



III

Rocket Shokai

Illustration by MEPHISTO

SENTENCED TO BE A HERO

The Prison Records of
Penal Hero Unit 9004

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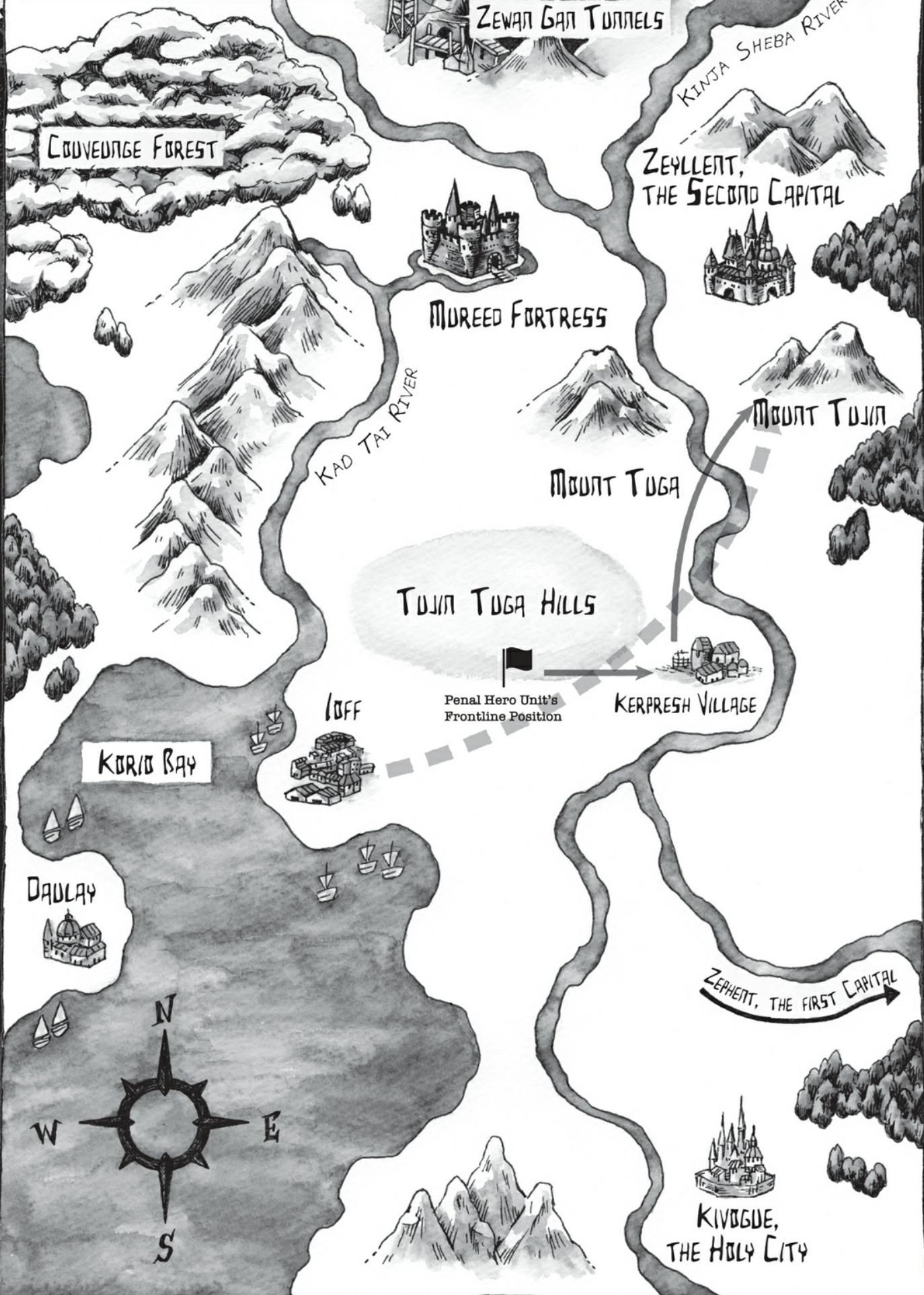
III

The Prison Records of
Penal Hero Unit 9004

Rocket Shokai
Illustration by MEPHISTO



Strategy for Retaking
the Second Capital, Zeyllent



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 PUNISHMENT: DIVERSION IN THE TUJIN

TUGA HILLS, PART 1

Snow danced through the air.

A thin layer had begun to build up at our feet.

It's too damn cold.

My breath came out in white clouds as I stared into the distance, past the falling snow.

This area was known as the Tujin Tuga Hills. A grand road extended from the port city of Ioff and weaved its way through this hilly terrain all the way to the northeast. Continuing through a valley between two mountains would put you on the path to Zeyllent, the Second Capital, which was currently under the rule of Abaddon—Demon Blight Number Twenty-One.

“...Xylo, look. Snow.” Teoritta scooped up some of the white stuff from the ground. She wasn’t wearing gloves, and the warmth of her bare hands would quickly melt it. I didn’t see any point in the exercise, but Teoritta watched curiously as it disappeared in her fingers. “It’s really coming down... Do you think it will stick?”

“Not enough to cause any problems for us in battle.”

I was sure of it, since the goddess with power over the weather was already controlling this area. Even if the snow did stick, it would barely reach our ankles. I wished she would do a little more to help us out, but apparently, her true power was simply summoning clouds and wind. From what I'd heard, she couldn't do things like make lightning strike the enemy, or cause rain to fall only on their camp. It wasn't exactly the most useful power on the battlefield.

"At the very least, the snow won't bury us," I continued. "We should be able to use horses and artillerymen, too."

"Really?" Teoritta seemed to be having fun, rubbing her hands together and exhaling so she could see each breath. Part of me understood how she felt.

"Xylo, have you ever seen snow really pile up?"

"...Yeah. I don't have any good memories of the stuff, though."

"But I heard you were from the south. How did you see so much snow?"

"The war took me all through the west and north, and put bluntly, snow is the enemy. There are a lot of things you've got to watch out for. For example..."

I took off a glove and grabbed Teoritta's hand. It was just as I expected. Her fingers were cold. She widened her eyes in surprise, but I needed to warn her sooner rather than later.

"Put on your gloves."

She had also been provided with gloves—of even higher quality than ours, of course.

"Frostbite usually starts with your fingers, so keep yourself as warm as you can. Don't forget to put some of those wrapped sleewaks in the toes of your boots, either."

Sleewaks were a type of small but extremely spicy fruit. Usually, you'd dehydrate and crush them to use as seasoning, but when stuffed into a person's shoes, they were said to improve blood flow and protect against frostbite. At least, that was what someone from the north had once told me. *Their name was*—... I started to think back, but then decided against it.

"But I despise those, Xylo. It feels so...disgusting to walk with them in your

shoes..."

"Do it anyway. Unless you want to lose your toes to frostbite."

I stuffed Teoritta's hands into her mantle pockets.

"...Very well."

She pursed her lips and nodded, still holding on tightly to my fingers. Perhaps she'd finally realized just how cold her hands were. Just as I'd decided to head back to our tent and had turned around, I noticed a thin, dreary-looking man approaching us. It was Venetim.

"Um... Xylo?" he said. "I have something I'd like to discuss with you, if that's okay..."

"Not really in the mood."

I slid a bottle out of my pocket and took a swig. It was whiskey made in the north under the Eard family's brand name, Sparkling Violet. Normally, we penal heroes would never be able to get our hands on something like this, regardless of how many military notes we paid. But stuff like that didn't matter when we had Dotta on our team.

"Please. It won't take long..." he continued. "We were given our next order. We are to advance—our final destination is the Second Capital."

"No surprise there."

We'd known this would happen. The loff city government had scraped together whatever forces they could from neighboring regions, and with such a large army, there could be only one goal: the Second Capital, Zeyllent. Everyone knew that recapturing the capital was, by all accounts, the top priority. We penal heroes had been included in the plan, and had been put in a shabby tent in a far corner of the military camp.

Venetim continued, "And, um...our first objective—"

"Is to defeat the army of faeries sent out from the capital and set up a base on Mount Tujin."

Mount Tujin was one of the two small mountains beyond the hilly terrain in which we were camped. The eastern peak was known as Mount Tujin, while the

western was known as Mount Tuga.

"Is that the gist of it?" I asked.

"Oh yes. You're exactly right. Impressive."

"Not really..."

It was obvious when you thought about it for more than two seconds. An army of faeries had most likely already left the capital to attack nearby settlements and increase their forces before attacking Galtuile Fortress. It didn't take a genius to realize that the best city for them to strike was Ioff. In other words, they were heading right for us.

And so, for our own safety, we needed to take out the faerie army first. And if we were going to retake the Second Capital after that, then we were going to need a base like Mount Tujin. If we could secure the mountain, we could receive supplies from the east, since a tributary of the Kinja Sheba River ran alongside the foot of the mountain.

That would also extend our supply chain to the First Capital, and to the Industrial City of Rocca, where the Verkle Development Corporation headquarters were located. And if we were able to push the front line up that far, we could coordinate more efficiently with Galtuile.

The military must be desperate to retake the Second Capital. The city wasn't just a city, it was a symbol. Thirty years ago, when the Demon Blight's invasion started to gain momentum, five nations unified to become what we now know as the Federated Kingdom. The royal capitals of the two most powerful kingdoms then became known as the First Capital and the Second Capital.

Which capital became the first and which the second was apparently decided after some boring political maneuvering, but I couldn't have cared less and didn't know the details.

At any rate, this background was key to the Second Capital's importance. It was a symbol of the people's will to join forces as one. Strategically, it was also a very dangerous position, as it was near enough to launch an attack on both Galtuile and the First Capital.

"So? What are our orders?" I asked Venetim. "Which unit are we going to

lead? Or are we the reserves?"

The latter was a definite possibility, since nobody trusted the penal heroes, and consequently, those in power hesitated to use them during critical battles like this one.

"Well, you see..." said Venetim. "I tried really hard to negotiate, but..."

His reticence was starting to give me an awfully bad feeling.

"Just spit it out already. What are they gonna make us do?"

"We won't be joining any unit this time."

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

"We—Penal Hero Unit 9004—must single-handedly reclaim the fourth hill of the Northeastern Tujin Tuga range and build a fortification. We leave tonight. The man giving orders was yelling the whole time, so you know they mean business."

Venetim unfolded a large paper map. One of several small hills northeast of our current position had a circle drawn around it. Was that supposed to be the fourth hill? I could figure that much out, at least.

"Who the hell gave those orders?!" I shouted despite myself. "Are they stupid or something?!"

"Eek!"

"Xylo, relax. You are frightening Venetim." Teoritta began patting me on the back to console me. What did she think I was, a wild animal? I wasn't about to be calmed by a few pats.

"What kind of ridiculous strategy is that?"

I glared at the map. They wanted the penal hero unit to proceed alone and secure a base. What a joke. Didn't they know how many faeries were out there? It was as if—"Exactly. We're merely decoys," a voice interrupted, taking the words right out of my mouth.

A woman approached from behind Venetim, the metal fittings of her suit of armor rubbing against one another. She had her black hair neatly tied back, and

a piercing gaze shot out from her serious, irritated face.

"Headquarters is ordering us to run onto the battlefield as decoys." It was Patausche Kivia. "There doesn't seem to be much of a point to this strategy from a tactical standpoint. Preparations have been made to attack the enemy once they've come after us, but we probably shouldn't expect too much."

She was different now: On her neck she had a sacred seal. It was the same one we wore—the mark of a penal hero.

"Thanks for the input, Rookie." I replied in a casual tone, because the gloomy look she'd been wearing ever since she joined us was starting to wear on me.

"Stop calling me that." She shot me a stern glare. "Even Jayce is saying it now."

"Don't let him bother you. He's just not good at remembering people's names. That's all. More importantly, do you think we have a chance taking the hill alone?"

Patausche had been joining Venetim at the strategy meetings in order to gather information on military decisions and to make sure her senior didn't say anything stupid. Up until now, Venetim had brought back only rough summaries of our orders, forcing me to take time I didn't have to accompany him or to find the information somewhere else. This was one of the major improvements we'd seen since Patausche joined our unit.

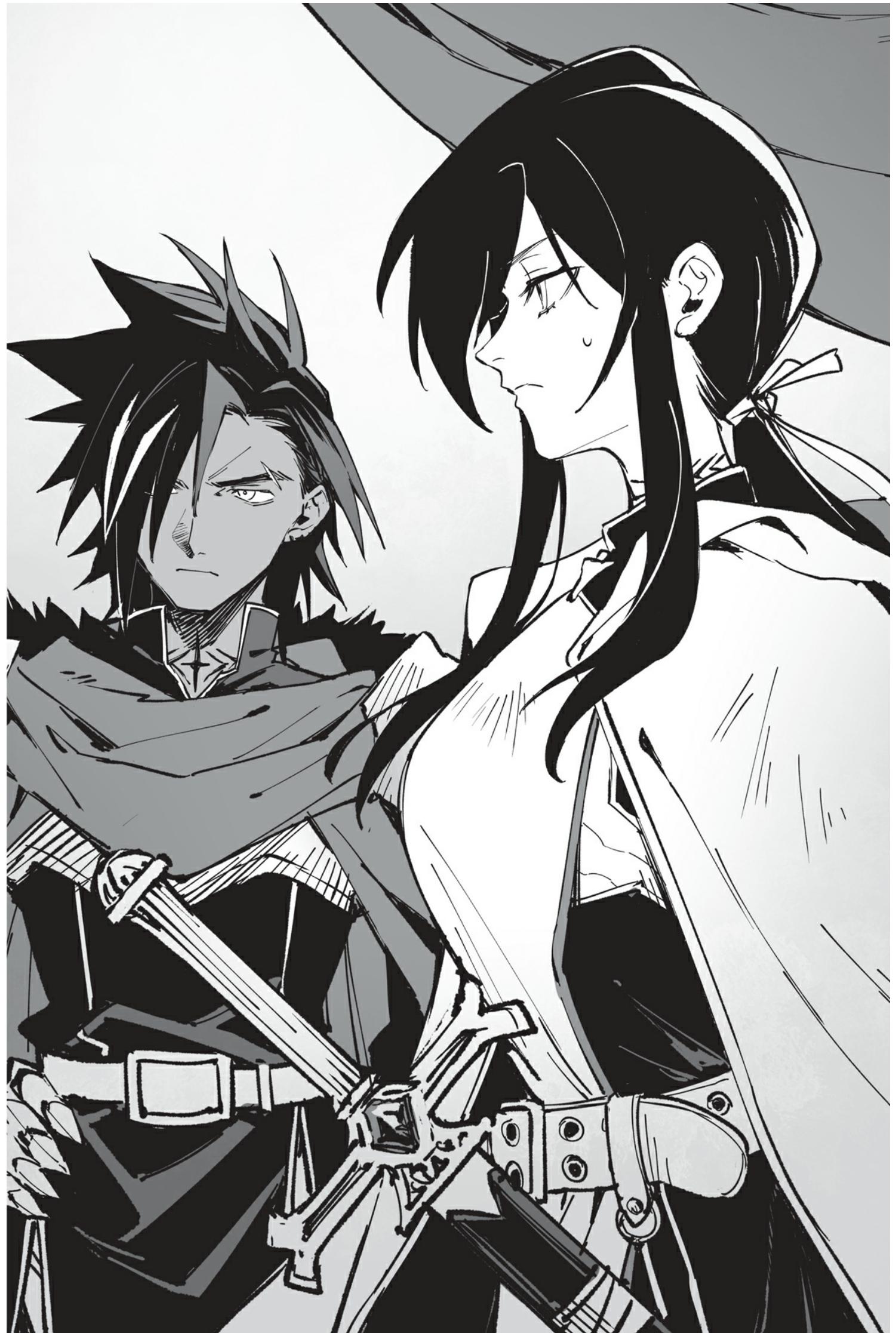
"With just us, seizing the hill is impossible." Patausche answered exactly how I thought she would. "If we want to continue occupying the area, we will need to build a fortification, and I highly doubt the enemy will just sit back and watch. They'll continue to send fresh troops until they've defeated us."

"But that's what our military wants, right? That's when they'll strike."

"And I'm sure they'd make a sizable dent in the faeries' forces," she said angrily, the crease in her brow deepening. "But our unit would be destroyed, and the object of the mission—occupying the hill—would remain unaccomplished."

"There are not enough soldiers," she continued. "At the very least, our unit needs backup, concealed and ready to ambush the enemy, if possible." She

raised a hand and lowered one finger at a time, listing the conditions. “What about supplies? How are we going to transport the necessary supplies to our destination? Are we supposed to carry them ourselves on foot? We need horses—at least ten including mine. Xylo, considering the terrain, I imagine you’d want to ride into battle as well... And there is no way we can depart tonight. We need time to prepare... Rhyno, was it? That creepy artilleryman needs to charge his cannon as well.”



After saying all this in a single breath, Patausche shook her head.

"The penal hero unit is something else. I cannot believe they send you on missions in these conditions."

When she was done, I tapped Venetim on the shoulder. "Hear that, Commander? Those are the things we need to succeed. Get on it."

"...Sure," Venetim said, nodding vaguely. As usual, he didn't seem to fully comprehend what was going on. "You want me to return with more soldiers, arrange for horses, and buy us some time. Is that it?"

"That's it. We're counting on you."

"Wait." Patausche seemed absolutely bewildered. "Is there even any leeway for negotiation? These orders came directly from headquarters. Haven't supplies already been allocated? Surely it's too late to change the time of deployment or the soldiers' positions."

"I can manage the supplies," said Venetim. "And as for delaying the mission... Well, I'll come up with something."

"What 'something' could you possibly come up with? The people back at headquarters aren't children."

"Uh... Well, I could tell them that if we wait until it's light out, we'll be a better distraction and survive longer, I suppose... This would work better if I had a written document of our orders..."

"I can handle that." I decided to suggest something we'd done a few times in the past. "We can use our old trick. We need an official stamp, though, so let's start there."

"King Norgalle probably still has the one we stole last time," said Venetim.

"He does? I bet he genuinely believes it's his."

"All that's left...is a bribe, right...?"

"Yep! That'll be on Dotta. How are you going to get them to send backup, though?"

"Hmm... I'll have them send back the messenger from Galtuile at the same

time as we deploy, and tell them we need bodyguards for the messenger... Actually, that might be a hard sell. Give me some time to think..."

"...You...!" The crease in Patausche's brow grew deeper and deeper as she listened to our exchange. "How can you be so careless? ...Are you all always this sloppy?"

"Heh! Impressive, yes?" Teoritta proudly puffed out her chest and put on an even grander expression than usual. She was clearly treating Patausche like her junior. "These are *my* heroes, after all!"

She snorted proudly. Perhaps I should tell her that this wasn't something to brag about. Patausche looked bewildered. Come to think of it, she still didn't know how we did things.

I thought back to the moment she became a part of our unit. That day, she was—



"Patausche Kivia," she announced sourly.

We penal heroes had been called to a special meeting in one of the tents.

"Surely, there's no need for such introductions," she continued. "And I know who all of you are as well."

Almost everyone in our unit had seen her before and knew her name. She was still the rule-obsessed, overly serious, overachieving knight we all knew. The only difference was that she now had a sacred seal engraved on her neck. In other words, she wore the brand of a penal hero.

Everyone was dumbstruck. It didn't make any sense. Why would this captain, who always took her work seriously, be sentenced to serve as a hero? I, however, had a guess.

She was charged with murder and with plotting an insurrection.

I had heard that she'd killed her uncle, High Priest Marlen Kivia, and a man named Rajit, who was her subordinate. Had she really committed the crimes she was being accused of? Did she really go berserk and murder those men?

Was she truly in secret communication with a heretic allied with the Demon Blight?

Most likely, the answer was no. She wasn't clever or skilled enough to pull off something that big. It was most likely the other way around. Either the High Priest or Rajit had done something. If not, then Patausche was one incredible actor.

That was why I decided I'd crack some stupid joke. I was sick of seeing her grave expression. Besides, I doubted she was interested in hashing out the truth right here, right now. I was no different. It was far too late to claim innocence. That was why— “Oooh! Yesss! That's my sis!” But before I could get a word out, Tsav started praising her. He even clapped. “I always knew you were a heartless, evil, killing machine. Like, remember when I suggested we use people in the crowd as meat shields when we were guarding Teoritta in loff? The moment you turned down my proposal, I knew you were one scary lady.”

He spoke so quickly that no one else, even Teoritta, could get a word in edgewise.

“Anyway, welcome!” he said, spreading his arms wide. “We're sooo glad to have you! Oh, but please don't try to kill us, okay? 'Cause I'm not sure I could beat you in a fair match.”

Tsav's comments were both ridiculous and borderline incoherent. Everything he said was based on his rather unique set of values, and Patausche clearly had no idea how to react.

“Guys! This is great, isn't it?” he said. “Everyone's excited to have her aboard, right?”

As Tsav turned back to the rest of the group, Venetim and Dotta averted their eyes at almost the same time.

“Well, uh... I mean... Sure?” said Venetim, obviously terrified. “As our unit's commander, I'm always happy to have more soldiers at our disposal.”

“If I say I'm not excited, will you snap my neck or something...?” Dotta stepped away and hunched his back, ready to run at any moment. Patausche frowned.

“I’m not going to snap your neck.”

“Will you break my leg, then?”

“No. Do you think I’m some sort of savage beast?”

“N-not at all!”

He definitely does, I thought. There was fear in Dotta’s eyes. Patausche hesitated for a few moments, unsure of whether to argue with him. In the end, she simply shook her head.

“...Whatever I say now would be nothing but an excuse, so I’m not going to tell you to trust me, but an order is an order,” she said. “I am a penal hero now, just like all of you, and I will fight by your side.”

“Very well.” Norgalle nodded gravely. He was sitting as majestically as a king, with Tatsuya at his side, waiting on him. “You have my permission. I expect you to work hard as one of my elite. If General Tatsuya gives you an order, you follow it. Got it?”

“Uvvv.” Tatsuya grunted from the back of his throat. It sounded like agreement...probably. It was also possible he was just breathing a little roughly. Regardless, Norgalle’s and Tatsuya’s opinions were essentially useless at times like this, so I simply ignored them. I was more curious about— “A new recruit, huh? Whatever. Fine by me.” Jayce was in a corner of the tent, fidgeting with what appeared to be saddle stirrups. He didn’t even look up as he hit and twisted the metal fittings. “Just don’t get in our way. Have you introduced yourself to Neely yet?”

“...Yes.”

“What’d she say?”

“I didn’t understand. It sounded like she was purring...”

“Then she’s not against you joining us. If some dumbass approaches her, she just ignores them. Anyway, the rookie here’ll be fighting ground battles with the rest of you landlubbers, so Xylo, Rhyno—you two keep an eye on her.”

This was about what I expected from Jayce. Being ordered around irritated me, so I didn’t answer, but the other person he’d named was unfazed.

"This is wonderful news!" Rhyno declared gleefully. "Yet another reliable compatriot has joined our cause!"

That was when I realized he was meeting Patausche for the first time.

"We welcome you with open arms," he continued. "What an honor it will be to fight by your side. Comrade Xylo has told me all about you. He had nothing but praise."

"H-he did...?" Patausche stared at me sheepishly for a moment, then cleared her throat. "What exactly did he say about me? Perhaps it would be...beneficial for me to hear."

"He said you were an extremely talented knight! A brave soldier with the strength of a wild bear."

"Rhyno, stop. I didn't compliment her that much."

"Wait... Who are you calling a bear?"

I might have praised her a little too much, and I got the feeling it'd be bad if she heard what I'd said. But before I could shut up Rhyno, Patausche fixed me with a piercing glare.

"This is ridiculous! What part of that was a compliment?!"

"The whole thing," I shot back. "Kobiki bears living along the western boundary are clever enough to lay traps and ambush their prey, and sasagane bears in the southern territories have skulls so strong that not even a shot from a lightning staff can pierce them."

"How dare you—!"

"Th-that is all! The welcome ceremony for the new recruit is over!"

A small shadow leaped in between Patausche and me. It was Teoritta, swinging both hands over her head in an attempt to block our view. Even Patausche seemed taken aback.

"My apologies, Goddess Teoritta," she said, "but I am in the middle of questioning this man—"

"We are allies now! We are fighting for the same cause. Therefore, there is no

reason for you to interrogate him! Right?”

“I—I suppose...”

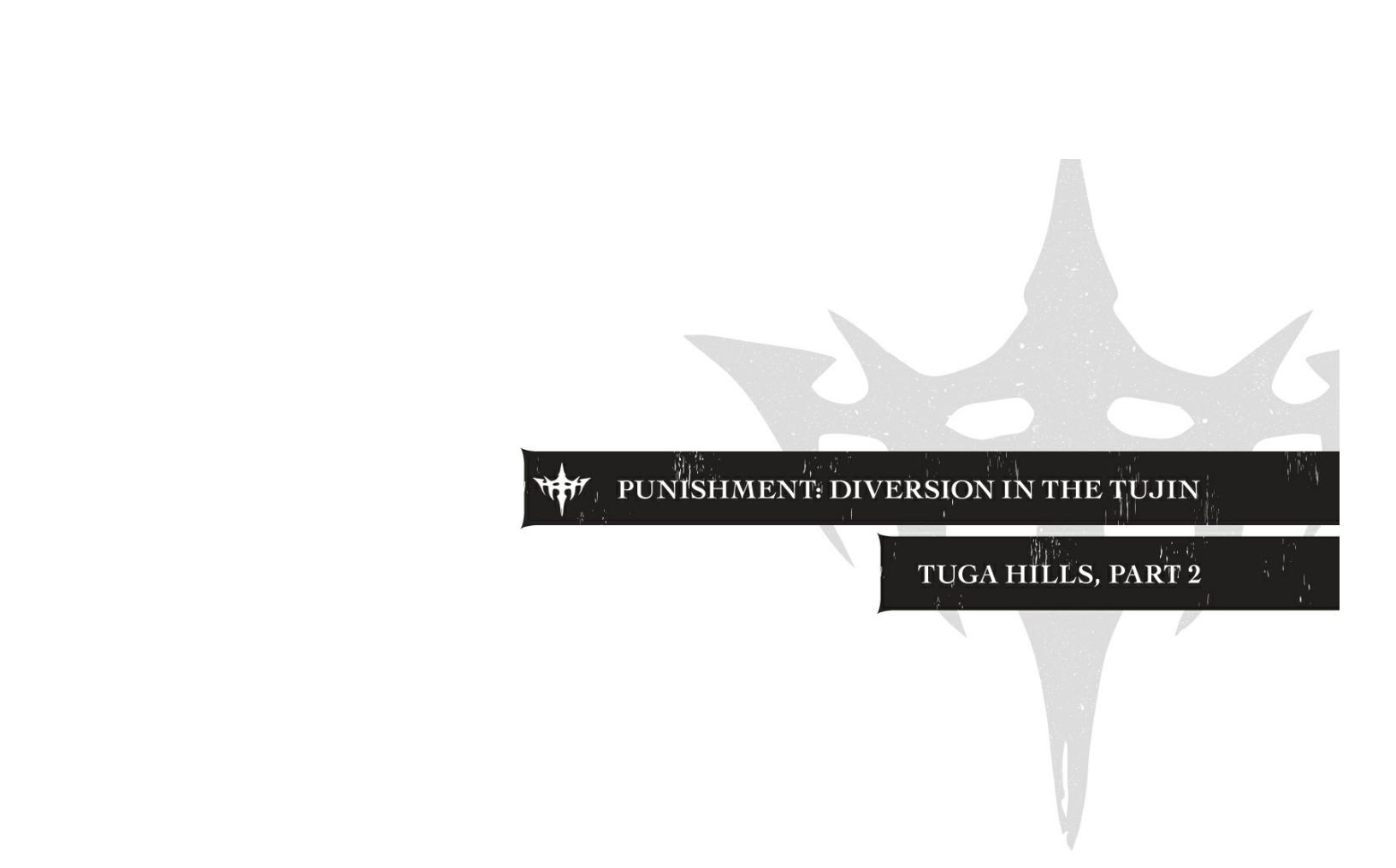
“I will not ask what happened to you or what crimes you committed.” Teoritta took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, then opened them again. I figured she was trying to fire herself up and put on the most “goddess-like” expression she could muster. “Because no matter why you are here, we welcome you to our unit, Patausche Kivia.”

To my mind, her words were indeed divine and fitting of a goddess. She then smiled and continued, “Welcome to Penal Hero Unit 9004. Let us work together to defeat the Demon Blight and create a glorious future for mankind.”

At those powerful words, the tension vanished from the room.

After that, we were officially made to join the effort to recapture the Second Capital and further ordered to create a diversion in the Tujin Tuga Hills.

And now, as always, we had to struggle with a lack of time and resources.



PUNISHMENT: DIVERSION IN THE TUJIN

TUGA HILLS, PART 2

"Huh? Horses? You need ten? ...No way, that's not happening," Dotta announced cheerlessly the moment I returned to our tent.

He was lying in bed, reading what was essentially a newspaper that the military passed out to its soldiers. I had read it earlier, so I knew it was a load of garbage.

"The Second Capital Falls," was written out in large, bold letters, and the article below made it sound as though they had some grand, heroic strategy that was sure to take it back.

But if you just read the factual statements, the newspaper was actually pretty depressing. The third princess and third prince, who resided in the Second Capital, were missing, and the city was currently occupied by multiple demon lords, with Abaddon at their head. So far, the presence of Demon Blights Wryneck and Furiae had been confirmed, and the number of faeries was only rising.

The truth was soul-crushing. Perhaps Dotta's attitude was a reflection of that.

"And just so you guys know," he said, "I'm not some goddess who can

summon any item you want just by snapping my fingers.” We already knew that, of course. Teoritta, who was standing by my side, frowned and grumbled under her breath. “I don’t have the power to turn into fog or smoke, either, so I can’t just steal whatever you ask me to. Some things are simply impossible.”

“You always seem to manage when it’s valuables.”

“I mean, if that was all you were asking, then sure. But horses are super difficult. And ten?! There’s not even anywhere around here to hide them.”

“It sounds as if you need my help, Comrade Dotta,” said Rhyno.

These two were the only ones hanging out in our assigned tent. Jayce was most likely with Neely and Norgalle, and Tsav and Tatsuya were on maintenance duty. In addition to Rhyno’s armor, we needed lightning staffs and the supplies for building a fortification.

“If you would like, I could create a distraction,” Rhyno continued. “For example, I could light the stables on fire. That would surely cause some confusion. Then we can kill the horses and bury them for later.”

“W-w-w-wait! What?! Nobody wants a dead horse!”

“No fires,” I added. “Something like that could wipe out our entire camp.”

Rhyno put on a cartoonishly depressed face when we instantly shot him down. “Oh... You need the horses alive... Well, that does make things more difficult.”

Watching the troubled Rhyno, Patausche elbowed me in the side. “What is going on with that man? There is clearly something wrong with him.”

“Not just ‘something.’ *Everything’s* wrong with him. Don’t expect any common sense out of Rhyno.”

“That’s quite harsh of you,” said Rhyno. “But I trust your judgment, so I suppose you’re right. That’s why...Comrade Patausche...” He smiled theatrically at her, and her shoulders jerked. She’d probably been hit with a wave of intense, inexplicable dislike for the man. I felt the same. “If you ever notice something off, please do not hold back, and let me know. It appears I lack common sense, and I wish to improve.”

"O-oh..." Now it was Patausche's turn to be troubled. "Are you sure it's just a lack of common sense...?"

"Patausche, there is no need to worry about him," said Teoritta, stepping in with a word of advice for her junior. "He confuses me all the time as well. You simply need to point out whenever he says something bizarre. You will get used to it eventually."

I had a hard time believing anyone could ever get used to Rhyno, but we had to do our best to work together as a team.

"Anyway! I can't get you guys your horses," said Dotta, rolling over onto his side. "I only steal when I know I can succeed."

"How about we purchase the horses?" Rhyno suggested calmly. "That would settle things peacefully, yes? Then we could leave them with the merchant until we need them. Fortunately, Comrade Dotta said he wouldn't have any trouble stealing valuables."

"...Ah!" I exclaimed, probably sounding like an idiot.

Rhyno had a point. As usual, the Verkle Development Corporation was traveling with the military, selling them luxury goods and supplies. They also had carriages and horses to carry those goods. All we had to do was buy horses from them.

"Of course," I said. "I didn't even think of that. Ten horses would cost a fortune, though. Dotta, if you have any valuables or money you've been hiding, now's the time to pull it out. Got it?"

"Y-yeah, sure... Man, I would have never thought of purchasing the horses."

"...Perhaps that's because you lot always try to solve your problems illegally," suggested Patausche.

"Technically, the stealing aspect of the plan is still illegal," said Rhyno. I decided to overlook this remark for now, since the idea was solid.

"I'm fine with stealing valuables," said Dotta, rolling over in bed to face us. "The question is what and where?" He seemed to be gradually warming up to the plan. This was essentially his hobby, after all. "There are nobles out here,

too, right?"

"The Ninth Order of the Holy Knights are taking command," I said. "The nobles from around Ioff are here, too. Then there are the knights who escaped the Second Capital, mercenaries, and warrior priests."

"...The Thirteenth Order is also present. Or rather, the *former* Thirteenth Order," added Patausche, suppressing her emotions.

Once the knights had finished defending Ioff, the remaining troops—almost two thousand of them—were incorporated into the strategy to retake the Second Capital. Frenci and her men returned to their settlements in the southern valleys to gather as many warriors as they could as quickly as possible before meeting back up with the military here. I wasn't about to try to convince them otherwise, either, since reclaiming the Second Capital was a matter that concerned every one of us. I'd also lost the chance to ask her father to stop his daughter's activities.

"All right," said Dotta. "We just need enough money to buy ten horses, right?"

"We're counting on you," I said. "Venetim will handle the negotiations with Verkle."

"Then I have one condition, Xylo."

"Go on."

"I want you on cooking duty tonight instead of Tsav. For the first time in forever, we've got actual pork—organs and all."

I immediately understood what he was getting at. Tsav seemed to believe that nutrients were the only thing that mattered in cooking. He seasoned food as an afterthought. "*Yep! The food isn't poisoned! It isn't spoiled, either!*" Those were his only criteria. His cooking was so bad, even Teoritta claimed it tasted like nothing.

If we had pork and organ meat, a stew would probably be best. Then even Jayce wouldn't complain. I could probably use some sort of fruit paste.

Jayce was from the southern plains, so he was against the idea of cooking meat in a pan. According to him, you lost all the juice that way, so a stew was

much more delicious. This was yet another thing we didn't see eye to eye on.

"All right, I'll cook tonight," I agreed, then turned to Patausche. "By the way, now that you're one of us, I have to ask: How good are you at cooking?"

"Mn..."

After her short groan, Patausche remained silent for ten or so seconds. It felt like an eternity. It was as if my question had blindsided her with a lethal blow.

"...I can cook just about anything without issue, of course."

My gut told me she was lying through her teeth.

The snow outside showed no signs of slowing down as the sun began to set behind the hills. Soon night would fall.



The large, violet moon could be seen peeking out from a slit in the clouds. Rykwell looked up for a moment, captivated by its glow. It had been too long since he had seen it so beautiful and clear. The last time must have been when he'd accompanied his older brother hunting. But the moon quickly hid back behind the clouds, and a cold, wet snow began to fall once again, sticking to his skin.

"Rykwell. Rykwell!"

His elder sister shouted his name. Her voice was weak. She was exhausted, and he could tell the cold would soon be too much for her. *I have to pull myself together*, he thought.

"Rykwell, stay close to me. I don't want us to get separated," his sister instructed, taking his hand. Even through thick gloves, he could tell that she was growing weaker. He squeezed her hand.

"Yes, my sister. I am right here," he replied, his voice firm so as not to worry her.

Rykwell thought about the responsibility he carried. He couldn't complain or show weakness. The royal guards had protected them as they escaped the Second Capital—that was the only reason they'd survived. And then the guards

had peeled off one by one to keep the enemy at bay, leaving only him to protect his elder sister.

"It is my duty to protect you, Sister. I am prepared to make any sacrifice."

"You are so brave, Rykwell. But there's something I want you to remember."

Rykwell's sister looked at him with her cold blue eyes. Some feared those eyes, but to Rykwell, their sparkle was the proudest light in all the world.

"The life of a member of the royal family—no, the life of someone who serves the public—does not belong solely to them, but to the whole kingdom." She spoke as if reflecting on each word. "Your duty is not to serve your family, but to serve the people. If abandoning me allows you to help a stranger whom you may never meet, then that is what you should do."

This sounded unreasonable to Rykwell.

A king's disposition—Rykwell had always felt such things had nothing to do with him, as the third prince. He had two elder brothers and three elder sisters ahead of him, so he figured his turn would never come.

"Someone I truly respect used to tell me that." His sister's blue eyes narrowed, and she smiled, making Rykwell curious.

"May I ask who?"

"He was a classmate of our brother's back when Lawtzir was studying at the Temple. He had profound opinions regarding the Federated Kingdom's future."

"He sounds like a really smart person."

"Yes, he was, very much so. He was the smartest man at the Temple. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a high priest now." She smiled once more. "That's why you mustn't throw your life away for just anything. Such risks must be taken only for the sake of the people. Focus on protecting the weight on your shoulders, not me."

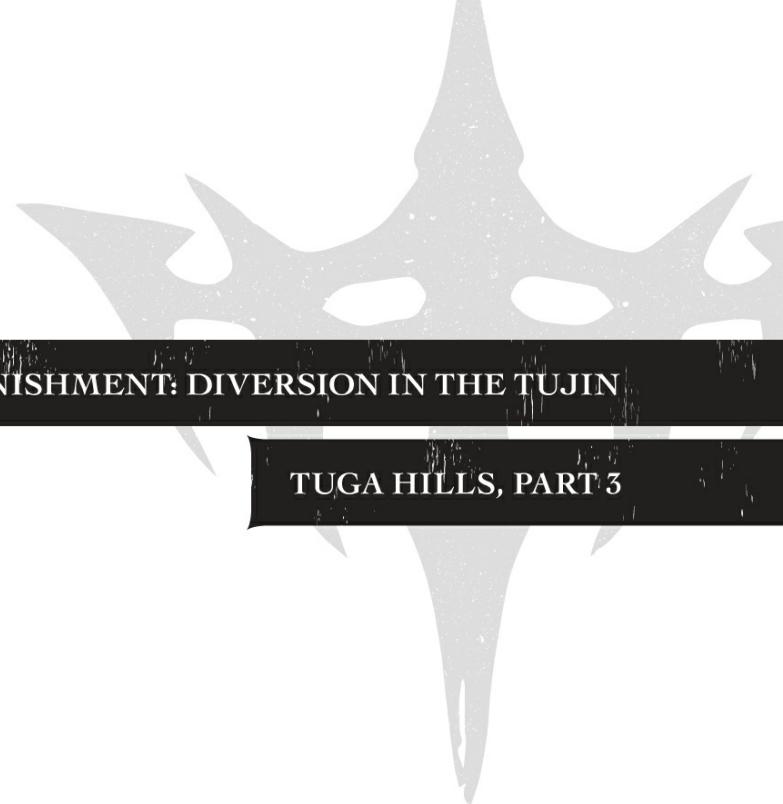
The weight on his shoulders. What his sister was referring to was not the lives of the people.

Rykwell thought back to everything they had been through. He could feel the weight of the bundle slung over his back. It was long and slim like a dagger, and

he had just barely managed to grab it as they escaped. *She's right. I have to protect this at all costs.*

"We must hurry." His sister began to walk once more, pulling Rykwell along by the hand. "You mustn't give up hope before we get there. To the south. To the port city of loff... That is our only chance of survival."

The third princess and third prince picked up their pace. There were still no signs of faeries at their backs, but that didn't mean that the never-ending snow and darkness couldn't be just as cruel.



PUNISHMENT: DIVERSION IN THE TUJIN

TUGA HILLS, PART 3

It was decided our mission would begin the following night.

In other words, Venetim had somehow bought us an entire extra day. Of course, we were being worked to death doing chores for the military in exchange, but aside from the cold stares everyone was shooting us, it wasn't that bad.

Besides, I understood why they despised us. It would leave a bad taste in anyone's mouth to see a group of hardened criminals freely waltzing around camp, even if they did have sacred seals engraved on their necks. It was only natural.

This was especially true of the captain of the Ninth Order of the Holy Knights. If memory served, his name was Hord Clivios—a gifted son of the Clivios family, who were famous for their wine. The way he glared at Patausche and me was especially harsh. Then again, I'd never really left a positive impression on anyone, even when I was a captain in the Holy Knights. Back then, I'd been a real stickler about military discipline and leaders' comportment and the like.

"It seems you have some issues with the plan, Xylo Forbartz," Hord Clivios said, addressing me directly. "I heard from your commander that you were so

frustrated, you were about to explode... I believe he said he wouldn't be surprised if you set fire to the whole camp."

Thanks, Venetim. Always talking out of your ass and causing me trouble. Knowing he'd probably used the claim to negotiate, I kept quiet, but I was definitely going to ask him some questions later.

"Let's get a few things straight," said Clivios. "I do not trust any of you, and I believe having you all here will do more harm than good." What wonderfully kind words from our supreme commander. Regardless, I had no choice but to hear him out. "Your orders are a form of punishment straight from Galtuile, however, so what am I to do? If I had it my way, I would personally have you all executed before the battle even started."

In a way, he made a fair point. I maintained my silence, then decided to walk away before I got angry. Listening to his trivial insults any longer was only going to put me in a bad mood. Hord wasn't the only problem, though. The low-level soldiers were trash-talking us as well. I could hear their endless complaints constantly as I did chores around the camp.

"...What are the penal heroes doing here? Don't tell me they're going to be fighting alongside us."

"The thought of doing battle next to the goddess killer makes me sick. Even the Man-Eating Ghoul Tsav is here."

"Don't let those criminals near our lord. Who knows what they'll do?"

Just words were fine. What really got on my nerves was the way they threw our rations and clothes on the floor when they brought them to us.

I got the feeling they were scraping some off the top, too. Obviously, no Holy Knight would do something so dishonorable, but the soldiers the Noble Alliance had brought with them didn't seem to mind stealing one bit. A lot of nobles would be joining us in battle this time around, and I recognized a good number of the family crests on their flags. The skylark flying through a tempest signified the Kurdel family, the flute-playing titan was the sign of the Genelies, and the lion holding a battle-ax in its mouth belonged to the Dasmiturs.

Their positions and backgrounds varied, but they all had one thing in

common: a sharp tongue. And the wealthier the noble, the more abusive their language. All I had to do was walk by, and they'd try to pick a fight with me.

"Hey! Walk closer to the edge of the road, filthy criminal!" they would say, cursing me.

Whatever. Bring it on.

Everyone thought we were either going to die or come crying to them for help. It pissed me off so badly, I didn't even want to see their faces. That was why I slipped into Jayce's dragon stable as soon as I could for a strategic break. Although Jayce was pretty aggravating himself, at least he didn't gossip. Plus, the stable was extremely spacious, since they needed enough room to house the dragons that had managed to escape the Second Capital. There were around forty altogether, and somehow Jayce had already won over almost all of them.

When I walked into the stable, I found him resting, gracefully propped up against Neely's stomach as if she were a pillow. There were numerous dragons holding meat between their teeth and trying to approach him, but Neely would bare her fangs every time and scare them off. *Must be nice*, I thought.

"...This'll probably end up being a large-scale aerial battle," Jayce said, glaring at me as he used a wooden spoon to slurp up what appeared to be porridge. "They have airborne forces as well. We need to be ready."

That made sense. The Second Capital had far more dragons than what we had here, and the enemy had still managed to take the city. We had to assume they possessed a considerable aerial assault force. That said, they probably wouldn't hit us with everything they had. The enemy still had to watch out for Galtuile Fortress and the First Capital, so they couldn't spread themselves too thin.

"Wow, Jayce. You don't sound that confident."

"That's not it." Unusually, he ignored my attempt to provoke him. "There's this demon lord known as Furiae that can fly, and it can shoot these—how do I explain it?—these projectiles like glowing spears. And its range is way farther than a normal flying faerie's."

"You make it sound like you've seen it before."

"I heard about it from Moira."

"Who's Moira?"

"Over there. She's the sweet-looking girl with the horns curling to the side who's looking this way. Neely, stop growling at her."

"You mean she's a dragon?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

There was no way Jayce could communicate with dragons. He must have heard about this Demon Blight from another dragon knight. There weren't many knights who would talk to a penal hero, but maybe dragon knights had some kind of special camaraderie.

"...Anyway," said Jayce, "it's not going be easy, but if Furiae attacks, I'll be the one to kill it." He sounded displeased, but his voice was clear. "Countless dragons have been killed by that thing. It's going to pay for what it's done to my family."

There was no doubt in my mind that Jayce would attack me if I pointed out he wasn't a dragon, and I wasn't stupid enough to pick a fight with Jayce here in the stable.

"I'll take command of the air," he continued. "You all just focus on breaking through enemy lines down on land, even if it kills you. I'm serious. Feel free to die."

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to respond. I wanted to take him down a peg. He was being too serious, and that kind of attitude never helped anyone.

All of a sudden, I heard a loud thud from the back of the stable. It sounded like something wooden flipping over.

"Whoa...! Whah?!"

The wild yelp was a dead giveaway. The source of the noise was Tsav, and he was currently underneath an upside-down wooden crate. I'd just been wondering where he was, too. Apparently, he'd been helping out in the stable.

"Idiot," muttered Jayce, sounding fed up. "What's wrong with you? Focus."

"Jayce, wait! Let me explain!" cried Tsav. "She tried to smack me with her tail, so I was, like, 'Uh-oh! Better think fast!' and dodged it. In fact, I think I deserve a medal for making sure nothing spilled out of the box."

"What? Are you blind? Look at her back. Why would you try to approach her from the tail?"

"Wh-what?"

"Can you not see the scar on her scales? Did somebody draw those useless eyes on you? She was clearly attacked from behind. In other words, she doesn't like being approached from the tail."

"How was I supposed to guess all that just from looking at her?!" Tsav was practically screaming. I knew where he was coming from, too. When it came to taking care of the dragons, Jayce's instructions could be downright absurd.

"Wouldn't it be better to have Dotta or Norgalle help you around the stable?" I asked. "I mean, I get that Tsav's good with his hands, but he doesn't strike me as emotionally capable enough to handle living creatures."

"They were busy. Besides..." Jayce shook his head. "I had an idea. I thought I'd use Tsav to— Wait. Hold on." He frowned, stopping midsentence, then held out the bowl of porridge he'd been working on. "Who made today's lunch?"

"Patausche Kivia."

"...The new recruit? You know, I was wondering why it was so tasteless, and then I found the salt and wheat clumped together at the bottom of the bowl. How do you even do that?" Jayce groaned. "Somebody needs to teach the rookie how to cook."

"That might actually be our unit's most pressing issue."

"Where is she anyway?"

"Working. But it's anyone's guess how that will go."

Patausche had been less than enthusiastic about her assignment. Nevertheless, it needed to be done, because there was no way our unit would be able to take on thousands of faeries all alone. We needed more soldiers to create a distraction. Even having a group to circle the enemy and put them on

guard would be enough. In fact, they didn't even need to move.

Depending on the conditions, I could think of some people who might help us. And right now, the ones with the highest chance of doing so were the former members of the disbanded Thirteenth Order of the Holy Knights.



Zofflec Ostbiche of the former Thirteenth Order was an exceptional cavalryman. He was quick-witted and tenacious. As far as Patausche knew, he was originally in the military in the north, moving from one battlefield to another. He'd made a name for himself saving frontier settlements until the Holy Knights eventually recruited him.

When it came to creating a new Order of the Holy Knights, there was no such thing as having too much talent. Or so Patausche's uncle had said back when he was making extravagant preparations for his niece's unit. High Priest Kivia was no longer of this world, however. Patausche had killed him, and by doing so, she had destroyed not only her own future, but that of every Holy Knight in her order. That was why she was reluctant to take on this task, especially since she had a good idea of what Zofflec was going to say. And she was right.

"What a wonderfully self-serving offer, Former Captain," he replied sarcastically, shaking his head and forcing a smile. "Do you honestly believe there are any knights left who would still listen to you?"

Just as I thought.

Patausche wasn't surprised.

There was no way this was going to work.

It was impossible to justify what she'd done to them. Nevertheless, she continued to look Zofflec square in the eye. He wasn't the only one fixing her with a piercing stare, however. She was painfully aware of the looks she was getting from everyone around her. Her former subordinates were almost hostile, or perhaps simply astonished. They had probably never expected her to come. Gathered there, in the crowded tent, were the former leading officers of the disbanded Thirteenth Order.

"Why would we ever follow your orders? You want us to help the penal heroes on a mission equivalent to a death sentence? As it happens, we're not even supposed to be talking to you."

Patausche had figured as much, which was why she had visited them in secret. Though it wasn't something she enjoyed, she had waited for Dotta's signal and sneaked into the tent during a gap in the patrol. She'd done all this for one reason.

"To win. That's why," she declared, causing those around her to sharpen their glares. Some of them looked flabbergasted. "We will drive a wedge into the enemy lines up in the hills and draw them toward us. If this plan succeeds, then the main force will be able to start the battle under extremely advantageous conditions."

"There's no way that will succeed," Zofflec said, astonished. He pointed at a map hung on a board at the back of the tent. "Do you understand how many enemies we're up against? Thousands. And how many penal heroes are there? Nine. Even with the goddess and a dragon, you'll be crushed in no time."

"All we have to do is make sure that doesn't happen." Patausche approached the map and pointed at the hill where the penal heroes would be taking up their position. "We can coordinate with the Ninth Order's main force here and form a pincer formation, forcing them right into our camp."

"What kind of pincer formation only has nine people on one side? I understand you have a dragon and a dragon knight, and I know that knight is the Partiract family's Jayce, who almost took down the capital... But it's simply not enough."

Zofflec shook his head. What he was saying was completely logical, and had their positions been reversed, Patausche was sure she would have said the same. However, that had all changed when she was locked in that cell, when she'd heard the penal heroes' true purpose. And more importantly, she knew well how many times Xylo and the others—the penal hero unit—had succeeded in pulling off a miracle with the most ridiculous plans. That was why she could now reply with utmost confidence.

"We can do it." Patausche glanced at those around her. Some of the knights

were clearly taken aback. “Surely, you’ve realized how valuable the penal hero unit is in battle. They protected Mureed Fortress and defeated the Demon Blight in loff. If we have adequate support, we can pull it off.”

“Do you really expect us to believe you? After you...” The second half of Zofflec’s reply was subsumed in a sigh.

“We can’t, Former Captain.”

“He’s absolutely right. This is ridiculous.” This voice came from the corner of the tent. Its owner wore a simple white robe, and an iron replica of the Great Sacred Seal hung from his neck, proof of his priesthood. The military priest looked up at Patausche with darkness in his eyes. “The moment you betrayed mankind, everyone in this tent lost their bright futures. How are we supposed to believe someone who murdered their own uncle and subordinate?”

Patausche didn’t say a word. Instead, she focused on maintaining a calm expression, hardening her heart like ice and suppressing her emotions. She knew she had made the right choice. But if there was one thing she regretted, it was the fate of the knights under her command. Maybe there was a better way she could have handled the situation, but it had been beyond her abilities, and this was the result. This military priest must have been blamed for her actions as well, since he was still accompanying the Thirteenth Order, even after it was disbanded and placed under surveillance.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, Patausche Kivia,” he said, reproaching her. There was hatred in his voice. “Please leave. Now.”

“I never said I needed you to fight.” Even then, Patausche refused to back down. “Simply intimidating the enemy would be enough. In fact, all you need to do is get into position as if you were going to back us up. Or even—”

“Did you not hear me ask you to leave?” The priest’s voice cracked with emotion. His irritation was obvious. “There is not a single person here who would be foolish enough to listen to you! We are no longer obligated to follow your orders.”

“In that case, there is no need to save us penal heroes. I do not expect to survive this battle. However, Goddess Teoritta is different. Even if we die, she must be saved.”

That was the bare minimum they must accomplish. But the priest shook his head.

"We do not recognize her as a true goddess."

Patausche knew there was a faction like that within the Temple. When it came to the goddess who traveled from battlefield to battlefield alongside the penal heroes, there were two distinct camps: those who praised her and acknowledged her status as a true goddess, and those who were still undecided. However, a third group claiming she was a false goddess allied with criminals was gaining ground. There was no need to ask which faction the priest belonged to. Still, Patausche lowered her head.

"...Unlike the rest of us, Goddess Teoritta has committed no sin... So I beg of you. Please."

She was met with silence. No one answered—well, except for one.

"I'll say this one last time. Please leave," said the priest, stifling his rage. "You make me sick."



When Patausche left the tent, Dotta and Venetim were waiting for her.

The two men looked equally uneasy, and after a glance from Patausche, the unease turned to panic. One of them, however, still couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"So... Not to bother you, but how did it go?" asked Venetim. "I mean, it clearly didn't go well, but I have to ask, just to make sure... Will they help us?"

"No," Patausche replied honestly. "The former Thirteenth Order will not help us. In other words, we're on our own."

"But we'll be slaughtered within minutes, and I'd rather not be killed... Maybe I..." Gloomily, Venetim placed a finger to his lips as if he was deep in thought. "...Very well. I'll persuade them. Patausche, could you please tell me about each officer's family? I want to know where they live, who's married, if they have small children..."

"What are you plotting? Whatever it is, don't." Patausche grabbed Venetim by the collar, and he let out a tiny scream. "It was a mistake trying to get them involved in the first place. If they'd agreed, they'd only be treated even worse. We've got to handle this ourselves."

"But...! Wh-what exactly do you have in mind? Hiring mercenaries? We don't have any money for that, though..."

"Guys, I don't really care what we do," Dotta chimed in as he softly patted Patausche's arm. "But we need to get out of here before the next patrol officer sees us. We don't have time to mess around."

Patausche frowned. She didn't like that he'd called what she was doing "messing around," but he was right that they needed to leave. They had failed to persuade the former Thirteenth Order, so there was no point in staying any longer.

"All right, let's go," she said.

But right as she began dragging Venetim back to their tent—"Former Captain Patausche Kivia."

—Zofflec peeked out with a troubled smirk. Patausche was all too familiar with the expression. It was the face he made when Rajit, the chief infantry officer, or Siena, the leader of the snipers, asked too much of him, or when he was asked to fight under unreasonable conditions.

"I'm against helping you...but the others, especially Siena..." Zofflec's eyes narrowed cynically. "She begged us to help you again, just this once. And besides, if it works out, we might make a comeback. We can't let the priest know, though."

"You're really going to do this, Zofflec?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. Not every knight will be joining us. It'll only be around two hundred—three hundred at most. Personally, though..." Zofflec hesitated for a moment, then winked. "I don't think I'm going to get along with that Xylo guy at all."

"No surprise there," Patausche said, nodding firmly. Xylo's personality was the worst.



The Second Capital's new administration had finally settled in.

Lentoby Kisco looked at the stacks of papers on his desk and heaved a deep sigh. Within these documents was a report detailing the punishment for a family of four, two of them only children, who had tried to run away the previous night.

People like that had to be punished in the cruelest way possible and then executed. At least, this was what his "boss" had ordered him to do. It was supposed to serve as a warning to any other humans considering escape. Lentoby agreed it was ultimately necessary to protect those living in the capital.

The method had proved effective, and the number of people trying to escape had decreased dramatically compared to the first ten days under the new administration.

They'd also managed to deploy new personnel. There weren't many humans holding office in management positions like this. Most public officials in the Second Capital had been demoted from "manager" to "managed." Lentoby, then, was quite fortunate to have kept his position.

His solid grasp of the city's guards and their positions, along with his willingness to betray his people and support the enemy's occupation, had made it all possible. Nevertheless, he couldn't let his guard down. He had been recognized as a coexister only recently, and he was well aware of how fragile his position was. He needed to continue producing good results—to prove himself to the Demon Blight.

"Is that all you have to report, Lentoby Kisco?" asked the shadow—the demon lord Abaddon.

Seeing the demon lord right before his eyes was overwhelming. At a glance, Abaddon appeared to be a kind, older man. In fact, if Lentoby didn't know any better, he would have mistaken the man for a provincial official. However, there was something fathomless in his narrow eyes—something that Lentoby couldn't comprehend. They were somehow inhuman, like an insect's.

"It appears everything is going well," the demon lord continued. "What about

escapees?"

"The number has gone down dramatically overnight. We could probably decrease the guards' presence without issue."

"That's wonderful news," Abaddon said. "It was a little over the top, but I believe killing the children first really worked. Starting with the fingers and chopping them up bit by bit must have truly sent a message. I am very pleased with you." He spoke in a voice one might use to comfort a child.

Lentoby couldn't relax, however. He'd once witnessed Abaddon speaking in the same manner right before he tore someone to pieces one-handed.

"You don't have to be so nervous," the demon lord assured him with a wry smirk, as if he could read his mind. "Is my face really that terrifying? People tell me that a lot. Perhaps I should change it to something a little more friendly? Could you bring me someone who you think looks more friendly? Even just a head would do."

"Um..." Lentoby hesitated, not knowing how to respond.

But then Abaddon suddenly clapped his hands together. "I'm kidding! Was it that hard to pick up on? It looks like I still need some practice."

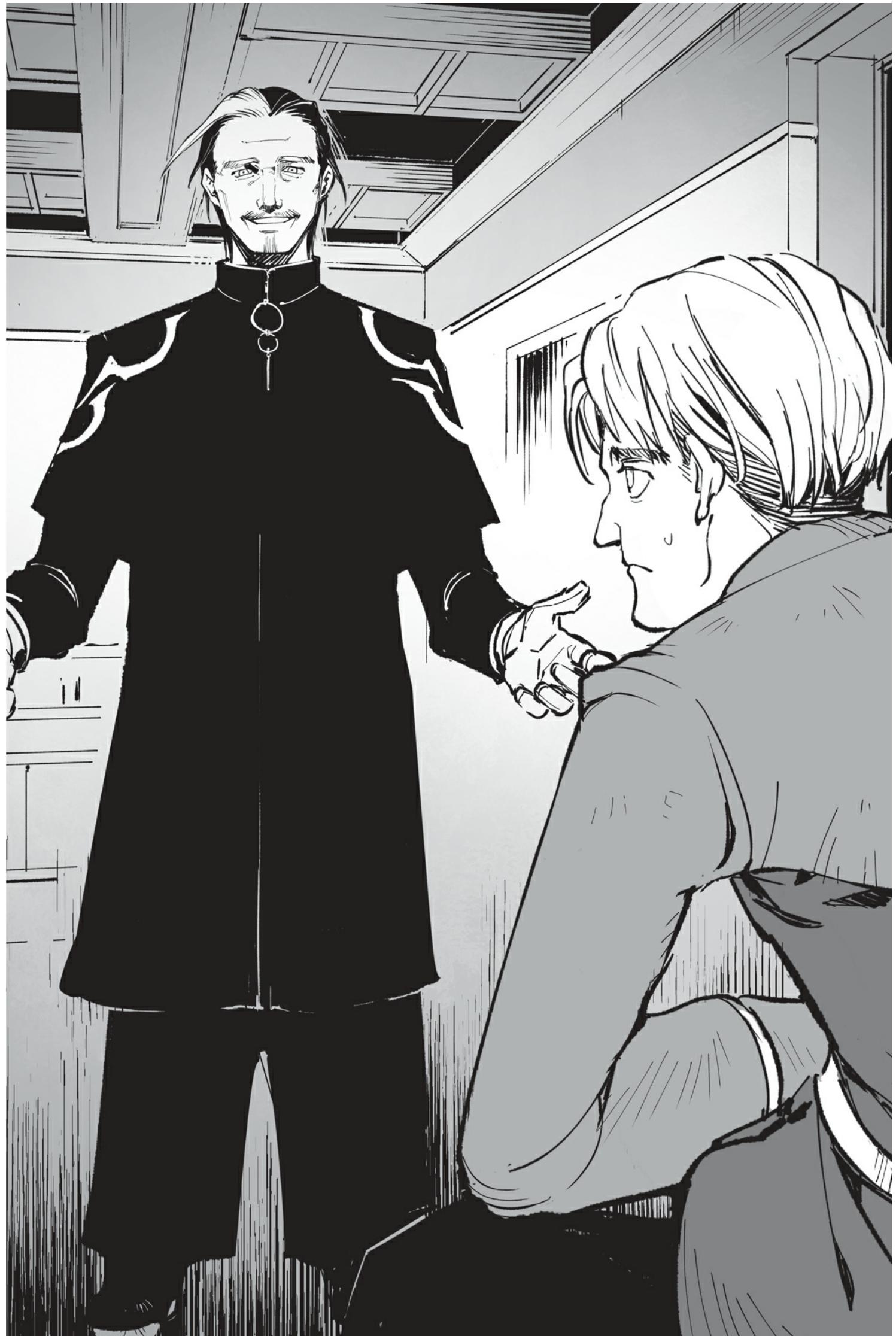
Some demon lords might look human, but there was nothing human about them. Once again, Lentoby had to admit their mental makeup was incomprehensible to him.

"The peace and order of the city is improving, mainly thanks to your management. However..." Abaddon lowered his voice. "I feel like there are still a few too many humans. Only a small percentage of them are needed for urban areas like this."

Abaddon and the Demon Blight needed humans primarily to serve as farmers. Additional people were required to assist the farmers or to do simple physical labor. Others could be used for food—as in food to be eaten, or to help in its production. That was what humans were worth to the Demon Blight. Few saw merit in human culture or civilization.

In addition to this, there was something else Lentoby had noticed while observing his new rulers. Demon lords and faeries needed to eat, but they

didn't cannibalize one another. If they ran out of food, they would fall into a suspended state of animation that could last for months. And the food they craved most was the flesh and blood of humans. It seemed they got some sort of nutrients—if that was the proper term—from it. Either way, it restored their power. Eating humans filled them with vigor, unlike pork, beef, or plants.



"I would like to further decrease the labor required for monitoring humans." And so Abaddon made his intentions clear. "There is a battle ahead. We will need to fight off Galtuile, Ioff, and numerous lords in the northern regions—it will be a broad attack from multiple directions, and the more soldiers we have, the better."

"In other words..." Lentoby's voice sounded distant and detached, even to him. "You'd like me to narrow down the candidates?"

"Exactly. I want you to randomly select people in their twenties and thirties, then hit them with an iron club ten times," ordered Abaddon, as if he were proposing a quality test of their products. "Those strong enough to survive will be turned into faeries and promoted to the rank of soldier. Those that perish will be made into food. In total... Hmm... Let's reduce the population by ten percent."

It was an extremely simple task. There was no way Lentoby could refuse. He had convinced himself that he was a cruel, selfish man, and he continued to tell himself he didn't care what happened to others. For now, he had to do everything he could to ensure his own survival.

This won't be for much longer, he told himself. Things won't be this bad forever. Once this is over, they might treat humans better. Once the new order settles in, this might never happen again.

That was why he needed to continue deceiving himself for now—to tell himself that everything would be okay, so long as he maintained the true version of himself that knew it was all a lie.

"You look pale," said Abaddon.

When Lentoby came to his senses, he saw the demon lord staring hard at his face. The creature's eyes made Lentoby feel dizzy. It was as if Abaddon were peering into his mind.

"Are you getting enough sleep?" he asked. "Human happiness comes from health and good rest, yes? I could sing you a lullaby if you need help falling asleep."

"That's, uh..."

"I'm kidding. This time it was obvious, right?" Abaddon clapped his hands together and smiled in what appeared to be a friendly manner. "Don't be so nervous, Lentoby Kisco. We already know you have value. We know you're working hard governing the humans, handling security, and managing the western supply chain."

Abaddon held out a hand, palm toward the ground, as if to say *calm down*.

"You are very skilled," he continued, "and that's why I want you to take command of the soldiers fighting at Ioff."

Give me a damn break, Lentoby thought. He was once again being forced to fight his fellow man.

"You will be adjutant to Lady Trishil. I believe you two make a great team, yes?"

Trishil was the captain of the human unit who had attacked the city. He had heard she was previously a mercenary. Originally from the west, she had moved from battle to battle until she was hired by the Demon Blight to help them take over the capital. Lentoby could still vividly recall the clear look of joy on her face as she charged in to the city. Watching her fight had convinced him to switch sides and join the Demon Blight.

"Why are you so afraid? Does our existence terrify you?" asked Abaddon. It was like he could see straight into Lentoby's heart. "I want you to trust us. We are not going to kill you. If anything, we are protecting you. Yes... You should be more like Lady Trishil and become a villain already."

Abaddon's lips curled into a smile. His was still talking in that soothing voice one might use with a child.

"Let us destroy mankind together," he said. "You should enjoy yourself. You have been chosen as one of the survivors, so you must live your life to the fullest. Humans live to seek happiness, do they not?"

"...You're right."

There was only one reply Lentoby could give. Abaddon nodded with satisfaction.

"Now let us talk about work. I have decided to send four demon lords to the Tujin Tuga Hills, since the Goddess and her Holy Knight will no doubt prove tough opponents. Look out the window. Those are the four. Allow me to introduce you."

Abaddon gestured toward the window behind him, but Lentoby didn't need any direction. All four demon lords were standing out in the plaza. They had been there for a while now, whether he wanted to see them or not.

"That one is Ammit. Though he has a troublingly large appetite, he is devoted and brave."

Ammit had the massive body of a wriggling caterpillar. He was crawling around the street, moving his gigantic jaws as if he was eating something. Lentoby didn't care to get a closer look at what it was.

It's human. I caught only a glimpse of what he was eating, but it was definitely human flesh.

There was nothing comforting about hearing how brave or loyal the creature was.

"Next, we have Charon. He's kind and a gentleman. But he's a bit neurotic, so I'd stay away from him if I were you."

A white, abnormally shaped creature was crouching in the corner of the plaza. He looked almost like a spider or a crab put together with various animal bones, and he was even larger than Ammit. In fact, he was so large and unmoving that Lentoby probably wouldn't have noticed him if Abaddon hadn't pointed him out. He would have assumed he was merely some strangely shaped building. What part of this monster was "kind and a gentleman"? It sounded like a bad joke.

"The lady over there is Furiae. If you need to communicate, she will relay your messages for you."

The third demon lord looked completely human. She looked like a woman, her white hair blowing in the wind as she gazed up at the sky. He saw her beautiful, delicate features as she turned and smiled at him through the window. But just like Abaddon's, her eyes were void of all emotion.

"And last but not least, we have Wryneck... Introducing him would be difficult, so I'll skip that and get straight to the point. I want you to work with these four to defeat the human army. No survivors. I know you can do it, Lentoby."

Abaddon said his name with a cold yet gentle voice.

"I'm counting on you."

In other words, do not betray my trust, thought Lentoby. ...I have to do this if I want to live.

Once again, he realized, he would have to be cruel.

But this isn't the real me.

The real Lentoby was far kinder. He could live for the happiness of others. And in order to do that one day, he had to survive this.

"Now...I'm not too familiar with how you do things, but I assume you humans like to perform some sort of ritual before battle, yes? Allow me to prepare the sacrifices. Their blood shall give you the strength to fight."

"Uh, that's..." Lentoby hesitated a few moments before he worked up the courage to ask. "That's a joke...right?"

"No. I was being completely serious. What did I do wrong this time?"



PUNISHMENT: DIVERSION IN THE TUJIN

TUGA HILLS, PART 4

Dotta went ahead on horseback and was swinging his lightning staff in the distance. But the sparks shooting from the tip made it clear that something was wrong. They were red, signaling danger.

Lightning staffs had uses beyond simply attacking. They could emit a loud sound or produce several different colors of sparks, like the kind Dotta was using.

"What do you think happened?" Teoritta wondered aloud, her arms wrapped around me from behind. "He seems quite panicked. Look how wildly he is swinging that staff! The horse must be extremely confused."

Besides Dotta, Patausche and I were also on horseback, and Teoritta had been forced to sit behind me.

"He's always like that," I said. "The only person more unfit for battle is Venetim."

"Is that all right for a soldier?" asked Patausche. "It seems extremely dangerous."

"It's not," I said, shaking my head. "But you know how good he is at scouting,

right? If he's telling us to be on our guard, then... Patausche, activate your sacred seal. We're going to talk to him."

I placed a finger on the sacred seal at my neck, and Patausche followed my lead.

"Xylo! This is bad!"

The first thing we heard was Dotta's favorite phrase: "*The faeries are a lot closer than we thought, and they're marching this way. They've probably already spotted us.*"

Dotta seemed wary of the sky. It was already dark, and the violet moon was peeking out from a gap in the clouds. And in that sinister light, I saw wings.

Gremlins were flying above us. Small faeries with membrane wings were all categorized as gremlins, and though they appeared weak and small on their own, the fact that they could fly made them dangerous. We would have to assume they'd already spotted us.

"How many faeries are we up against?" I asked.

"*Around thirty, I think. And most of them are fuathan and bogies!*"

Both of those were especially quick runners, which led me to believe the enemy was using scouting parties. It was a small group—we'd probably only run into a single finger of their probing hand.

"...If that's true, doesn't it mean they're advancing even more quickly than we predicted?" Patausche grimaced. "Are you sure about this, Dotta? Why would they march straight for us?"

"D-don't ask me! How should I know?!"

I could understand why she wanted to doubt what she was hearing. Our mission was to take the large hill up ahead and build a fortification there to get the enemy's attention. But before we could even start the mission, we found ourselves at a disadvantage.

"Xylo, do you think we should get those in the rear to pick up the pace?"

Rhyno, Tsav, and Tatsuya were at the back, overseeing the supplies, which had been loaded onto a horse-drawn sled. And wheezing pathetically behind

them was Venetim, carrying only the bare minimum amount of food. Jayce would probably join us later overhead. Meanwhile, King Norgalle was sitting on the supply sled, since we wanted him to focus on making sacred seals until we arrived. We couldn't allow our king to waste any of his noble stamina doing grunt work—especially because he had supposedly readied a “revolutionary new weapon.”

“I believe it would be safer if we waited for the troops in the rear before moving forward,” said Patausche. “That way—”

“W-wait, wait, wait! You’re kidding, right?!” cried Dotta. *“Are you seriously expecting me to just stand here in front of the enemy by myself and wait? No way! I’d die of fear before they even reached me! Hurry up and get over here! I don’t wanna die!”*

“What are you rambling on about? This isn’t about being scared or dying. This is about winning.”

“Hold on. It’s true we don’t have time to wait,” I interrupted. I wasn’t siding with Dotta, though. “Let’s make the first move and follow the plan. That will put us in the best position. I agree we need to hurry those in the rear, but we need to move even faster.”

“...In other words, you want us to take out their scouting party? Just the two of us?”

Patausche had left Dotta out of her count. She seemed to believe he was totally useless in battle, and I didn’t disagree.

“You don’t sound very confident, Patausche Kivia.”

“Hmph.” She looked conflicted for a moment. “...I suppose it won’t be so bad, as long as you can keep up with me.”

“It’s settled, then. Teoritta!”

“Very well,” she replied. “Allow me to bless your battle and—”

“No, not that. Hold on tight! I don’t want you biting your tongue!”

“Goddess Teoritta, please grant us your blessing!” Patausche chimed in.

“Oh! If that’s—”

Our horses broke into a furious gallop, cutting off Teoritta, and bringing us to the snow-dusted hill in a matter of moments. There was nothing special about the area, but it was essential that we build the fortification there and guard it with our lives.

"You hear that, Venetim?! Pick up the pace and get your ass over here!"

"I-I'm already going as fast as I can—!"

"*You got it, Bro! Rhyno, can you go any faster?*"

"*Of course. Should we tie Venetim to the horse and drag him along?*"

"Whoa! That's what I'm talkin' about, Rhyno! I've never heard anything less considerate in my life! Venetim, what do you say? Should we tie you to the horse?"

"I—I can run! I'll run, so please stop looking at me like that! You're scaring me!"

Tsav and Rhyno instinctively knew how to get Venetim to move, so I decided to leave it to them. After clearing them from my mind, I shifted my gaze forward to where a small army of faeries was heading our way. I saw a meager party of under thirty scouts, confirming Dotta's estimate.

"Xylo, Xylo! They're here! Right in front of me! What should I do?!"

I galloped ahead of my trembling teammate. Dotta was useless at times like this anyway.

"Just don't shoot us in the back, unless you have a death wish. Patausche and I can handle it ourselves."

"Does that mean I don't have to do anything? Because that'd be awesome! But please hurry!"

As I ignored Dotta, the faeries in front of us started to move. It was clear they had spotted us some time ago and knew we had only three units. Consequently, they decided to come at us from both sides. It was a simple pincer movement with around ten faeries in the middle and ten on each side.

"Patausche, do you know what cavalry are best at?"

"I have no idea why you're quizzing me at a time like this, but that one's simple—mobility."

Patausche was an exceptional cavalryman, just as I'd expected. Mobility. If she understood that, we'd be fine. Some people would've said it was the power to break through enemy lines, or increased attack force, but I was taught things like that were mere icing on the cake.

"Let's start with the faeries on the right," I said. "Circle around and attack them from the rear."

"Roger." Patausche sped up her horse, simultaneously lifting her lance into battle position.

"Let's do this, Teoritta." Communicating my intentions and strategy to the goddess was simple, since she was still clinging to my waist. "First, we're going to open a hole through the front!"

"Very well."

She quickly caressed the air, raining swords upon the faeries in the front. The attack was exceptionally accurate, and it alone inflicted heavy damage on the faeries in the center. A large opening had been created, which Patausche passed through effortlessly.

"Ahhh!"

Dotta screamed, firing his weapon randomly. He wasn't even close to hitting a single faerie, but at least his antics were providing a decent distraction. At the very least, he bought me enough time to rush toward the faeries to our right, unsheathe a knife, and throw it at them.

A flash of light was followed by an explosion and then another knife.

Patausche raced toward the enemy from the rear, activating the sacred seal compound engraved on her armor, which was intended for sneak attacks. Glowing, interwoven chains formed a barrier at the tip of her lance, and each faerie that touched it was either burned to a crisp or thrown into a fit of convulsions and blasted into the distance.

The faeries on the right were going to be completely wiped out in a matter of

minutes. They didn't stand a chance. Patausche's lance deftly skewered one faerie before mercilessly sending it spinning into another mid-lunge.

Before long, not a single enemy was left standing on the right. This was the true power of a cavalry soldier—a textbook example of breaking through the enemy's central line and attacking from the rear. It was obvious Patausche's true value lay in this sort of combat.

"Xylo." As she raised her sacred seal-engraved lance into the air and galloped forward once more, she even started issuing me orders. "Let's end this. Leave no survivors! We cannot let them relay any more information to their leaders!"

"I know."

The penal hero unit finally had their own cavalry soldier, a fact that would prove significant indeed.



"...One of the scouting units still hasn't returned," Trishil observed.

She gazed curiously at the faeries as they flew through the air, making their return. As she watched, her smoky red hair grazed her thick fur coat. She had a vicious look to her, but even Lentoby found her attractive. There was a wild beauty to her profile, lit up in the glow of the violet moon.

Suddenly, she turned to face him.

"According to the gremlins, one of our units encountered a contingent of only three cavalry soldiers and promptly ceased all contact. What do you make of this, Adjutant Lentoby? I await your brilliant insights."

"Hmm..." Lentoby Kisco had to make sure that his reply was clear and concise. He knew that was what Trishil wanted, and for now, he had to continue acting the part of the calm and composed adjutant. "It sounds like two of the three knights made swift work of the faeries while the one in the center remained in place, sending signals with his lightning staff. From that, I believe the latter is their commander."

"I was thinking the same thing. What does it mean, though?"

"The enemy has sent their elite far in advance of their main forces, and I think we can expect the worst, given the circumstances. It seems safe to assume that their goal is to save and protect the third princess and third prince, and those three knights are the enemy's strongest warriors."

Always expecting the worst and exercising as much caution as possible was how the mercenary leader, Trishil, liked to do things. That much Lentoby knew.

"Are you saying the enemy somehow learned of their escape?"

"Yes. At the very least, I would advise that we fight under that assumption," Lentoby replied. It sounded like Trishil was testing him, and he had to stay alert.

"Overestimating the enemy goes against the principle of mass, does it not? This might be just a diversion."

"Regardless, this is the prince and princess we're talking about. They are the hope of mankind, and I believe that warrants making them our highest priority."

Did I sound convincing? wondered Lentoby, admonishing himself once more. This was all merely an act. The real Lentoby was not like this. At such times, he would imagine a pure white box where the real him was hidden. All he had to do was protect that box. As long as he could do that, he could continue to pretend to be someone he wasn't: mankind's enemy.

"All right, I'll keep that in mind. Things are getting interesting, aren't they?" Trishil smirked. The expression reminded Lentoby of a sharpened blade, hungry for blood and battle. "Do you think we're up against the Holy Knights and their poison-summoning goddess? Or those 'heroes' I keep hearing about?"

Lentoby couldn't understand her. She seemed to enjoy fighting itself. Or perhaps she simply liked winning. He remembered once hearing her say that the thing she liked most was to trample those she'd bested into the dirt, and the stronger her enemy, the better.

"Let me take out their commander. Not many in his position would voluntarily come out to the front line. He's caught my interest." Her lips looked eerily red, perhaps due to the moonlight. "Let's move out. Grab my armor. If we're up against cavalry, then I'll need my Dyrap Strike Seal Compound."



It continued to snow on and off, and before he knew it, it was night.

He could barely see, and it was so bitterly cold, he had almost lost all feeling in his hands. He concentrated his strength in his left hand; he mustn't let go of his elder sister.

"My sister, are you all right?"

There was no reply.

This can't be happening.

His sister had to still be there, holding his hand. She had to.

"Please, answer me!" he called out.

"...Shhh, Rykwell," his sister whispered. "You mustn't raise your voice. Our pursuers have yet to give up."

Relief washed over Rykwell. Her voice was still strong. She was still alive. The bundle on his back and his sister's presence were the very hope that kept him moving forward.

"I'm sorry, Sister. Where are we now? ...Is Ioff still far?"

There were hills as far as the eye could see, and they were covered in snow. Rykwell had no idea what was ahead, nor could he imagine it. All this time they had been moving south—according to their sacred seal-engraved compass, at least. Hopefully, it was still working.

“We must already be at...the Tujin Tuga Hills. There should be a settlement somewhere around here. That, or the soldiers from Ioff...” Rykwell’s sister whispered once more, bringing her face closer to his. “So I need you to be quiet just a little longer... Our pursuers must be drawing near. We might run into them at any moment...”

After they escaped the Second Capital, their guards sacrificed themselves one by one to slow down the enemy. And now two full days had passed since they last saw the captain and his adjutant. Furthermore, their pace had clearly slowed. At least, that was how Rykwell felt. Though his elder sister was acting tough, he could tell that she was almost out of stamina. In fact, she might already be moving on sheer willpower alone—using her very life force to push forward. She hadn’t slept much these past few days, and they had no time to stop. All she’d had to eat since the day before was a lick of salt, some water, and a bite of cheese. Some might think to eat the snow, but they had been sternly warned not to use snow as a substitute for water. It would only lower their bodies’ temperature and as a result, weaken them even more.

“The darkness and the snow are helping us right now, but that won’t last much longer.” His sister’s voice was so weak, he could barely hear it over the snow and wind. “So, Rykwell...” She gripped his hand tightly. “Look for flames and listen for shouts. Search for the signs of battle, for not only our enemies, but our allies will be there as well. Even if I fall, you must go on by yourself.”

“It’s going to be okay, my sister.”

Rykwell didn’t know what else to say to comfort her. Could he truly go on without his sister? It seemed impossible. Regardless, he still wished to encourage her.

“I’m here to protect you,” he said. “I will take you to safety.”

Those were the same words that the captain of their guard had said before he left two days before, but Rykwell felt he should say them, too.

"I can always rely on you," she said. "But I want you to remember one thing. The Kaer Vourke is far more important than me and must be delivered at all costs."

"I know."

I told her I'd do it... Rykwell faced forward, focusing his eyes and ears on the world ahead. So I have to follow through, no matter what.

He thought back to the royal family's teachings, like a ray of light in the gloom.

He had to make sure what the king had said came to pass. Lies would weaken the king's authority. Actions and results were everything, especially for someone like the king, who was at the center of everyone's attention. He had to show results. Doing one's best and giving up halfway through was the same as inaction.

Rykwell had to survive and reach their allies. If he couldn't do that, then his and his sister's deaths would be for nothing.

...I have to do it.

Rykwell peered out into the dark and the snow, searching for the things his sister had mentioned: flames and shouts. He scanned their surroundings desperately, walking and walking until—



"Hurry!" shouted King Norgalle, hopping off the sled and throwing bundles of thin metal onto the ground. "I made six sets for now. Tie them around the front and on both sides."

The bundles appeared to be full of wire, all tied together to form a straight line. Looking more closely, one could see spikes coming from each of the knots.

According to Norgalle, this was his "revolutionary new weapon."

"Fasten these wires to a few stakes, install them at equal distances, then activate the sacred seal."

Norgalle did just that, and the sacred seal caused the wire to braid itself into a

set of interlocking circles. When it was done, they had a barbed metal barrier.

It reminded me of something I had seen very recently.

"I was struck with the idea after seeing that adventurer Shiji Bau's gauntlets. Those must have been one of Verkle Corp's prototypes." Norgalle observed his work and nodded with visible satisfaction. "Allowing for the user to freely change its form would be difficult, but a simple, uniform shape like this is easy."

"Uh-huh." Venetim stared skeptically at what was essentially a fence. He looked uneasy. I understood how he felt—the spikes were small, and the fence was full of holes. "How effective is this going to be? It looks like the kind of fence you'd use to corral sheep."

"Actually, this fence *does* look pretty revolutionary." I carefully examined one of the metal wires and nodded.

For starters, the wire and spikes would function as a physical barrier that would be hard to sever. It would take a faerie with extremely sharp fangs, claws, or some sort of scissorlike organ to break through. In addition, parts of the wire were clearly engraved with simple defense seals. No one but Norgalle would be capable of such intricate work.

"Man, any faerie that gets caught in these will be one heck of an easy target. Hell, I bet even Dotta would be able to hit 'em." Tsav traced his finger along a sharp spike.

"Vaaa... Ugh... Kk..." Even Tatsuya was staring hard at the fence with cloudy eyes and grunting from the back of his throat. It was rare for this man, who had no sense of self or will of his own, to pay so much attention to something other than his mission.

"...Barbed wire? So that's what this is. Interesting," muttered Jayce, casting Tatsuya a sidelong glance. He had caught up with us a moment ago, making sure to kill as many gremlins as he could on his way. As Neely breathed hot white mist into the cold air at his side, he nodded again. "It looks promising. Make good use of it and handle things down below. Got it?"

Jayce placed a foot in one of Neely's stirrups, and she immediately lowered her body to let him on. Then she faced the sky and roared.

"More gremlins are heading this way," said Jayce. "We'll take care of them."

"Permission granted," Norgalle bellowed. "As for the rest of you, stop yapping and get to work! I ordered you to hurry!"

His Majesty drove another stake into the ground. Then he threw down a shovel and kicked a block of wood at Venetim.

"Patausche, Tatsuya! You less-coordinated bums start digging inside the wire enclosure! Those who can't manage that, start a fire! Chancellor, I'm going to need you to work, too." His angry shouts were so aggravating, I was beginning to forget how cold it was. "We need a bigger bonfire! Hoist our flag! We must let them know that this hill is the front line, and it's under my control!"

"On one hand, I'm not sure if that's the best idea strategically, but on the other hand..." I grabbed a stake and a bundle of wire and immediately set to work. "Our goal is to act as decoys, and we need something to make us stand out, so let's do it."

"Hold on... Why am I being lumped into the same category as Tatsuya? That's ridiculous...!" Despite her anger, Patausche picked up the shovel almost reflexively. Her serious nature and habits as a knight had won out. Following these kinds of orders was practically second nature.

I smiled despite myself. "King Norgalle has decided you're inept because of your less than stellar cooking. Give up and start digging. We can work on your cooking later."

"What?! Was he really that dissatisfied?!"

"Well... It was pretty damn bad," said Dotta. "You were a captain in the Holy Knights, so I thought you'd be at least as good as Xylo, but uh... Yeah..."

"Yes, um... It may be a little presumptuous of me to say this, but you should probably check whether the root vegetables are completely cooked before serving them," advised Venetim. "May I suggest piercing them with a skewer...?"

"Man, you guys *all* thought that? Harsh. Like, I don't think her cooking's *that* bad, but— Ah! Hold on! Maybe that's because I underwent special training so I could eat anything."

"Do not let it bother you, Comrade Patausche. Your cooking is an expression of your individuality as a human. Everyone is different and special in their own way."

Patausche fell silent.

It was Teoritta, however, who dealt the final blow. Patting her on the shoulder, the goddess said, "Do not worry, Patausche. I can teach you sometime. It would be my pleasure."

Teoritta helped with the cooking and was currently learning how to properly use a knife. "With your serious attitude, I know you will improve in no time. I guarantee it!"

"...Thank you very much, Goddess Teoritta," replied Patausche, her voice a monotone as she used all her strength to thrust her shovel violently into the ground.

"Stop dillydallying and move!" Norgalle continued to furiously shout all throughout their exchange. "We have merely dispatched a single scouting party! Commander-in-Chief Xylo, how many do you think we're up against?!"

"Good question. Probably around ten thousand. From what I heard earlier, five thousand is a gross underestimate."

"Did you hear that, men?! In other words, we cannot let our guards down for even a second!"

The king thrust something into the ground next to the bonfire. It appeared to be a flag with a crest of five swords and a gate on it, representing the Federated Kingdom. It didn't look anything like the real one, and I didn't even want to think about what kind of trouble he'd be in if anyone found out he'd made such a thing and was carrying it around.

"Let us devise a foolproof strategy! I am counting on you all to fight bravely until the bitter end! The fate of the kingdom depends on this battle!" That was Norgalle for you. His speeches were always powerful. "Once we finish building our fortification, we shall rest until the fight begins!"

As our commander, Venetim would normally make such declarations. I glanced in his direction, only to discover that he was already hard at work

carrying wood, wheezing like he was about to die.



In the end, the entire hill was fenced in with barbed wire. The barrier itself was a little taller than a horse, towering over the land below like a line of bizarre art pieces.

Norgalle had me realigning stakes until I was sick of it, and at last, the hill had been more or less transformed into a fortress, complete with a wire fence. All that was left was to set up a simple tent and to bring the supplies inside, and once we were finished, most of us started quietly resting.

Tsav was the only one who couldn't keep his mouth shut. He kept talking about the reward he was supposedly going to get after retaking the Second Capital and how he was going to use it to open some weird themed café. Venetim was busy wheezing like each breath might be his last and had no energy to respond.

I decided to look up at the sky to see if I could distract myself from all the noise.

Looks like it stopped snowing.

Thankfully, the tent was protecting us from the wind as well.

But it's still cold, and winter hasn't even started yet.

I used our sacred seal-engraved pot to melt the snow and rehydrate my jerky, making a piece of meat half the size of my palm surprisingly filling. But in the middle of my meal, Tsav put on a big grin and dragged me into the conversation.

"And that's why I want to open one of those special cafés, Bro! Do you know what I'm talking about? They're all the rage in the First Capital right now."

"No." I cut into the meat with a knife and tossed another piece into my mouth. "It's been a while since I've been to the capital. What's special about them? Do you gamble there or something?"

"No way! I mean, like, that does sound fun, but I'm talking about the kind

where women in special costumes greet you at the door and spend time with you!"

"Oh, those? Those *have* been popular as of late."

The reply had come from someone unexpected. Patausche nodded at Tsav as she gracefully brought a small piece of bread to her lips. "They have cafés like that in the Second Capital as well, and I've heard that many women enjoy working at them, since they get to dress up. Supposedly, the outfits are really cute."

"...What kind of clothes are they wearing that customers will pay to see them?" I asked.

"Well, you know. Maid uniforms with cat or dog ears, Temple school uniforms with cat or dog ears... Stuff like that. Unique outfits one wouldn't normally get the chance to wear."

That made some sense. To become a maid in a noble house, you had to have both pedigree and considerable skill. Temple students were the same. But wearing fake cat or dog ears... What was that about?

Teoritta, however, immediately stood up, her eyes sparkling. "Oh! That sounds incredible!" She looked at Patausche and clapped her hands. "I would love to go someday and see all of the costumes! If possible, I would also like to dress up!"

"Your wish is my command, Goddess Teoritta. I promise to take you one day, if that is your wish."

"Wait. Like, I can't be the only one losing my mind here." After bolting down his share of jerky, Tsav began chewing on some seeds he'd brought along. He was oddly shrewd when it came to stuff like that and always carried his own rations. "You've gotta be kidding me. I had no idea that you knew so much about this stuff, Sis."

"I am not your sister. And I was living in the First Capital until recently, so of course I know about them. In fact, I considered working at one to gain experience. Just for experience, though. Got it?"

I tried to imagine Patausche serving customers in one of those outfits, along

with Teoritta, but I simply couldn't. Patausche would give her customers death glares, and Teoritta would run all over the place, getting nothing done. In fact, I doubted they'd be able to serve anyone. Nevertheless, I was a smart man who knew when to keep his mouth shut—unlike our brain-dead teammate, Tsav.

"Whoooo! You? Working part-time dressed up like that? For real, I can't even imagine it. I'd be, like, is the world gonna end—? Whah?! Watch out!"

Tsav scrambled back as the tip of Patausche's sword neared his throat. She'd managed to unsheathe it at blinding speed, and she was shooting him a glare as cold as ice.

"What's so hard to believe?" she asked.

"...How the heck did you get the jump on me at this distance? I almost wet myself... Forget I said anything, okay?"

"I will not. Explain yourself! What is so hard to believe!"

"Give it a rest, dammit." I had no choice but to cut in. "You want us to kill each other before the enemy even gets here?"

"...Seriously. You guys are a nuisance." It seemed Jayce and I agreed for once. He was resting his back on Neely's neck, sipping hot salt water and glaring at us. "Neely said she enjoys watching you all because you're funny, but she doesn't want to see anyone die, so she requests you put a lid on it. Now. Next one that says something stupid gets crushed."

Neely snorted softly as if to confirm what he'd said, but it also sounded a bit like a chuckle. Even Tsav shut up after that. If Neely wanted him quiet, then he had no other choice. Neely probably had the most authority in our little group, followed by Teoritta.

"Um... In other words..." Teoritta stood up hesitantly, spread her arms, and started waving them about. I guessed these mystery gestures were probably meant to fire us up. "We all need to work together to win! This is no time to be fighting among ourselves! Right?"

"Yeah." When she looked to me for support, I had no choice but to nod, though to be honest I wanted nothing to do with this. "We don't know when the enemy will strike, so we don't have any time to fool around."

"Dotta," I called out to the one member of our group currently on lookout duty. "What's the situation? Any new faeries on the horizon?"

Now that Jayce and Tsav were here, it was going to take more than one or two hundred faeries to defeat us. The enemy would probably come at us with thousands or tens of thousands.

"Are the faeries still biding their time?" I asked. "They're closing in, right?"

"Y-yeah... In fact, they're already pretty close." Dotta was staring into the distance through the lens on his sacred seal-enhanced telescope. "They're moving. And there are a lot of them. Around a thousand...I guess? And while they're not right on us yet, there seems to be another...thousand or so faeries behind them."

"Hmm? ...Sounds a bit disorganized."

It sounded like they were sending whatever troops they could muster the moment they were ready for battle. Usually, they'd send the whole force out at once. Were they really in that much of a hurry to get rid of us?

Perhaps we'd taken them by surprise, and they were having trouble finding a way to deal with us. We may have built a fortification, but our unit was small, so it wouldn't have surprised me if they ignored us completely. Maybe there were other factors at play.

Regardless, they would be here soon, and the real battle would likely start as soon as we were done eating.

"Teoritta, finish your tea with honey. We have a tough fight ahead."

"Okay! You will have a cup, too, right, Xylo? The rest of you as well!"

Teoritta gleefully boiled some water, apparently planning to make a cup for everyone. It was clear that we wouldn't be getting any more breaks after this. I started stretching, getting ready to lend Teoritta a hand.

That was when Dotta made an odd noise.

"Ah! Wait!" He raised a hand and pointed at something in the distance. "There's something there."

"Yeah, I bet. What? You see a rabbit or something?"

"No, people. Two people. Children. There are two kids out there! Wh-what are they doing?!"

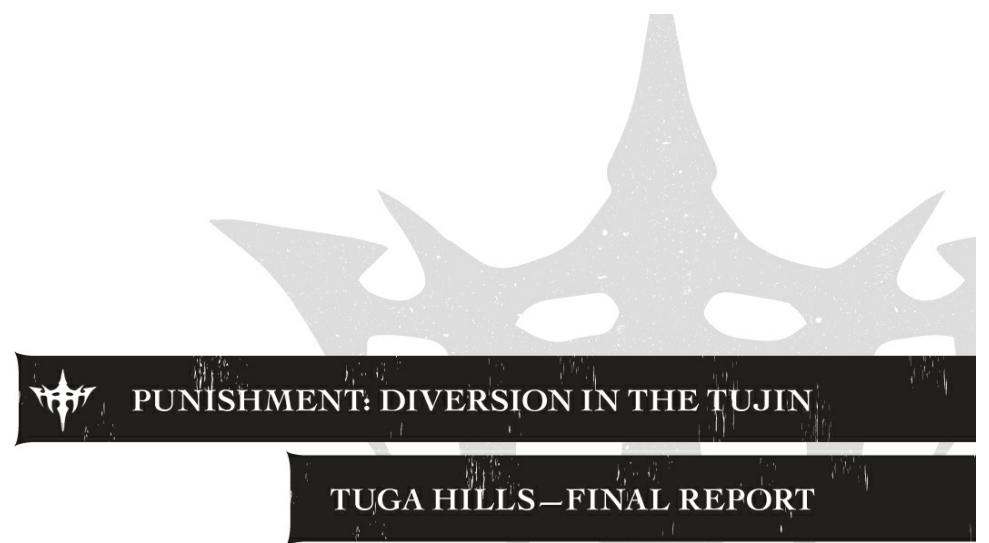
Dotta was making no sense again. Two children? Were they from a nearby settlement? But what would they be doing here? This wasn't the kind of terrain someone would accidentally wander into. That meant they'd probably escaped from the capital.

"They're heading this way," said Dotta. "You think they're escapees? Wh-what should we do, Xylo?!"

"What should we do?" We should—"

"Hey," he cut in. I had never seen Dotta act like this before, and his next words, too, were totally out of character. "D-do you think we could help them?"

You've gotta be kidding me, I thought.



I doubted my ears, but before I could even process what Dotta had said, I was hit by two extremely conflicting opinions.

"What? No way," argued Tsav, looking genuinely disgusted. His face seemed to say, *Like hell I'm gonna waste my time on strangers*. That was the kind of guy he was, after all.

"I agree with Comrade Dotta!" said Rhyno, a fake-looking smile on his lips and his arms spread wide, like he was about to hug Dotta. "What a wonderful suggestion! We should do whatever it takes to save them!"

Rhyno and Tsav turned to look at each other. Tsav seemed shocked as Rhyno stared at him in wonderment.

"You can't be serious, Rhyno! Do you have a death wish? Now that I think about it, you've always been suicidal. I mean, if you weren't, why would you volunteer to be a hero?!"

"Not at all! I simply believe it would be much more efficient if we all survived together. Wouldn't it be better to share this pain and suffering across the whole species? Otherwise, the imbalance will lead to weakness. Isn't that right,

Comrade Dotta?!”

“Wh-what I’m trying to say is... Um... It’s nothing complicated like that...” Dotta struggled to get out the words. “I, uh... I think they must’ve run away... because they’re really important people.”

“Hm?” Now it was Venetim’s turn to react. He opened his eyes wide. It seemed he’d finally recovered enough to speak. “Dotta, I knew you were a thief, but you rob children, too? How terrifying.”

“No! It’s, um... It’s hard to explain, and I can’t really remember why, but...!” Dotta scratched wildly at his head. He was practically screaming. “W-we should probably save them! It’s the right thing to do! You know, as h-humans!”

“Yes!” came a solemn shout. I knew Norgalle would react this way. The king clapped his hands together and stood. “For once, you have made me proud! This is the right decision! Move out, men! We must save my loyal subjects! O Goddess, please grant us your blessing!”

“Of course!” Teoritta chimed in, grabbing my arm in excitement. “Just what I expect from my brave warriors! It appears I was wrong about you, Dotta. It is our duty to save the lost and the weak! Right, Xylo?!”

“Dammit.”

Did this really have to be the day Dotta suddenly decided to grow a set of morals? Wanting to help people was fine, but this wasn’t the time or the place. Morals were the kind of thing you brought up in a speech during peacetime, not in the middle of a desperate battle.

I was totally against it. It was going to be a tough job, and it wasn’t even part of our mission. I couldn’t imagine it would benefit us at all. These were two strangers—what would helping them gain us? A thank-you and a smug sense of self-satisfaction? But...

I wouldn’t be able to look at myself in the mirror if people started to think I had even less humanity than Dotta.

“...I’ll have to go by horse with Teoritta.” I placed a hand on the goddess’s head, and she snorted proudly. “I know they’re kids, but you said there were two of them, right?”

"Y-yeah... A girl and a younger boy... At least from what I can tell."

"Then you take the boy, Dotta," I said angrily. "Patausche will handle the girl." Break time was over. I pulled my horse over and put a foot in one of the stirrups.

"...!" Dotta gulped audibly, then nodded. "O-o-okay. But I'm gonna leave the fighting to you!"

This was quite unusual. Dotta rarely took risks like this unless it had to do with stealing.

"Then let's do this! Unless you object, Patausche."

"Normally, taking unsanctioned action would be out of the question, since it introduces unforeseen variables into the mission and puts the whole army at risk..." she mumbled. Despite her words, she was already on horseback, her sacred seal-engraved lance in hand. "But I suppose aiding in such foolish acts is one of the benefits of being a penal hero."

"Benefits my ass. I'd bury every one of us alive if I were the supreme commander."

"If I were in charge, I'd discharge and court-martial every one of you. However..." Patausche looked like she had an itch on her back. Perhaps she was smiling at her own joke, but the cold made her expression somehow stiffer. Whatever the case, it was an awkward smirk. "I was actually planning on saving them myself if none of you did it. So if you're willing to help, hurry up and follow me. Don't fall behind."

She immediately took off on horseback. There was nothing to do but follow her.

"You heard the lady, Dotta." After helping Teoritta onto the horse, I gave it the signal to take off. "I don't want to hear any complaints, even if you die out there. You're the one who wanted to do this! Got it?"

"I—I know!"

"Rhyno! Back us up with your cannon! High-angle shots only!"

"But of course. I wish you luck, my comrades."

Rhyno's encouragement was aggravatingly cheerful, so why did it sound so empty? It didn't make any sense. As I took off on horseback, I listened to Tsav's and Rhyno's exchange, not with my ears but through the sacred seal on my neck.

"Wow, those guys are something else, huh? I wonder what they want those kids for. Food?"

"Hmm? For me? Unfortunately, I'm not that hungry right now, and I'm not sure if it would be morally acceptable to kill someone in order to eat them. After all, there are plenty of dead bodies on the battlefield to choose from, so I don't really see the point."

"Why would you be eating them, Rhyno?! That'd be a huge waste of two perfectly good kids! I'm talkin' about for the faeries! I thought we could use them as bait to distract the enemy."

"...Don't worry. I was only joking. Eating living humans is unacceptable... right?"

"Huh? I dunno. Personally, I think it's okay as long as you have consent—"

I took my finger off the sacred seal on my neck. I didn't want to waste any more time listening to them debate ethics and humanity. I had to focus on what was in front of me. Soon, I expected to see the kids Dotta had mentioned appear out of the night.

Patausche raised her lance into the air and shot a powerful ray of light from the tip, illuminating the darkness. But Dotta with his sharp eyes still spotted them first.

"Over there!" he shouted, pointing.

They really were just children, weakly staggering through the snow in their thick garments. The younger boy was practically carrying the girl, and behind them was a horde of faeries. It appeared they were being chased, but something was off. Why would such a large group of faeries be pursuing children? It was far too much effort for a snack. The enemy's formation was strange as well. Thousands of faeries were scrambling forward as quickly as they could, in order from fastest to slowest. Were these two children really so

important?

"Help!" shouted the boy. "Please help! Please save my sister!"

The boy's way of speaking made him sound like a noble, but I appreciated the way he prioritized his sister. *Not bad*, I thought. Impressed, I placed a finger on the sacred seal at my neck.

"Rhyno, Jayce, now!"

At my words, the two promptly took action.

A shell of light shot out from our fortification, illuminating the night sky like a pure white moon on a fine day, before landing right in the middle of the pursuing faeries, tearing apart numerous fuathan and bogies and sending their remains in every direction.

Unlike the direct fire used in urban warfare, high-angle shots like this sent the shell over one's allies' heads in order to strike the enemy behind them. However, it was Rhyno's uncanny accuracy that made a strategy like this possible. One day, I'd like to open up that skull of his and see how his brain worked. It seemed he could calculate a shot's trajectory and landing point perfectly every time. I thought back to one of my instructors in military school. He'd said that attacking with artillery was all about math and complained that the really smart soldiers would gradually become obsessed with the calculations until they eventually quit the military and became scientists.

"...I'm only going to help you this once because Neely wants me to," said Jayce. He sounded fed up. *"So hurry up and save those brats."*

I heard the flap of dragon wings overhead, and moments later the snowy field was scorched with powerful, hellish flames, sending steam rising into the air. Faeries dropped one after the other, thinning the horde considerably.

This was the correct way to use a dragon. Outside, with no obstacles in sight and enemies as far as the eye could see. There was no need to hold back with the beast's powerful fire breath, and Jayce and Neely could show off their true strength.

Nevertheless, the attack wasn't enough to take out all the pursuers. There were still a few dozen fuathan and bogies heading our way.

"Teoritta, I just need one attack," I said. "After that, we're withdrawing."

"Allow me."

Teoritta wasted no time summoning colossal swords from a void in the sky and sending them raining down into the ground. Although they only skewered a few of the pursuers, it created a fence that slowed down the rest.

I threw a knife, hitting one of the stragglers and blowing it up.

"Over here, brave children! I, Goddess Teoritta, shall protect you!" Her voice was strong and encouraging. I was genuinely surprised that she could be so cheerful after the deception and betrayal by those civilians in loff just the other day.

"I have the sister!"

Patausche picked up the girl while simultaneously swinging her lance, piercing a faerie that had lunged at them. The tip of her weapon glowed, emitting a strange sound as it created a barrier inside the enemy's body. The creature's torso twisted and flew apart.

"Dotta, hurry," I shouted.

But Dotta was already running desperately at top speed. He reached out to pick up the boy.

Then, right before he could grab him, the child collapsed. A bogie had pierced his body with its horn. Dotta wailed as if it were the end of the world. Maybe it was more of a scream than a wail.

Still, he reached out farther—so far that he almost fell off his horse—and grabbed the boy. Then he touched the bogie's head with the tip of his staff and unleashed a powerful bolt of lightning.

An interesting choice, I thought. Even someone with godawful aim like Dotta wouldn't miss if his weapon was touching the enemy. It was such a reckless, stupid act, and I hesitated even to call it foolhardy, but it had worked.

"Xylo! Give me a hand." About to fall himself, he was struggling to lift the boy onto the horse.

"Idiot." I grabbed Dotta by the back of his neck and lifted him up onto his

horse.

The problem now was the boy—he still had a horn penetrating his stomach. When Dotta's attack blew the bogie's head off its body, it had left most of the horn intact. The child's face was twisting in agony, but his pained groans meant he was alive.

Something felt off, though. Usually, a faerie would aim for the back, but it seemed like the boy had turned his side to the enemy at the last second to make sure his back wasn't hit. Maybe he was just scared and panicking. No—I caught a glimpse of something there, wrapped in white cloth under his mantle. What was it?

Dotta's wailing dragged me back to reality before I could come up with an answer. “Wh-what are we going to do?! H-he has a horn stuck in him!”

“Don’t touch it,” I warned. “There’s only one thing we can do right now.” A legion of faeries was still heading our way. We had to withdraw. “We have to hurry! Don’t worry about your horse! Get back to the fortification as quickly as you can! ...Patausche, give the signal!”

“Already on it!”

As her horse galloped, Patausche swung her lance over her head as silver light shone from its tip.

Bring it on.

My horse took off, but there was still a group of faeries behind us, and we needed to do something about them, or we wouldn’t be able to treat the boy’s wounds back at our fortification.

“Are they still not here, Patausche? The enemy’s going to catch up with us any second now.”

“They’ll be here!”

“...Ah!” Dotta yelped.

Immediately after, I heard the sound of hooves pounding and people shouting from beyond the falling snow. The new force violently charged into our pursuers’ flank. Neither the snow nor the darkness could stop them. There

could be no doubt—they'd come to our aid.

It was the backup Patausche had requested: the cavalry of the former Thirteenth Order. I figured they would be a good enough diversion simply standing in the distance, but they seemed to be taking their role seriously. I didn't know why they were going so far to help us, but I was beyond thankful for the force of nearly four hundred soldiers.

And these guys are the best of the best.

The fresh cavalry broke through the enemy line with style, creating a hole right in the middle of their forces. Thanks to that, the faeries were already beginning to retreat. It was the level of morale you would expect from faeries without a sentient being like a demon lord commanding them. The next wave of a thousand trailing behind the first were in disarray, thanks to Jayce and Neely scorching them from above. It probably wouldn't be long before they began running away aimlessly in droves.

I suspected they would regroup with their main force and strike back with everything they had sometime later. But...

"We owe you one." I looked back at Patausche. "Your cavalry are something else."

"Of course they are," she replied, purposely removing the emotion from her face. "Have you never heard of the northern cavalry?" She shot a brief glance at the other unit, her eyes filled with regret over her lost pride.

Her former subordinates.

I tried to remember the faces of the knights in my old Order. We'd fought together, in snowstorms just like this one. I could still remember them all. I had to remember. And yet— "Xylo, we should hurry." Teoritta wrapped her arms tightly around me from behind. "Look ahead. We have to save those two children. It isn't too late...is it?"

"You're right." I squeezed my legs together, causing the horse to speed up. This was no time to be looking back. "We'll have Tsav check them out. They won't last much longer like this."

We were still in danger. Nothing had changed. The faeries' main army was

going to come after us, and this time they'd have a commander.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE, PART 1

The battle took place in the northeast of the Tujin Tuga range, on hill four, which would later be called Thorn's Palm. It was perhaps the first time the penal heroes' names were recorded in history.



The gremlins' report was patchy, but it was enough to get an idea of what was going on. Gremlins could use a few human words, but it was similar to how a parrot would mimic someone's voice. Only through difficult training could they learn to actually communicate.

"It appears the faeries we sent after the siblings failed," said Lentoby.

Trishil was swaying on her horse's back, her eyes closed. It almost looked like she was sleeping, but Lentoby knew she was awake. He couldn't let his guard down for even a second. He made sure to choose his next words carefully.

"The enemy appears to have extremely powerful weapons: an artilleryman and a dragon—a dragon knight, to be exact."

The dragon knight is especially troubling, Lentoby thought bitterly.

He still didn't have enough information on the artilleryman to form a serious opinion, but it was clear that the dragon knight was a major threat. The fact that only four gremlins had made it back spoke to the knight's unusual skill. Lentoby had sent gargoyles for protection, and even those had been easily scorched and killed.

"There are three cavalrymen as well. They're probably the three knights we spoke of earlier. At any rate, they saved the siblings. This is merely my opinion, but I believe that was the very reason they were dispatched."

"You don't say... Things are starting to get interesting, Lentoby," said Trishil. She nodded and opened her eyes. It appeared he was right: She really *had* been listening. "They brought a dragon and an artilleryman with them. The dragon's ability to control the air is a threat, but I suspect they have multiple artillerymen as well. The shots were far too accurate, and I find it hard to believe that a single person could have done it alone."

"Could you see what was happening, Lady Trishil?"

"Just barely." She brushed her finger along her shoulder, perhaps unconsciously. That must have been where her *stigma* was located. "I saw the faces of the cavalry. It was the same group our scouts ran into earlier. The commander seems to be the one who rescued the prince. I'm impressed. He's got guts. I'll give him that."

Her throat sounded as if it were spasming. Apparently, that was how she laughed.

"I wasn't expecting him to thrust the lightning staff right into the faerie's head and blow it off." She continued. "In fact, I've never seen something more ridiculous in my life."

Although it was hard for Lentoby to imagine, Trishil must have seen what had happened as if she were there in person. It was all thanks to her inborn talent, bestowed upon her by her stigma. The sacred seals people were born with were known as "stigmata." They weren't tattoos, but rather something like a permanent birthmark. Even if you burned them or peeled off the flesh, they would always reappear.

According to legend, stigmata appeared when children were born between a

human from this world and one summoned from another during the First War of Subjugation. In ages past, the marks were called many things, such as blessings from the heavens, and the trait didn't always pass from parent to child, but could skip several generations before reappearing.

These days, however, the marks were viewed very differently. Those born with a stigma were seen as cursed and were often dumped or killed. Perhaps they were simply too different to blend in to human society. Up until a decade ago, at least, it was common for children bearing stigmata to be abandoned immediately after birth.

Trishil was one of the survivors of this practice.

Although her stigma allowed her to see things happening far away, she wasn't able to use it however she wanted. Sometimes, if she concentrated, she would fall into an almost dreamlike state, where she was able to watch events unfolding in a different location.

"The enemy's stronger than I expected," Trishil said, sounding a bit excited. "The commander is especially incredible. He set up camp like he was expecting all this to happen and organized a team of his most elite troops in mere moments to rescue those kids. He even led the cavalry into battle himself. Impressive, right?"

"Yes," Lentoby replied. He had no other choice. "...I agree. We must stay vigilant. He seems to have the intuition of a wild animal and good judgment to back it up."

"Right?! He fights like a savage beast and has a fox's cunning. Have you ever heard of hanged foxes?"

"Never."

"They're clever little beasts that live in the forest of my homeland. They leap down from tree branches to attack and hunt their prey. That's what this commander reminds me of. Oh, hey. In fact, from now on, I think we should call him Hanged Fox. Mustering a great force and fighting such a man... Heh." Trishil smiled savagely. "Nothing gets my blood pumping more than crushing talents like him. Lentoby, get ready for battle."

"As you wish," he said. He was terrified, but he kept his expression serious. He had to play the part of the loyal, sharp adjutant, or else who knows what Trishil would do to him? She was truly dangerous.

"It's time for the cavalry to move out. Put them with the coiste bodhars and place them in the center. I want infantry on either side. Then, when the time is right, we'll surround the enemy on both sides." Trishil was smiling as she visualized the coming battle. "Now... How will you defeat our army with your tiny force, Hanged Fox? A few reinforcements won't save your hide... Oh, Lentoby! I almost forgot."

"...Yes?"

"I want the commander captured alive. I have a personal interest in him. Surely, you're curious about him, too, right? He commanded an elite force and so brilliantly snatched those children from right under our nose." Her eyes sparkled, locked on the distant hills as if she were looking beyond them, straight at the enemy commander. "Nothing beats capturing exceptional people and torturing them until they lose their will to live. Know what I mean?"

"Uh..."

"I can't wait to see what Hanged Fox's first move will be. He must be one cold, calculating man—levelheaded and with no sense of fear."

"...Very well. I suppose we should stay behind in the rear?"

"No, I am going to gather my elite—my cavalry." Dawn was approaching from the east. It appeared the battle would take place during the day. "If they really plan on holding that position, they must have a strong defense. And in that case, we're going to attack from the rear. But we'll need to do a little prep work first."



"Xylo, what are we going to do?!" shouted Dotta the moment we arrived back at camp.

He practically fell off his horse, still holding the boy tightly in his arms. We brought the child into the tent to protect him from the cold wind and placed

him near the bonfire to keep him warm.

Finally, we had a moment to relax. Within our fortification were the four hundred knights of the former Thirteenth Order who had come as reinforcements, greatly increasing our fighting power. Right now, they were outside digging holes and wrapping more barbed wire around stakes, preparing for the oncoming attack.

"We have to do something! H-he's got a horn in his stomach!" Dotta wailed.

"I can see that," I replied.

"He's having trouble breathing, too! What should we do?!"

"You hear that, Tsav? What can we do?"

I patted our unit's sniper on the shoulder. He was also our medic, and he quickly got to work. He was already observing the child's wound with cold, lifeless eyes.

"How's it look?" I asked. "He's alive, right?"

"Yep. I'd say he's pretty lucky, too. You did the right thing not pulling out the horn, Bro! I know how reckless you can be, always assuming people are just as tough as you are."

"Can you work without running your mouth?"

"Being able to run my mouth while I work is only one of my many talents! In fact, it's proof of my genius!"

Tsav excelled in efficiently destroying human bodies. His understanding of their mechanisms meant he knew exactly where to strike to kill—all thanks to his training in the order of assassins. But to some extent, he could use that knowledge to save people as well. That said, I'd had to see his skills myself to believe them.

"His organs are... Oh, this is bad." Tsav whistled when he saw the wound. "His clothes were pushed inside his body... I guess we'll have to use the sprites. We still have the bottle we swiped from the repair shop, right? Your Majesty, may I have some assistance?"

"Very well." Norgalle nodded generously before grabbing a small bottle from

his bag. “Saving my people is my duty as king. I’m counting on you, Tsav.”

Norgalle removed the cork from the bottle. Near the bottom was a reddish, sparkling slime, and its glow spilled out into the surrounding area.

The things inside were known as “sprites.” They were small living creatures summoned by Andavila, the irritatingly smug second goddess. An individual sprite was supposedly so small that you couldn’t see it with the naked eye. However, when you gathered a bunch of them together like this, they looked like slime, and they could close, soothe, and heal wounds. I had used sprites before as well, and while I wasn’t a fan of the second goddess or her Holy Knight, these sprites were one of the core techniques used at the repair shop.

“It didn’t go all the way through, and he doesn’t seem to have any other injuries. Good.”

Tsav laid the child down and lifted his clothes to examine his body. However, when he raised the boy’s mantle, he noticed something wrapped in white cloth hanging around the kid’s shoulder. Sewn into the cloth was the crest of a gate with five swords around it.

The royal crest.

If this belonged to the kid, then he wasn’t just some noble. He was most likely a member of the royal family. It was hard to believe that such people had been forced to run all the way here by themselves. Whatever happened in the Second Capital must have been truly tragic.

“Um... I apologize for bothering you, but how is the girl?” Venetim was gazing gravely at the girl, even though there was nothing he could do. Maybe he was worried that he would be held accountable. “She doesn’t look good. She’s really pale.”

“Her skin seems to be naturally fair, but her body’s temperature is low,” said Rhyno, touching her face without a trace of hesitation. He was acting as if he’d found some rare creature on the side of the road and wanted to see how it felt. “But that’s all. The child should recover once she warms up and gets some nutrients. Impressive... Rather durable for something so fragile-looking.”

“Rhyno, unhand her,” said Patausche, ready to draw her sword. “She’s

probably a member of the royal family.” Simply seeing Rhyno touch the girl seemed to make her sick. “Can you not see her right earring? It’s the royal family’s guardian bird, and it’s made of pure gold... Wait. Where’s her left earring? Dotta, don’t tell me...”

“Ack...!”

“Comrade Dotta, you should probably return whatever’s in your hand later... Oh, this really is gold.”

Rhyno boldly reached out again and touched the bird-shaped goldwork hanging from the girl’s ear. A second later, Patausche grabbed his wrist to stop him. “I told you not to touch her!”

But she ended up shaking the girl’s body as a result.

“Ah...” The girl slowly opened her blue eyes. “Mn...”

However, her cloudy gaze saw neither Rhyno nor Patausche. Instead, it locked on King Norgalle, who was currently treating her younger brother’s wound. Immediately, she opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

“Sir Norgalle...?” she murmured, her voice hoarse.

I and everyone around me heard it. *The hell?* I thought. Surely, the others were thinking the same thing. This was their first meeting, and yet she’d addressed him as “Sir” without so much as a threat. More importantly, this young girl, who was most likely a royal, knew his name before he had even introduced himself. Everyone fell silent as their eyes naturally drifted toward Norgalle. He looked back, his brow furrowed. When he saw the girl, he seemed to freeze for a moment.

Then, after a few seconds, he nodded pompously. “Melneatis, I am glad you’re safe. It must have been a tough journey.” Norgalle’s lips turned up in an uncharacteristic smirk. The unusual sight took me by surprise. Even Jayce smiled more often than Norgalle. “I am happy to see you again, my dear sister.”

“...!”

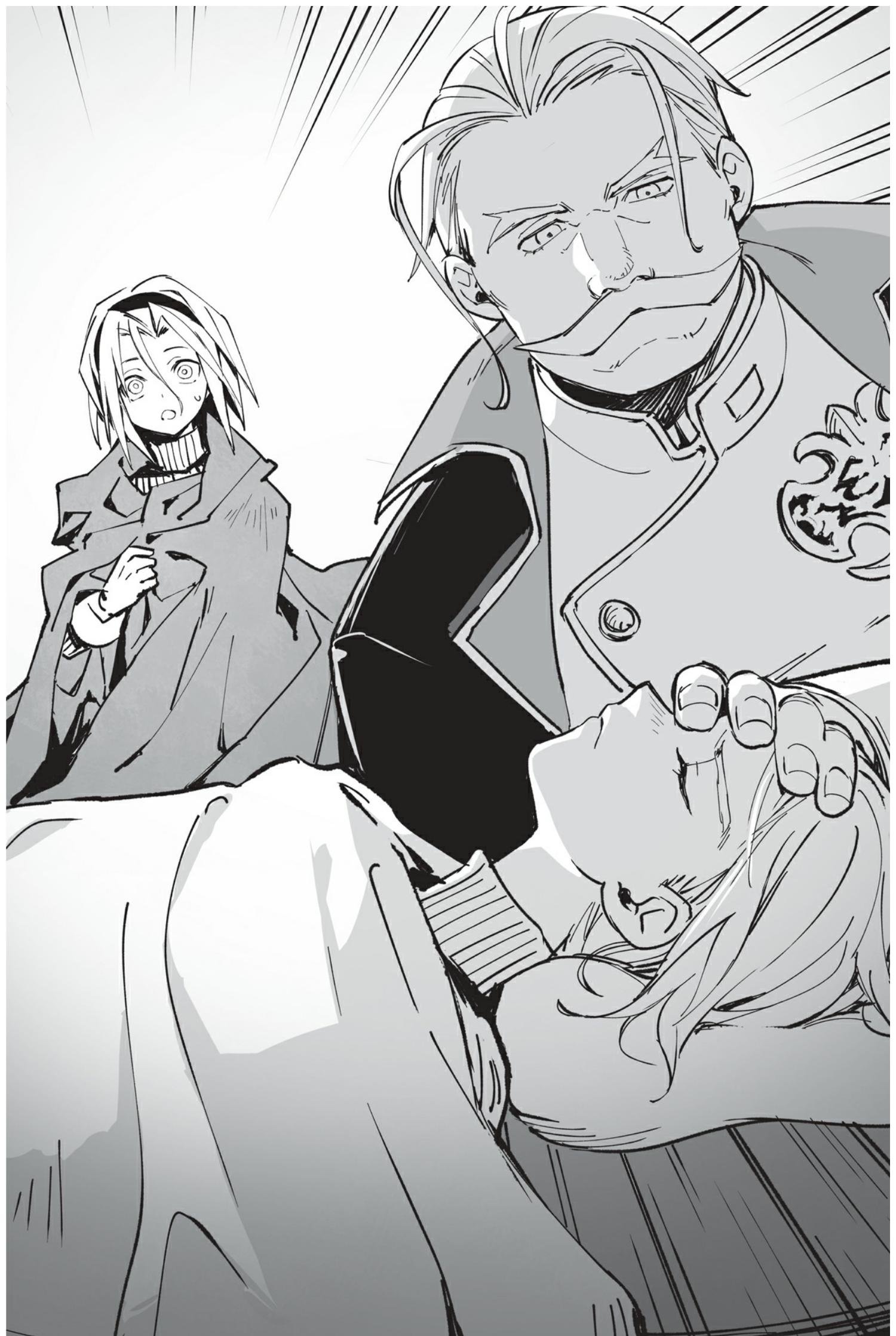
Her lips quivered as if she was trying to speak. I had something to say, too: *What the hell is going on?*

"Sir Norgalle, is he—are he and the Kaer Yourke okay?" she asked, her eyes still unfocused.

That was a term I wasn't familiar with. *The Kaer Yourke?* I repeated in my head. That must be whatever was wrapped in the white cloth and strapped to the younger brother's back. But before I could ask, the situation took a sudden turn.

"Hey, you *idiot landlubbers!*" Jayce, who had been patrolling the skies, suddenly contacted us through our sacred seals. "*The enemy's approaching. It should take them a while to get into position, but be ready.*"

"Understood," I replied. The battle would probably start at dawn. Or maybe they would wait until the sun had completely risen in order to get full use out of their sacred seal-engraved weapons. "What kind of enemies are we up against?"



"Their main force...seems to be cavalry. They're human mercenaries."

That increased the likelihood of the battle taking place during the day. They would probably try to overwhelm us with numbers and brute force.

"They seem to be focused in the center. There are infantry spreading out to the left and right. It looks like they're going all out. There are a decent number of flying faeries, as well." Jayce clicked his tongue. *"It's going to take a while for that many of them to get here, but make sure you're fired up and ready to go... Neely, let's land and rest your wings while we still can."*

Neely and Jayce slowly descended. We had to finish our defenses before it was too late. This was going to be another dangerous battle, and the deck was stacked against us.

I looked down at the girl, each of my breaths turning to mist in the cold air. "You alive? I can't say you're safe just yet, but I'll figure something out. Things are gonna get a little noisy outside, though, okay?"

"Ah...! I-I'm so sorry. This is all our fault. They're after us...! We—"

"What's done is done. No use throwing around blame now," I said, cutting her off. "Everyone, get ready for battle. Let's do this."

However, there was one among us even more scared than the children: Venetim.

"W-we're going to be okay...right?" he stammered. "Because that army is m-massive...!"

"I have a plan," I said confidently, hoping it would make him less annoying. "So stop acting like a coward, Venetim. You're our commander, right?"

"...Y-yes, but... Well, actually, you're right. I wonder what it is?" Despite his timidity, his lips turned up in a radiant smile. "It's been a while since we were all together like this. I get the feeling we can do anything, no matter what happens."

"I don't know that I'd go that far, Commander."

I peered into the darkness.

The sun was about to rise, and there were urgent preparations to take care of. We had one hell of a day ahead of us.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE, PART 2

There were countless things that needed to be done, but we had to save our strength for battle. All this work would be for nothing if we were too exhausted to move by the time the enemy arrived.

After doing what was absolutely necessary to treat the boy, we finished preparing for the enemy attack and were now taking turns resting. Although we would only be able to take an hour or two each, it was far better than nothing.

At times like this, Tsav was always the first to start messing around. Without fail, he would strike up some glib conversation with one of the regular soldiers and manage to further sour our already poor relationship with the rest of the army. This time was no different. He was currently chattering away tirelessly at the former members of the Thirteenth Order. Unbelievably, Rhyno would often stand to the side, observing him with a look of utter fascination, absorbed in writing down everything he heard. The whole thing was really creepy.

"I figured it would help me learn how to converse and socialize," Rhyno claimed, but I felt there were any number of better subjects to study. As for the other penal heroes, Norgalle was still ordering Tatsuya to dig, and Jayce was accompanying Dotta, who was on lookout duty.

"It must be tough always being the lookout. Why don't you try scouting from up above next time? I know a girl who'd be fine with you riding on her back." Jayce looked up at Dotta while chewing on some disgusting-looking rations. "Her name's Kaja. Remember the girl looking at you at camp yesterday? You know, the one with black scales and long, straight horns?"

"I—I don't know about that... I'm not used to flying, so I'd need to practice..."

"Then how about practicing next time you're free? Kaja's a little shy, but she's a good girl, and she takes her work seriously."

Jayce sounded like he was trying to set Dotta up with his niece or something, but this was an extremely rare offer from the dragon knight—proof of just how highly he regarded Dotta. Their relationship honestly made no sense to me.

That was more or less how the penal heroes spent their break. But some of us didn't even have a break. Patausche was the busiest, and it wasn't because she was the newbie. We needed to coordinate with the former Thirteenth Order for the upcoming battle, and she was the only one who could serve as our liaison.

We had four hundred reinforcements, and while it was a small number compared to the ten thousand enemies we were up against, it was still a miracle to have them on our side at all. We needed to ask them to take care of a certain task for us, and making the request wouldn't be easy. That was probably why Venetim had left the job to Patausche and me.

"I believe she's the best one for the job," argued Venetim, slumped on the floor like he was about to die. "Besides, her charisma is the whole reason they're here." He really wasn't suited to be a soldier. A little bit of physical labor for the first time in a while was all it had taken to lay him out.

Meanwhile, the knights of the former Thirteenth Order were waiting on horseback at the rear of our fortification, the picture of a well-disciplined force. They watched us, their faces stiff and grim. Then one of them approached Patausche. It was someone I had seen before—the leader of the cavalry, Zofflec.

I overheard their conversation as I sat by myself in the corner. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but the two of them were speaking very loudly.

"Hey, Former Captain," said Zofflec with a cynical smile. It wasn't too overt, but he was drawing a clear boundary between them. "The first move was a success. You are a truly talented commander."

I couldn't know how he was feeling, but I imagined he was angry about what had happened to them—that they were now disgraced as the former unit of a traitor. How many more battles would they have to fight before they could regain their reputation? Even Patausche seemed full of regret.

But at least they're alive. My men were—

I realized I was clenching my fists. I told myself to stop—that my feelings were unjustified. Fighting over who had it worse wouldn't change anything. It wasn't like we were holding a competition for the saddest backstory here.

"Zofflec," Patausche said at last. "Unfortunately, I'm not the commander of this unit, so I'm in no position to give orders."

"I know. That's Venetim Leopool, right?" Zofflec glanced at Venetim, who was slumped on the ground, looking pale. It was hard to believe he was actually a soldier. "But he's just a figurehead. His job is to bring everyone under control, but that's it. You're the one who came up with the actual strategy, right?"

Zofflec was right about one thing: Venetim was only a figurehead.

"I mean, the penal heroes are essentially a bunch of bums who couldn't make it as real soldiers," he continued. "Some of them aren't even soldiers at all. In fact...," he said, pointing at me with his thumb.

Wow, so he was speaking loudly on purpose to make sure I heard him.

"...The only one who actually knows how to put up a decent fight is the goddess killer."

"Not exactly." Patausche's voice was hard, as though she was intentionally trying not to show any emotion. "...While you may be partially right... I've come to realize that the members of the penal hero unit aren't mere criminals."

"Can I trust you? Can I trust that what you're saying is true?" Zofflec's face twisted, though I couldn't tell whether he was trying to smile or to look more intimidating. "I want to believe that you becoming a penal hero was all a

mistake—that you were falsely accused. Everyone here feels that way. You’re the last person who would ever do wrong. You had to have a reason, right?”

“Patausche.” Before I knew what I was doing, I’d stood up and was calling her name, interrupting them. I probably should have kept my mouth shut, but...

“What?” She looked back at me, annoyed.

This woman had killed her uncle and one of her subordinates. I had an idea of what had happened, but I needed to make sure. I spoke in a whisper so that Zofflec wouldn’t hear.

“The crimes they got you for... How much of it is true?”

“...What are you getting at? I killed my uncle and let one of my men die. That’s what I’m guilty of.”

“If you killed your subordinate, I figure you’d just say so. And yet you said you ‘let him die.’”

Patausche wasn’t the kind of person who could lie when it came to the law. If it were me, I would clearly say I’d killed him. As I’d expected, she simply pursed her lips. The mistake was obvious.

“Was that high priest—was your uncle a coexister?” I asked.

There was no other explanation I could come up with for why someone like Patausche would kill a member of her own family.

“Hold your tongue.” Her eyes were burning with rage. “I respected my uncle, and I won’t let you or anyone else talk about him like that, so keep your mouth shut.”

“No can do. Because it was the coexisters who framed me, too.” This wasn’t only about her and her uncle. Patausche’s anger didn’t matter.

“That’s how you became a penal hero?” She seemed taken aback.

“Yeah. My team was wiped out because of a false report made by the coexisters. Because of them, I ended up having to kill my unit’s goddess before she could turn into a faerie. I really am a goddess killer, but I won’t ever forgive the people who made me do it.”

I felt numb. It was as if the words coming out of my mouth were about someone else. It was no wonder, though. This was probably the first time I had ever shared this story.

Patausche opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but in the end she stayed quiet. That was probably what saved me. I didn't want any pity. Silence was exponentially better than some attempt to comfort me.

"Tell me the truth, Patausche. I need any leads I can get." I'm sure my eyes were full of anger as I glared at her. Neither of us looked away. About a second later, I said again: "Tell me. I'm begging you."

"...Marlen Kivia was a coexister," she admitted, closing her eyes and nodding slightly. "He was in contact with the guild master at the Adventurers Guild, and he was conspiring against humankind to ensure the Demon Blight's victory. I had no choice but to kill him."

"And you're not going to tell that to your men? They think you're a traitor."

"How would it help anything? Even if they believed me, then what?" Patausche argued bitterly. "I'd be sending them into battle with no trust in the military or their nation. Would you have me tell them to rebel, or to pursue the coexisters? Or should I suggest they quit the military altogether and choose another way of life? That's just not feasible."

She's probably right, I thought. She didn't want to involve anyone else in this mess. I wished the others in our unit would take some notes.

"For their sake, I must be a Holy Knight who committed that act of violence all on my own. I'm sure you'd do the same in my position."

"Yeah, I get it."

I glanced at the members of the former Thirteenth Order and noticed they were talking among themselves. It seemed that the sight of Patausche and me whispering to each other had put them on edge. Only Zofflec stood quietly, watching our exchange.

"So to summarize, you want them to hate you?" I asked.

"...Yes."

"Then let me help. That's my specialty. Besides, there's still something I need them to do for us."

"Wait. Your way always creates unnecessary fric—"

"Hey! That's enough chitchat! Time to work!" I clapped my hands and stepped toward the knights, pointing back at Patausche with my thumb. "This idiot here isn't your boss anymore, or your commander, but you all were stupid enough to come out here anyway. If you still have the will to fight by our side, then you'll have to do as we say."

"Wait. What gives you penal heroes the right to order us around?" Zofflec smirked, challenging me with his eyes. "If you have a plan, then we'll hear you out, but do you really have the authority to take command?"

"The supreme commander, Hord Clivios, gave us orders to defend the front line, and the penal heroes were given a free hand in deciding how to do it. It was your decision to join this mission, right?"

"That's true, but we..." He started to say something before closing his mouth once more. It was obvious he didn't have a good argument.

"Then that settles it. You all need to do what we say, and if you can't follow orders, then you're free to go."

People in the military had a hard time refusing when you laid things out for them like this. Both the chain of command and the situation couldn't be clearer, and my words sent a stir through the hundreds of soldiers and shut down any arguments.

Zofflec shook his head. "Goddess Killer, when you die, it's not going to be pretty."

"If I *could* die."

Perhaps he was being sarcastic. Regardless, he screwed up his face and laughed, and with that, the discussion about orders and authority was over.

"First, I need half of you off your horses," I said. "We only need two hundred cavalry. The rest will defend the fortification."

This created another stir among the soldiers. Perhaps telling cavalrymen to

hop off their horses was quite an insult. After all, these men used to be Holy Knights—the greatest warriors on land and the pride of the Federated Kingdom. We didn't have much of a choice, though. And besides, we were trying to make them hate us.

"You're their leader," I told Zofflec. "So you decide who does what. I want all the snipers on foot! We'll need their help fending off the enemy when they arrive. Those on horseback will wait in the rear, using the hills for cover." I smirked as wickedly as I could. "I need you *former* Holy Knights to hurry, okay? And if you're scared, feel free to run away. You won't have to worry about us chasing after you. Patausche will explain the rest of the plan."

"...Xylo," said Patausche, grabbing my arm as I turned to leave. Her gaze seemed to ask, *Why are you being such an asshole?* "How you say things matters," she said at last.

"I'll keep that in mind." I patted her lightly on the shoulder. "I hope some of them end up hating us so much that they really do run away. If they have family waiting for them at home, they should leave right now... But if there are people who want to fix their tarnished reputation for themselves or for their leader..."

The more I spoke, the more disgusted Patausche looked, which was perfectly fine by me.

"...then there's no helping them," I continued. "So I'm going to have them lend us a hand. Do your best to keep them safe."

"...This is why it matters how you say things. And you always..."

She sighed instead of finishing her sentence. It looked almost as if she were smiling, but it was probably just my imagination. After that, she left to give the knights their orders and to explain the strategy in more detail.

In the end, every one of her former men stayed to fight.

Heh. It's obvious how much they look up to her.

I watched them from the corner of my eye while sipping the tea I'd just heated. The spiciness almost numbed my tongue.

"What is that, my knight?" Teoritta had suddenly come up to me and was

peering curiously into the cup of tea in my hand. “It smells wonderful.”

“Don’t even think about it. This is spicy, and it has alcohol in it, too.” I pulled my cup away from her. “This is how we drink tea in the south. It keeps you warm, but it’s one of those tastes people either love or hate.”

They called this kind of tea “ucchir,” which I vaguely recalled meaning “elbow strike.” It consisted of powdered sleewak and syrup, made from boiling down fruit, mixed into a strong tea. It only took half a cup to warm your body. Personally, I enjoyed having mine with a few drops of booze.

“...I see,” replied Teoritta, averting her gaze. She sounded bored, or perhaps sulky. Her behavior seemed very forced. She wouldn’t make eye contact, and yet she sat with her back right up against me. She was being so obvious, even I couldn’t ignore it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “You look like you’re in a bad mood.”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s exactly what people say when they’re in a bad mood. Out with it.”

“I said I’m fine... It’s just...” Teoritta looked away when I tried to get a peek at her face. “You appeared lonely, my knight. Therefore...I figured I could keep you company.”

“Whoa. What a compassionate goddess,” I said, laughing. I had to laugh. But if Teoritta thought I was lonely, it must have been because I was watching Patausche and her former men interact. She still had subordinates who looked up to her. For a soldier, that was one of the greatest honors one could receive.

I no longer had that. My men were all dead.

“But...,” Teoritta continued. “I am in a bad mood because of something else. I thought I could cheer you up, but I do not feel like it anymore.”

“So you *are* in a bad mood.”

“...Ever since we arrived on this hill, you have been spending all your time chatting with Patausche.”

“That’s my job.”

"You two have really been hitting it off. It must be because you are both former Holy Knights. You make it so obvious."

"Did it seriously look like we were having fun?"

"Yes." Teoritta stood up and pointed at me. "Listen, Xylo. I am a goddess, and you are my Holy Knight. We only have each other! And no matter what happens, I will not allow you to neglect me! I will personally make sure you suffer divine retribution if you do not start putting me first and giving me the praise I deserve!"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it."

She had a point. Patausche had her men, but I had a goddess—a goddess that idiot Dotta stole from them, in fact. Once I thought about it, I couldn't help but laugh. I laughed so hard that Teoritta started scolding me for it.

That was when I heard the sharp ring of a whistle reverberate across the dawn sky. It was Dotta, on lookout duty, signaling the start of battle.

"Xylo, hurry! They're coming!" he shouted, looking desperate. *Isn't it a little too soon to start panicking?* I thought as I finished up my ucchir.

This battle would be the real deal. I glared at the sun peeking out from the horizon.

We can do this.



The fight began with a flash of light and a roar—one of Rhyno's high-angle shots.

There was nothing better to stop the incoming surge of cavalry. It landed precisely in the center of the frontmost enemy group and blew up countless dullahans, along with some human cavalry. Yes, *human* cavalry—there were a decent number of them, probably mercenaries.

Teoritta, her face pale, lowered her gaze and grabbed my arm. "Xylo, why are there people on the Demon Blight's side? Are they...being controlled?"

"Maybe." I wanted to make her feel better, but I couldn't think of anything to

say, and she would probably be able to sense my true feelings anyway. "Mercenaries work for whoever they think will win, so we should probably cut them some slack."

"I do not blame them for the choices they felt they had to make, but..." Teoritta clutched her chest. "Hurting humans pains me greatly. It makes me feel sick."

"That's because you're..."

...a goddess created by mankind to serve and please them?

No, maybe that wasn't the reason. I wanted to believe there was more to it than that. I felt disgusted with myself for being so stupidly optimistic. Who was I trying to fool? And yet I couldn't help it.

"...so damned kindhearted," I said at last.

"Your only fault is your filthy mouth, my knight." She smiled slightly, her profile illuminated by the ceaseless barrage of cannon fire.

Rhyno was using his Neven Artillery Seal Compound to fire high-angle shots. The sight of it under the clear, midday sky was almost cheery. The artillery fire raining down on the enemy like a storm felt somehow surreal. Rhyno had been storing up luminescence these past few days, and he had another cylinder of the stuff ready to go.

Reloading was King Norgalle's duty and consisted of removing the massive, empty cylinder from the back of Rhyno's armor, then grabbing the new one, just big enough for an adult man to wrap his arms around, and shoving it into place. Obviously, this took strength.

"Time to work, Melneatis." He was even giving orders to the girl they'd rescued, who was still weak and had only just left her bed. *The arrogance.* "This is your duty as a member of the royal family! Gather up snow and bury this. It needs to be cooled," he shouted furiously as he pulled a sticklike object from the arm portion of Rhyno's armor and tossed it on the ground. It glowed red hot, melting the snow around it.

"...Y-yes, sir!" The young girl called Melneatis seemed somewhat confused, but she did as she was told.

She was asking him questions in return, but I could only hear parts of what she was saying. “Um, so... Sir Norgalle, what are you doing here? And, um, who are these soldiers? What happened to your studies at the Temple—?”

“These are my brave warriors, protected by Goddess Teoritta’s divine blessing.”

“O-oh...? Um... But what I want to know is...”

“Fulfill your duty as royalty. The job of a king is not to sit on the throne, but to serve as the shield of the people! You must stand on the front line with your men!” Norgalle was practically howling a battle cry.

“Simply incredible, Comrade Norgalle,” Rhyno whispered cheerily. “You never cease to impress me. I can’t help but respect you... In fact, thanks to you, I feel I will be able to do my very best this time around.”

The first time I saw one of Rhyno’s high-angle shots, I was puzzled. He’d fire off a bunch of them, making it look easy, then he’d fall silent and wait. Most artillerymen would fire a shot, then make adjustments, but not Rhyno.

When I asked him about his process once, he told me: “Because of the difficulty of calculating the shots, I find this method to be most suitable for me.”

He then showed me a notebook he had written, full of overly complicated mathematical formulas. It was a rather thick notebook, and there were others of the same size. I’d thought they were diaries, but they were apparently records of what he had learned and the fruits of his labor.

“If I can predict the trajectory and landing point after factoring in external variables... Well, then I don’t need to fear a miscalculation. If I know the numerical values that need to be plugged in to the equation, then it’s better to fire multiple shots in quick succession, since conditions can change with each passing second.”

It didn’t make any sense to me, but whatever he was doing, it sure seemed to be effective.

Nevertheless, our enemies continued their approach. It didn’t matter how good Rhyno was. He couldn’t take all of them out alone. Meanwhile, Jayce was fighting for air supremacy overhead.

In other words, we had to do something about the approaching enemies ourselves.

“Tatsuya.”

“Grrr...!”

I heard him growl somewhere nearby the instant I called for him. He stood up from his trench, an unusual lightning staff as big as a log in his hand. I could tell the tip was already emitting light—clearly, he knew how to wield it. I should have had him start using these things a long time ago.

This one was a special model made by Verkle Corp, which usually required multiple people to operate it. The product was known as the Halgut Blaster Seal Compound, and it was the fruit of research into a type of destructive power different than that of an artilleryman’s cannon armor.

“Start attacking the enemies as they approach. Shoot all of them.”

“Vuh,” grunted Tatsuya as he raised his blaster compound into the air. While I knew he was strong, this was too much for one person to handle. I figured I should find someone to help him.

But before I could say another word, his fingers started brushing the air in complex motions. It didn’t make any sense to me, but it was one of his old habits. Whenever he was about to try something new, he would do this thing with his fingers for a few moments.

The next moment, his body enlarged as his bones and shoulder muscles eerily cracked and popped. Soon, both his arms had swelled bizarrely and he held his staff at the ready. This was clearly some sort of anomalous physical transformation.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

The others were probably just as astonished as I was. Tatsuya’s body had transformed right before our eyes. As we all watched in disbelief, a dramatic flash of light, blindingly bright even in the daytime, scorched the snowy field like a whip of glittering fire, swallowing the enemy cavalry.

“Gi.” A grunt escaped Tatsuya’s throat. “Giiigigigigigigigigi!”

It sounded like some sort of battle cry, or laughter, perhaps. The bright beam indiscriminately penetrated each man, dullahan, and coiste bodhar in sight.

The Halgut Blaster Seal Compound was intended to be operated by multiple people. It was too big to be referred to as a mere lightning staff, and it was meant to rapidly fire multiple bolts of lightning with each shot in order to attack a wide range of enemies.

A rapid-fire lightning staff—exactly what one would expect from the development department at Verkle Corp. People in the military didn't refer to them as the Perverted Toy Box for nothing. At any rate, it was too big for one person, and it consumed a heck of a lot of luminescence. Venetim was originally supposed to help operate it, since he wasn't good for anything else, but it looked like that wouldn't be necessary. Tatsuya was easily waving around the massive weapon with his meaty arms, sending bolts of lightning trailing left and right, blowing away our enemies as they approached from the snowy plains.

"Hey, uh..." Venetim looked back at me. "What's going on? Did anyone know Tatsuya could do that...?"

"You've been with him the longest. If you didn't know, then how the hell would we?"

I rolled my eyes. I was starting to doubt all the rumors Venetim had ever told me. In fact, using him as a source for information was probably a mistake to begin with.

But if Tatsuya really was a member of Penal Hero Unit 9001, that would mean he took part in the First War of Subjugation, the only recorded victory of mankind over the Demon Blight. A warrior summoned from another world back when humankind was stronger. If all that was true, maybe it could explain this extraordinary feat he was pulling off.

At any rate, it seemed we could leave the enemies in front to Tatsuya.

All we had to worry about now were the cavalry, the dullahans in particular, detouring around and coming at us from the sides. If the coiste bodhars were like horses that had been turned into faeries, then the dullahans were like a combination of a horse and a parasitic creature that became a faerie together. I'd heard of cases where humans riding on horses turned into dullahans.

They weren't as quick as coiste bodhars, but they were larger and more intelligent. Furthermore, depending on the creature atop the horse, some could even hold weapons. Charging past the artillery fire and bolts of lightning were five...six...seven—I gave up trying to count, because the number was rapidly increasing. There were a lot of them, and they were almost here.

"Th-they're coming, Xylo. They're right up ahead," stammered Venetim. His voice trembled, and his hands shook around the lightning staff he was holding. This was his first time at the front line in a while, and he was probably an even worse shot than Dotta.

"Keep luring them in," I said. "Don't worry. Tsav'll take care of the tough ones."

"Yeah, for real! Just leave the heavy lifting to me, and you'll be fine! I didn't place first in the order of assassins' sniping contest countless times for nothin'! I hit and killed my target every time. Anyway, Dotta, who should I hit next?"

"Huh? Oh, uh..."

Dotta brought his eye closer to the telescope's lens. He was sitting on a stack of wooden crates. We needed someone on watch while Jayce was busy in the sky, and there was nobody with better vision than Dotta.

"...I think the biggest enemy's at ten o'clock. That's probably their leader. It has a large number of faeries following closely behind it... Wait a minute." All of a sudden, his knees began to shake restlessly atop the wooden crates. "Is it just me, or am I in a really dangerous position? What am I gonna do if a projectile comes flying?"

"You should be fine until the infantry get closer," I said. "But if you feel like you're in trouble, jump. Somebody'll probably catch you."

"Somebody..." Dotta looked around, passing over each of our faces in turn. "Who's gonna catch me?! Can't I get down from here already?"

"You could, but we'd have to kill you, and I'm sure it'd be really painful, so I don't recommend it."

"Mmm! Xylo," Teoritta scolded. "Could you please not say such awful things! Dotta looks terrified. The poor man is shaking!"

Dotta, however, took my kind advice to heart and shut his mouth.

Crackle! A dry pop tore through the air as Tsav shot a bolt of lightning at the large dullahan Dotta had pointed out. The beast was blown some distance before it collapsed onto the ground. This threw the enemy out of step, but they continued to push forward.

“It’s your time to shine, former Holy Knights!” I shouted. “Attack!”

The knights who had gotten off their horses were already in position in front of the barbed wire, each holding out their lightning staff in silence. They didn’t seem to like taking orders from me, but that didn’t matter, as long as they followed them in the end.

“Don’t push yourselves too hard, okay?” Tsav said casually. “It’d be impossible for you guys to nail every shot like I do, so just focus on unleashing everything you’ve got when they’re right in your face. I mean, even Dotta would be able to hit them that close up, so you all should be fine!”

“Prepare to fire,” ordered the sniper unit’s officer, her lightning staff pointed at the enemy. Her name was Siena, if I remembered correctly. It seemed Tsav’s taunting had gotten to her. “I don’t want to see any of you miss,” she added. She had one eyebrow raised, and I was pretty sure she was pissed.

Seconds later, the enemy cavalry arrived. The dullahans held out their lances while the coiste bodhars rushed forward, using their bodies as battering rams.

It was clear, however, that they didn’t understand the threat of the obstacles in front of them.

The barbed wire fence was far more effective than I had imagined. The wire deflected their hooves with a *clang* as the spikes dug into their flesh. It blocked both their fangs and lances and prevented them from advancing any farther. Some fell over, dragging others down with them, and yet more rammed into these from behind. One dullahan tried to force its way through, but the sacred seal-infused spikes scorched its body, bringing the creature to its knees. They were nothing but targets for the snipers now.

Bolts of lightning roared through the air, piercing the enemy. Incidentally, there was another merit to this fence: You couldn’t break through it with an

explosive. When I saw the next group of enemies approaching in between volleys, I yelled.

"Everyone, get down! Teoritta!"

"You got it!"

Immediately, a short sword emerged from the void. As soon as I grabbed it, I threw it. There was no need to worry about accuracy. The explosion was followed by a flash of light, swallowing the entire group of dullahans in flames and scattering melted snow all across the ground.

We were waging a one-sided battle from behind the fence, especially since ducking into our trenches protected us from any explosions. There was no way we could have used such a strategy with our usual sacred seal-engraved wooden fences. I had begun to realize just how effective Norgalle's new weapon really was. To my great surprise, we had the upper hand. However...

"...There are too many of them, my knight." Teoritta looked grave. "They keep coming one after another. There is no end...!"

"No surprise there."

It wasn't like Rhyno could keep firing at them forever, either. There was a limit to how much longer we could keep this up, and there were far too many enemies. It wouldn't be long before the other side's cavalry noticed how we were dominating them and started trying to jump over or cut through the fences, or decided to come around and attack us from the rear. The faerie cavalry were already trying to break through our fire using pure numerical advantage. Eventually, they'd be able to use the bodies of their fallen allies to climb over the barbed wire fence. Of course, these were all things we'd predicted and prepared for.

"My knight! Should we not start taking action to protect everyone? I—I am ready whenever you are."

"Don't force yourself."

Teoritta was clenching her fists too tightly, so I placed a hand over hers and stopped her. It didn't matter how accurate her aim was. There was no way I could send her onto the battlefield right now. Her inability to attack humans

meant she'd be helpless if targeted by one.

"I'll need your help when the time comes," I said. "And don't worry. I'll really run you through the wringer."

"You will? Really? You will depend on me?"

"Yes. So I need you to wait. Let the humans handle the humans."

After unsheathing a knife with one hand, I infused a high concentration of energy from my sacred seal into the blade, lifted my arm into the air, and threw it as hard as I could—right into the enemy cavalry's path. The knife penetrated the snowy terrain and created a massive explosion, forcing the cavalry to stop in place. It wasn't the flames that frightened them, though—their horses' hooves had suddenly sunk into the ground. The animals neighed while the coiste bodhars and dullahans shrieked in strange tones. But the more they struggled, the more they lost their balance, until eventually they fell. A wave of chaos rippled through their ranks to the rear in a matter of seconds.

"...A disintegration seal?" muttered a sniper. I assumed this was Siena. "I can't believe you'd use something like that here. You're playing a dangerous game, you know?"

She had a point. Disintegration seals could pulverize the ground, turning it into a swamp. Although they were perfect for stopping horses in their tracks, they absolutely destroyed the land. That said, when it came to stopping cavalry charging you, there was nothing more effective.

"Dotta, you still alive up there? Give the signal!"

"R-roger!" Dotta moved swiftly, swinging his lightning staff over his head and releasing a green light. Patausche Kivia might even have set out already, not bothering to wait for the signal. This was it—we'd made every move in our arsenal.

All that's left is... I turned to face forward and saw a huge monster headed our way, trampling its own allied cavalry as it came. It was a barghest—a quadruped beast—and it was even bigger than normal. With a faerie this size, any changes I could make to the land would be pointless. To make matters worse, I saw a few goblins on its back. If that thing were to get close enough, it could crush our

fortification, barbed wire fence and all. Seeing this irregular faerie heading straight for us made me suspicious that it was some sort of decoy. Nevertheless, it was not the kind of decoy we could simply ignore. I patted Teoritta on the shoulder.

"It's time for the goddess to take action. Can I count on you?"

"But of course." Teoritta's hair began to spark. "I have been waiting for this moment. I will prove my usefulness, even if it costs me my life."

"Stop being an idiot. How many times do I have to tell you? Don't go throwing —"

"I know." She wrapped her arms around my neck. "I simply wanted you to scold me again."



Trishil couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Her huge cavalry force had been almost completely stopped in its tracks. The enemy's defensive wirework was far more effective than she had imagined. Hooves and lances couldn't easily break through it. To destroy this barrier, they would have to target the wooden stakes. But it wasn't going to be easy, since that was where the enemy's firepower was most concentrated.

Trishil regretted spreading her infantry out to the sides. It was going to be difficult getting her large cavalry force around to attack the enemy from the rear. But she could still send those nearby.

She didn't even have to close her eyes and concentrate now. She could see him up ahead as clear as day.

Hanged Fox...

It was only a nickname she'd given their commander, but perhaps it did indeed describe his true nature.

He sat boldly on a stack of wooden crates, issuing orders. An unexpected yet carefully planned tactical decision.

You've won this stage. I'll give you that.

But the battle wasn't over. She had plenty more strength to draw on.

"Lentoby." She called out to her overly serious adjutant. "We need to get cavalry behind that fortification. Our secret weapon won't be able to break through their barrier from the front. Besides, it's about time we got serious. I'm going to win this for us."

Regardless of the tide of battle, their victory was assured. The only thing yet to be decided was how much she could show off her skills as a mercenary.

I'll take out that commander myself. It's payback time, Hanged Fox.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE, PART 3

Jayce Partiract was the first to realize something was off.

He and Neely were up in the shining, clear blue sky when he saw it.

They had just finished ridding the clouds of enemies in a one-sided massacre. Their range and maneuverability were simply too much for the other side. The gremlins' claws and fangs couldn't even reach them. Gremlins usually hunted in packs, attacking larger prey from above. Even so, they were no match for the dragon knight. Neely had turned a swath of gremlins to ash with her every fiery breath.

The gargoyles, which were far more suited to aerial battles, met a similar fate. Although they had spike-like organs they could shoot from their bodies, Neely dodged them easily, circled around them, and lit them on fire. Jayce, for his part, would skewer enemies with his short spears each time they passed. The weapons' sacred seals gave them the ability to home in on their targets.

"Don't worry about the guys down there, Neely." Jayce patted his dragon on the back of the neck in response to her roars. "Let them struggle some more. They've got Xylo on their side. They'll be fine."

Then, just as he shot down one of the few remaining gargoyles...

“...What’s that?”

Jayce narrowed his eyes, looking hard at the ground below.

Something was happening behind their fortification. A group of shadows—no, a horde of them was running along, kicking up a cloud of dust and snow. A flag was fluttering in the wind above them, but they looked disorganized.

To Jayce, it looked like an army retreating in panic.



I was staring straight ahead at the massive barghest.

Like humans, faeries differed in size, but this went beyond that. It was even larger than an elephant. If the higher-ups in the military and the Allied Administration Division saw this thing, they’d probably give it a whole new classification. But I wasn’t interested in stuff like that.

I leaped over the wire barrier, kicked off the corpses of a few coiste bodhars, and jumped even higher into the air. That was when I noticed the goblins on the creature’s back, already pointing their lightning staffs at us.

Teoritta tightened her grip on me.

“Tsav! The goblins on its back—!”

Before I could finish my sentence, a bolt of lightning soared through the air, grazing my feet before exploding with a dry *pop*. Two goblins were skewered and sent flying off the barghest with this single shot. Not only was Tsav quick, but he was efficient as well.

“Yesss! Am I talented or what?! I took out two of ‘em. What do you snipers say? How about a friendly match? Whoever kills the most wins!”

I could hear Tsav jabbering, followed by a few bolts of lightning aimed at the barghest and the goblins atop it. Only one bolt hit, but it took out another goblin aiming at me, knocking it down. The enemy quieted down after that, each rider grabbing a shield to protect itself as the colossal barghest continued its charge.

“Tsav! Stop fooling around! I’m gonna kill you if I get hit!”

“Eek! ...O-okay! Let’s change the rules! If you suck at shooting, you don’t get to play! Okay?!”

His rude phrasing was sure to anger the other snipers, but it was too late to care. I glared at the incoming barghest and leaped back into the air, then unsheathed a knife and threw it at the enemy.

“Are you ready, my knight?”

Teoritta opened a void, and swords rained down. I grabbed one, infused it with the power of my sacred seal, and hurled it at the barghest as we passed it by. There was no way I could miss a target that big. I landed on the ground, scraping a thin layer of snow off the top as I slid, then turned around to see how effective the attack had been.

“Looks like it worked.”

The massive barghest fell to the ground, now missing most of its head. It had two fatal wounds. One was from my explosive seal, while the other— “*How do you like that, Bro? I hit it, too.*”

“The only thing that would have made it better is if you’d kept your damn mouth shut.”

An enemy of this caliber wasn’t much of a threat with an exceptional sniper as backup, and I figured there was no need to overburden Teoritta. Apart from his lack of basic humanity, Tsav had all the skill and judgment one could want in a sniper. His lack of basic humanity was a doozy, though.

“I hardly did anything,” Teoritta muttered sulkily from under my arm. “And now the battle is over.”

“Don’t pout. There are still plenty of enemies. Plus, the Demon Blight hasn’t shown itself yet.”

We were in a good place, though. The remaining enemy cavalry seemed to be planning to outflank us, but we’d seen that coming a mile away. Patausche and our own cavalry were waiting in the rear, ready to handle them. Although we were up against a great deal of faeries, it wasn’t like they could send all ten

thousand of them at once.

At this rate, we have a real chance of making it through.

But just as I started getting optimistic...

"Xylo! This is bad! This is really, really bad!"

...I heard Dotta screaming. Of course, that wasn't anything new—he was always panicking when he contacted me.

"What?"

When I answered him, I was still confident everything was fine. I figured he was going to say something about a few enemies that had been waiting to ambush us finally showing themselves. Though they far outnumbered us, depending on their commander's personality, they might try to ambush even a small force like ours.

"Did something happen? Has the demon lord shown up?"

"No, it's not that! Xylo, you need to hurry back! This is bad!"

"Enemy reinforcements?"

"No! It's our allies."

"Huh?"

"We lost! And now our allies are headed this way, with the enemy on their tail! The Demon Blight is right behind them! It's bad! Really bad!"



Patausche's horse galloped straight through the horde of faeries.

She had been standing by at the back of our fortification, waiting for this very moment. Using her superior mobility, she slipped in between the lines of enemies whenever there was an opening and attacked the faeries in the rear. Though the strategy was simple, this was something cavalry excelled at. Or so Patausche Kivia had once been taught.

There you are.

Patausche saw an enemy cavalryman moving swiftly across the snowy plain, and immediately adjusted her grip on her lance's handle. She knew the enemy would be coming her way—it would be far too difficult for them to break through the front. Going around and attacking the rear was their only choice. It was easy for Patausche to predict. It was what she would do, after all.

There were twice as many human cavalry in the enemy's group, and their commander appeared to be a woman with smoky red hair. When she saw Patausche, she opened one eye in surprise. In her hand, she held a pike—a weapon Patausche knew well. It was most likely a Dygrap Strike Seal Compound—a weapon often used by cavalry that could harness great destructive power in close combat. Patausche herself had trained with one.

She seems like a competent leader. She must have brought her elite to circle around the rear. Still...

Patausche stopped speculating there and called out to the cavalry following close behind.

“Onward! Fire your lightning staffs!”

It may have only been a portion of the force she once commanded, but the former Thirteenth Order answered her call.

“Roger,” Zofflec shouted back. A low-pitched war cry echoed over the snow.

They pulled out their lightning staffs, then charged as one right into the horde of enemies, like a cannonball.

What happened after that was unsurprising for two reasons.

First, the distance the enemy had traveled was far too great. They had taken an extremely roundabout path to attack the rear of the fortification, but all Patausche and her men had done was wait.

The second reason was merely the gap in ability between the two groups. The seasoned mercenaries were skilled warriors individually, but they lacked coordination as a group, especially when up against someone like Patausche, an experienced leader with many such battles under her belt. A head-to-head attack only made this more obvious.

In the blink of an eye, dozens of enemies had been knocked off their horses, only to be further trampled amid the ensuing panic as the former Holy Knights doubled back.

Patausche faced the enemy commander.

"Tsk!" The woman with the smoky red hair clicked her tongue. "Outta my way!" she yelled, swinging her pike.

As she squeezed the shaft, the end of her weapon bent while stretching forward. It seemed to change shape, now resembling a serpent. She aimed the weapon low, and it tore through the ground, sending a cloud of snow flying into the air and then coming back up from below.

The Dygrap Strike Seal Compound, intended for use in close combat, could change the shape of a weapon in order to get around an opponent's shield. It was also used to extend a weapon's length when the wielder was out of range. There were four weapon types it could transform into: sword, ax, scythe, and chain. This made it extremely effective when on horseback, since a rider was constantly having to maneuver around their enemies.

Patausche, however, was well aware of this weapon's characteristics. Her own lance and armor, when combined, formed the Niskaphol Strike Seal Compound, a single sacred seal-engraved weapon. Its main and most important function was creating a barrier. In fact, the tip of her lance could freely create two different types of barriers: a wall of fire and a shield of light.

Patausche had already created a shield of light that emitted a faint azure glow and completely blocked the path of the redhead woman's attack.

If I ever want to be Xylo Forbartz's equal as a penal hero, then...

The tip of the redhead woman's pike transformed into a scythe, its blade in Patausche's blind spot, but her effort was in vain. The light blue, glittering shield deflected the attack, knocking the woman off-balance.

...I can't allow myself to lose against another cavalryman.

Patausche swung her lance once more as they passed each other. Her opponent tried to dodge, but the lance tore straight through her right arm above the elbow, sending fresh blood spewing into the air.

“Tsk.”

The redhead woman glared at Patausche—or at least, it seemed that way a first, but she was actually looking beyond, at something else.

“Hanged Fox, you bastard! You had cavalry lying in wait for us...!”

This was a name Patausche wasn’t familiar with. The enemy passed her by and moved away, as if to retreat.

I can win. Just one more push.

Patausche moved to launch a follow-up attack, but her subordinates stepped in to stop her. Why? They had weakened the enemy considerably during their first clash, and most of the former Holy Knights were unscathed. They could win.

However, the instant she started to chase after the woman, a familiar voice stopped her.

“*Patausche, we need you back at the fortification! As Dotta would say, this is bad.*”

It was Xylo, forcing the message through via Venetim.

“Wait,” groaned Patausche. “I almost have them. I can take out the mercenaries! What happened?”

“*The main unit fell. Dammit! They were ambushed!*”

Xylo sounded angry, as always. He probably didn’t know it, but that rage of his sometimes had a calming effect. That’s what helped Patausche cool her head and listen.

“*The Ninth Order’s stronghold was suddenly attacked by multiple demon lords, and the Noble Alliance fled instead of assisting. They’re heading straight for us. We have to do something before things get out of control.*”

It seemed the enemy had gone around them to ambush the Ninth Order. The Demon Blight had been on the move, and with terrifying speed. It must have exceptional stealth abilities.

“*We’ve been on a losing streak ever since Ioff,*” Xylo said bitterly.

I wouldn't say that.

Patausche didn't feel like they had "lost" at all. Though only small parts of greater battles, the penal hero unit had racked up more wins than anyone had expected. That said, the greater war effort was still losing.

"We need to stop the pursuers and protect the fleeing knights. Those are our orders from the oh-so-important nobles, so we need you back here. Besides, I'm sure our allies' pathetic faces will cheer you up in no time."

Xylo was a vulgar man with poor taste. Perhaps that said a lot about Patausche as well.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE, PART 4

In the blink of an eye, chaos descended on our fortification.

The soldiers of the Noble Alliance, the cause of this mess, were the first to arrive. Allies deciding to flee and throwing a battlefield into disarray was a tale as old as time. Still, this was especially awful, since the Ninth Order had been left to fend off the enemy alone while their allies ran off, desperate to save their own skins.

"What are the penal heroes doing?!" shouted a man on horseback furiously.

He was clearly a noble, and he looked to be a big shot. He was well-dressed—too well-dressed. He wore a pure white mantle with hardly a speck of dirt from the battle and a finely polished sheath for his sword. Behind him was a flag bearer, displaying the crest of a lion with a battle-ax held in its mouth. I knew that crest. It belonged to the Dasmitur family—a central noble line of the royal lineage of House Zef.

"The Demon Blight is almost here! That had to be the faerie's leader—the demon lord. Hurry up and stop it!"

"Excuse me?" I shot back. "Why the hell—?"

"Okay! You got it! Xylo, it's time for us to fight!" Venetim's loud, obnoxious voice drowned out mine. It was only at times like this that he was full of energy and ready to take the lead. "Please allow us to handle things. This is what we penal heroes are here for, after all!"

"Of course it is," came the noble's cold reply. "Now, the demon lord's coming from the east, and it's huge! I've never seen a monster like it! There's no time to be fooling around. Go! At this rate, my men will be that thing's next meal!"

"Your wish is our command. We will move out immediately, and I promise we —"

"Shut it." I grabbed Venetim's shoulder before he made any more unkeepable promises. "Enough talking out of your ass. The Ninth Order's main unit is currently being crushed by the enemy."

"We are penal heroes. We don't have the right to refuse, regardless of what's going on."

"...Dammit!"

Venetim was right. All I could do was curse our situation. There was no way we could disobey orders, and we didn't have the time to carefully consider our options.

"It's here! It's the Demon Blight, Ammit!" a soldier screamed.

Ammit was a name I had heard from time to time during my battles in the north. This demon lord looked like a flabby black caterpillar of colossal size, and it was known for its giant mouth, which devoured anything in its path, whether that be rock, iron, or even fire. Put simply, it was going to be a difficult opponent to deal with.

I could see it rapidly approaching from the east—not something you'd expect from a creature of its size. The horrifying jet-black monster's disgustingly glossy body glittered in the sunlight as it slithered across the plains.

"Hurry up and do something!" the noble screeched.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll see what I can do," Tsav muttered from my side. It seemed he didn't feel much loyalty toward the noble class.

He was currently on his stomach with his lightning staff in hand, already aiming at the enemy. Immediately, a sharp, powerful bolt of lightning soared through the air—and was promptly sucked into Ammit's gaping maw.

The beast didn't even react. It merely continued to slither toward us, chiseling out the land below and devouring everything in its path.

Even Tsav couldn't help but laugh. "That didn't even tickle it! This is so not good. I can't kill that thing! I'd have to take it by surprise, and there's no way I can do that from here."

"Yeah, I've seen this guy once before," I said. "Back when I was fighting in the north."

This was no surprise. Ammit could form a mouth anywhere on its body. Everyone could fire their lightning staffs at once, and it would still be able to swallow every single bolt.

"Rhyno." I looked back. There were only three people close enough to take orders: Venetim, Tsav, and Rhyno, and I was most concerned about Rhyno, so I decided to give him a warning. "Don't randomly fire your weapon and waste ammo! In fact, don't do anything unless it's absolutely necessary!"

"I know. But how do you suggest we defeat—...?"

The cannon on Rhyno's right arm wasn't even out. Did he know about Ammit, too? Then again, I supposed it would make sense if he had heard rumors while working as an adventurer in the north.

"What are you idiots doing?! Hurry!" the noble shouted, pointing at me. Well, technically, he was pointing at me and the goddess behind me, Teoritta. "Use the Holy Sword! You can defeat it if you use Goddess Teoritta's Holy Sword!"

Teoritta tensed up. The sword must have gotten pretty famous if even a guy like this knew about it.

"That sword—," I began.

"Xylo, I can do it." Teoritta grabbed my arm. "I still have plenty of energy, and I want to make up for how little I've done so far. It is time for me to demonstrate my greatness."

"That's not the issue here." I glared at the nobleman. "We can't rush this. If Teoritta uses the sword, she won't be able to move for a while. It should be considered a last resort. We should try to figure out how to kill it with ordinary weapons."

"This is exactly the time to use it, dammit!" shouted the noble, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Have your goddess use her Holy Sword this instant! How dare you, a lowly penal hero, disrespect me like this!"

"...And how dare you disrespect a goddess."

"Goddesses exist to benefit humans and bring us good fortune." It seemed this Dasmitur noble didn't feel the need to show Teoritta any respect. Were these the beliefs of some faction he belonged to, or was he simply panicking because of the situation we were in? "Tell her to get to work and rescue us from this mess, no matter what it takes."

"All right, that does it. You've—"

"It is fine, Xylo. I want to do this." The flames in Teoritta's eyes were already burning brightly, and she didn't seem hurt or angry. "Our soldiers are being killed! I cannot stand by and do nothing!"

"That's very goddess-like of you, but..."

I wanted to ask her, *Do you really want to use your powers for someone like him?* But I quickly realized it would be pointless. Teoritta didn't choose who to save based on whether she liked them or not. There were people in danger—that alone was enough for her.

"Start moving! If you're not going to do it, I'll have you killed this instant! There are countless others who can do your job!"

The smirk on Venetim's face froze in place. Tsav, on the other hand, smiled breezily and made a gesture implying he'd kill the man if I asked. Meanwhile, Rhyno, in his dark red armor, seemed completely unfazed.

Whatever the case, I'd decided to fight. I picked up Teoritta and ran, then kicked off the ground.

"Tsav, Rhyno! Take care of the weaker faeries for me. I'm going to kill the

demon lord, then withdraw."

I didn't even wait for them to respond. The towering demon lord was looming ever closer. As soon as it saw us, it opened its mouth, releasing the lightning bolts from Tsav that it had just eaten. But I already knew that Ammit could spew out what it had eaten at will, so there was no way I was going to let it hit us.

"Xylo!" Teoritta's hair sparked as a massive sword emerged from a patch of void, allowing me to kick off it and twist my body, changing our direction. Ammit's eyes followed us the entire time.

Perfect.

We had accomplished our first objective. Ammit opened its mouth even wider, spewing out a torrent of mud. All of that must have taken a long time to store. Regardless, the monster was now close enough to finish off as we descended.

"Teoritta, let's end this in a single strike."

"Okay!"

Her body sparked furiously as she summoned the Holy Sword. It was a simple, single-handed weapon with no ornamentation. I grabbed it in midair. Not even a torrent of mud and gravel could stand in our way now. The tip of the blade twinkled with blinding light, followed by a beam that erased everything in its path. The torrent of earth vanished bit by bit as the ray of light soared toward the demon lord. Ammit opened its mouth as if to swallow us whole, sword and all.

That's not going to work.

I twisted my entire body, using the momentum to throw the Holy Sword into the demon lord's mouth. Immediately, another flash of light was followed by a cyclone.

By the time the air cleared and we landed, there was nothing left but rushing footsteps shaking the ground and cries from the surrounding soldiers. All we had to do now was take care of the faeries Ammit had brought with it while the Ninth Order bought us time. It wasn't going to be easy, though.

"Teoritta, are you all right?"

"I am...fine... I feel...great..."

"Don't lie to me," I said. Despite being ghostly pale, Teoritta tried to clench her fists until I stopped her. "I'm proud of you."

I touched her head and was met with a weak electric discharge, but as I felt the sparks touch my fingertips, the sound of the soldiers pounding the ground grew louder. *No, wait.* It wasn't just that. I could no longer feel their eyes on us. They must be focused on something else.

And that wasn't the pounding of footsteps. The ground was truly shaking—something was approaching from the east.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

I looked over to find yet another enemy heading our way. It was a massive monster that looked to be made out of bones. It was approaching slowly, creaking and cracking and chattering with each hard, heavy step. It was as if somebody had taken various animal bones and crudely stuck them together to create some sort of spider or crab. Either way, I could tell it was a demon lord right away, and it was even bigger than Ammit. What's more, I'd never seen one like this before.

"Another one...?! This is getting ridiculous!"

Just how many demon lords had they sent into battle? It felt like a sick joke.

"The hell happened to the Ninth Order? Hord Clivios is doing a pretty garbage job of holding back the enemy."

I could easily imagine Hord's nervous, sullen expression. But complaining about him wasn't going stop that bony demon lord from crushing soldiers underfoot as they desperately tried to escape.

This was exactly why I'd told that asshole noble to use Teoritta's Holy Sword only as a last resort.

"Xylo," Teoritta said, groaning weakly. "I can...summon it again...for a few seconds..."

"Shut up."

There was something wrong with this goddess. She grabbed my hand to prove her resolve, but her grip was weak, and the flickering fire in her eyes was slowly dying. I was utterly unconvinced.

"Penal heroes! A-another enemy is already here! What is the meaning of this?!" Against my will, I could hear the Dasmitur noble's flustered voice via the sacred seal on my neck. *"Stop that thing before it gets too close! Guard the rear like you're supposed to and buy us enough time to escape!"*

"...So, Xylo, did you get all that?" said Venetim in a monotone. He was really acting the part of penal hero unit commander right now, maintaining a level and calm demeanor while suppressing his own emotions. It was the voice of a real con man. *"That was apparently an order. Can you handle it? I, uh... I'm with the king and Tatsuya now, so I'm ready to slaughter some faeries, but..."*

This guy couldn't so much as slaughter a single bug—he was just acting cocky because he had Tatsuya with him. Anyway, an order was an order, so I had no choice but to do the best I could.

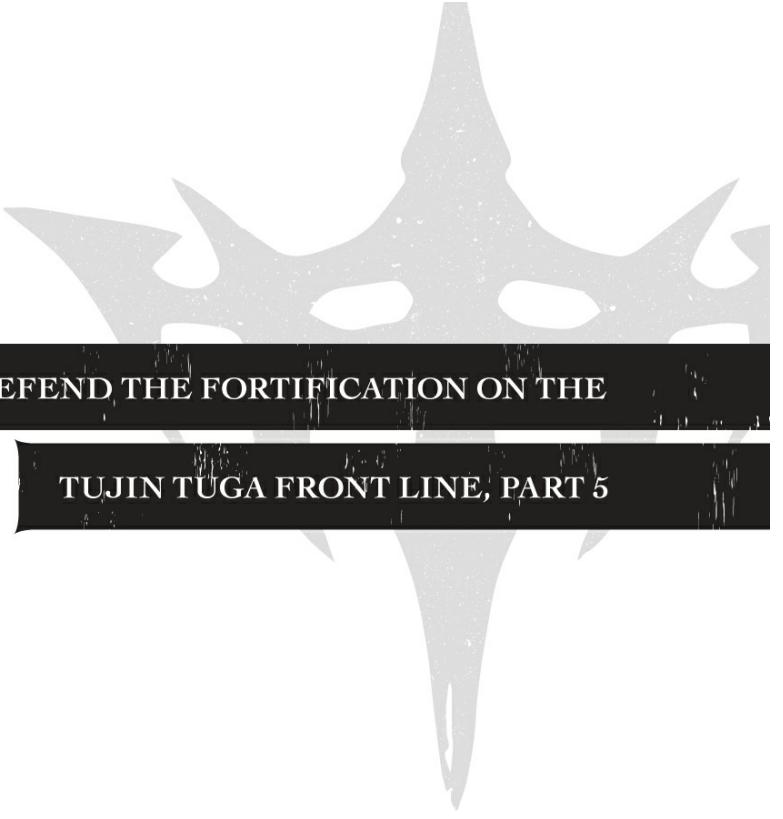
"...Let's get to it. We've got to buy them some time."

I looked at our fortification on the hill, touched the sacred seal on my neck, and started calling out to any penal hero who would answer. Was everyone okay? They probably were, I thought with resignation. It'd almost be cute if one of us got hurt from something like this.

"Head north while slowing down the enemy! And dammit, don't forget those two kids, either!"

We fled, abandoning our fortification on the hill.

Unfortunately, it would be some time before anyone figured out that there were actually *four* demon lords on the battlefield.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE, PART 5

Screams were coming from every direction.

Some were shrieks of terror, some rage-filled shouts. Whatever the case, it was all up to us to fix this miserable situation.

It was likely that the Ninth Order was still fighting multiple demon lords in the rear, which meant we had no choice but to handle things here ourselves. I didn't want to give anyone, especially Hord Clivios, the chance to say something like, "The penal heroes ran away just like the cowardly criminals they are," or "That goddess killer's pretty spineless for someone who always acts so cocky."

Whatever. Bring it on. Just you watch.

The first thing I needed to do was find Patausche and hand off Teoritta to her. Of course, not everyone was happy with this idea.

"Wait, my knight," demanded Teoritta. Despite her tone, her voice was frail and her face sickly. "I...can still...fight. How do you plan on winning...without my blessing?"

"I still need your help, so you've got to rest up. Just buying time and helping the others escape won't be enough to end this battle."

"I am going to stay with you... It is my duty as a goddess—"

"Patausche! Keep her safe, and don't let her out of your sight."

Not feeling the need to listen to any more, I held her out in my arms and passed her off to Patausche, who accepted her charge with a grimace.

"...Are you staying?" Patausche asked. "Can you handle this all by yourself?"

"I can do it, so go. Don't even think about trying to stay behind."

"No..." Patausche wiped some blood off her cheek as if to hide her expression. "You made the right choice. This is something that only a cavalryman can do. I will take Goddess Teoritta to safety. You have my word."

"You better not double back after dropping her off."

"...I won't!"

"Then go."

The brief pause made it clear she'd been considering doing just that.

Either way, they promptly took off, leaving me behind. I felt confident she'd be able to cut down any faerie that got in their way and escape this hell.

All that was left was for me to clean up the mess. I took a deep breath and placed a finger on the sacred seal at my neck.

"Tsav! Where are you?! Don't even think about running. Back me up."

"Uh, don't worry, I know. If I run, I'll just be executed later. I'll help..." While he didn't seem overly excited, he'd still gotten into position to shoot. *"By the way, I captured Dotta trying to run away and have him pinned down."*

"I, uh...don't think I'll be much help, so..."

"What are you talking about?! Like, at least help me aim. I need your eyes to search for the enemy!"

"Sure, but...are you really gonna try to snipe...from here?"

"Why not? We can use this as a shield. Feel free to use one yourself if you want, Dotta."

"I'm starting to feel sick..."

Tsav and Dotta seemed to be arguing over something, but I didn't have time to find out what.

"Help the others withdraw and save as many people as you can."

"Roger. I'll take out the larger faeries, so do you think you could do something about the soldiers lagging behind? Like, what are they even doing?"

It was just as Tsav said—there were soldiers still on the battlefield that had taken too long to escape. They were likely to be hunted down by nearby faeries before the bony demon lord even reached them. There were fuathan, bogies, and dunnies, and there were a lot of them to boot. They were clearly aiming to surround their prey.

There were about two hundred of these soldiers, and on their flag, I saw the crest of a lion holding a battle-ax in its mouth. They were House Dasmitur's men. I wasn't a fan of their lord, but...

"Maybe we should help them evacuate?" Tsav suggested. "You know, since they're lagging the farthest behind."

I completely agreed and silently took off running. It was going to be a really long day.



The strategic withdrawal was pandemonium. Despite suffering a surprise attack that night, the soldiers had no choice but to keep on moving amid the chaos.

The pain is unbearable, thought Siffritt Zuar of Dasmitur's fourth squad. Every part of the soldier's body was in pain: freezing toes from marching through the snow, thighs rubbed raw by a staff's sheath, tired shoulders from carrying a heavy knapsack—every part of Siffritt was in agony, and that agony was indistinguishable from the piercing cold. Siffritt didn't want to move anymore, and yet pushing forward was the only way to escape. Stopping now would mean certain death. The Demon Blight was rapidly approaching from behind, and the fear—the disgust—kept Siffritt moving.

When humans push past the point of exhaustion, they give up. They stop

caring what happens.

Siffritt had seen such a fate befall countless friends, and they had all died without exception.

Dammit. I need to feel more hatred—more disgust.

Imagining one's body being devoured by faeries did the trick. That would be far more agonizing than this. It was revolting, and the thought alone pushed Siffritt forward, one step closer to catching up with the others.

Maybe this is hopeless... We're probably too far behind...

They were so distant from the other Noble Alliance squads that it made Siffritt wonder how theirs had wound up so far behind. But the reality was simple. It was because of their lord's orders. He wanted to make sure the other nobles were in his debt, and so he had commanded them to stand at the end of the line during the strategic withdrawal. At the low price of his subordinates' lives, he would gain a greater voice within the Alliance.

No, no, no! I'm not angry enough. I have to feel sick to my stomach. The moment I accept my fate is the moment I die.

Though the Ninth Order was holding their ground as they retreated, they hadn't managed to pin down the whole enemy force. The demon lord Charon and its faeries were still chasing after Siffritt's squad. Charon could be heard rapidly approaching, but Siffritt no longer had the courage to look back.

No...

The soldier ran desperately, but exhaustion was catching up. The sacred seals engraved into Siffritt's armor enhanced strength and aided movement, but right now, the biggest threat was losing the will to go on. It didn't help that those sacred seals were almost out of power.

"Siffritt!" shouted the platoon commander from up ahead. "Hurry! The enemy's going to catch up!"

I'm the farthest behind, thought Siffritt, suddenly realizing the gravity of the situation. The rest of the squad look so far away. Just then, the soldier tripped and fell facedown into the snow. The bitter chill stung both cheeks. Siffritt

struggled to stand, but the exhaustion and cold were catching up, and even crawling to one's knees took time.

No, no, no!

Siffritt glanced back and was struck with terror. Faeries. Two bogies leaped forward, spewing saliva, the tips of their horns shining with a sinister light. *What am I going to do?* the soldier hopelessly wondered. But there was only one thing to be done—unsheathe the lightning staff. The process was far more difficult when one's fingers were too weak and too cold to even grab its handle.

I'm going to die, aren't I?

It felt like this was happening to someone else. Everything seemed surreal.

Just then, a bolt of lightning rained down from the sky, obliterating both bogies.

“...?!”

Siffritt's jaw dropped as a large man holding a knife descended from the sky like a bird of prey. But humans didn't have wings. What was going on?

“...You're...” Siffritt stared up at the man in disbelief, no doubt looking like an idiot, before being grabbed by the collar and lifted back up.

“What are you doing?! Stop standing around and run! Head north!” The man shouted angrily at Siffritt's squad mates, who had all stopped moving.

Siffritt knew this man. All the soldiers on the front line were talking about him. It was Xylo Forbartz, the goddess killer—no, the Thunder Falcon. He was a penal hero and a thunderstroke soldier. He had killed demon lords and countless faeries, and he had pulled off one miraculous victory after another. At least, that was how it appeared to those in Siffritt's squad.

More impressively, his unit was always given the most grueling orders in every battle, whether that was aiding a strategic withdrawal or breaking through enemy lines, and this battle was no different. They were always asked to throw themselves in front of the enemy, putting them closer to danger than anyone else.

Some people even called them saviors or champions. Siffritt didn't believe

that, though. This world didn't have champions. If it did, they would be fighting battles far away from here—too far to do something like rescue a few stragglers. And yet...

"Pull yourself together, dammit." Xylo shoved Siffritt forward into another soldier's arms. "Give this kid a hand. He's too exhausted to walk on his own."

"O-okay!"

Siffritt's squad mate wrapped his arm around his fellow soldier and started to move, which was very much appreciated. Strength began to return to Siffritt's legs.

"But..." Siffritt looked back at Xylo. He was already facing away, a new knife in hand as he stared down an approaching faerie. "You're—"

"I'll manage. Now, get lost. I'm busy. Run." There was irritation in his voice. He was angry, and Siffritt shrank back. "Yeah... Dammit. I know! I owe you one!" Xylo shouted, a finger on the nape of his neck as he looked up at the sky.

At that point, something occurred to Siffritt. Maybe Xylo wasn't mad at them, but at himself, or maybe even at the whole situation. The thought passed in a second, however, as two azure wings soared over their heads.

Fire rained down, incinerating the incoming faeries and slowing down the rest. Amid the monsters' ear-piercing cries, a strange roar echoed through the sky, drawing everyone's attention. The sound was coming from a dragon with blue scales so vivid they shocked Siffritt to attention. The dragon flapped its great wings, creating a gust of wind that pummeled the soldiers' cheeks.

"Dammit," Xylo grunted, lowering his stance like a wild beast. He looked like a bird of prey about to take flight. "That's the last asshole I wanted to owe a favor to. I'm gonna be cleaning the dragon stable for the next three days straight."



The soldiers of House Dasmitur were exhausted.

With the exception of the Ninth Order, these were the last soldiers to withdraw, so we had to cover them as we made our own retreat. That said, with Jayce and Tsav on our side, we were able to pull it off.

“Can’t you run any faster?” Jayce asked unreasonably as he soared over our heads. “Humans are so—... All you do is eat and sleep in your stone houses. It’s no wonder your legs have atrophied and become useless.”



It was a rude evaluation, to say the least. *Seriously? You're human, too,* I thought. Still, each time Neely's flames rained down and Jayce's short spears soared through the air, numerous faeries were slaughtered. The enemy couldn't even get close, and I immediately disposed of any faeries that tried to run through the flames.

"Man, that's Neely and Jayce for you. What a show... Hmph!"

A flash of light flew past me—a bolt from a sniper's lightning staff destroyed the head of a charging barghest.

"Hurry up and run, Bro! I made a wall to slow them down. It should buy you enough time. It looks like we'll soon have plenty of carcasses, so this works out great."

But when I ran, I saw something ahead of me that left me speechless. Even the Dasmitur soldiers had their mouths wide open in astonishment. Tsav and Dotta had taken up a position on a small hill and had stacked the corpses of their allies into a defensive wall. Tsav's lightning staff was propped against another.

"You say there's gonna be plenty of carcasses, but, uh..." I could hear Dotta's wavering, frightened voice. *"Is it just me, or is that partially your fault? I mean... you just killed a guy barely hanging on over there."*

"I put him out of his misery. He wasn't going to make it, was he?"

Tsav was clearly up to no good, but I wasn't in any position to point it out right now. That luxury would have to wait until the battle was over.

"Stop standing there and move." The other soldiers were still staring, so I clapped and yelled to get their attention. *"Hurry! If you don't want to die, run! Run, before I kill you!"*

"Y-yes, sir!"

Only after I'd kicked some sense into one of them did they start to pick up the pace.

The faeries now had their hands full dealing with Neely's fire and Tsav's sniping. The only problem left was...

Creak... Creak, creak... Creak...

I could hear the giant skeletal creature moving closer, clumsily pulling itself across the plains with its eight legs. It was clear the demon lord was conscious of us as well.

I figured it was about time to test out our plan, so I placed a finger on the sacred seal at my neck.

“Rhyno! It’s time. You can start. You’ve already taken aim, right?”

“*I’m ready, but are you sure? I’m going to run out of ammunition.*”

“It’s fine. Give it everything you’ve got.”

I knew it would be pointless if he didn’t. Numerous soldiers had already tried to snipe the creature with their lightning staffs, but the bolts just bounced off its bones and didn’t seem to affect it at all. This was the only thing I could think of that might damage it.

“Rhyno, fire!”

“Roger.”

Immediately, a radiant ball of flickering light traced an arc in the air, followed by a second and then a third until he’d fired over a dozen, all crashing into the same front leg. He couldn’t have been more accurate—not a single shot missed.

The demon lord curled forward the moment it was hit, as if trying to assume some sort of defensive position.

Another roar, followed by a shock wave, a cloud of dust, and rumbling.

“Now... *Let’s see how I did,*” Rhyno muttered, as if he was about to observe the results of a science experiment.

The demon lord was still moving within the cloud of dust, but I noticed three of its front legs were broken. It had collapsed forward onto the ground and was currently struggling to push itself up with its back legs. Rhyno’s attacks had been much more effective than I’d expected. The enemy was hurt.

If I have Rhyno reload and fire every last shot— No, wait...

I’d been far too optimistic. The enemy wasn’t struggling, and it wasn’t

writhing in pain. Soft tentacles began protruding from its shattered bones and grabbed the fragments of what used to be its legs. Those fragments soon began to bubble as if the creature was welding its body back together.

"It's healing itself. Hmm..." Rhyno sounded like a surgeon coldly delivering his diagnosis. *"We need to try something different if we wish to kill it. We should probably withdraw for now."*

"...Yeah."

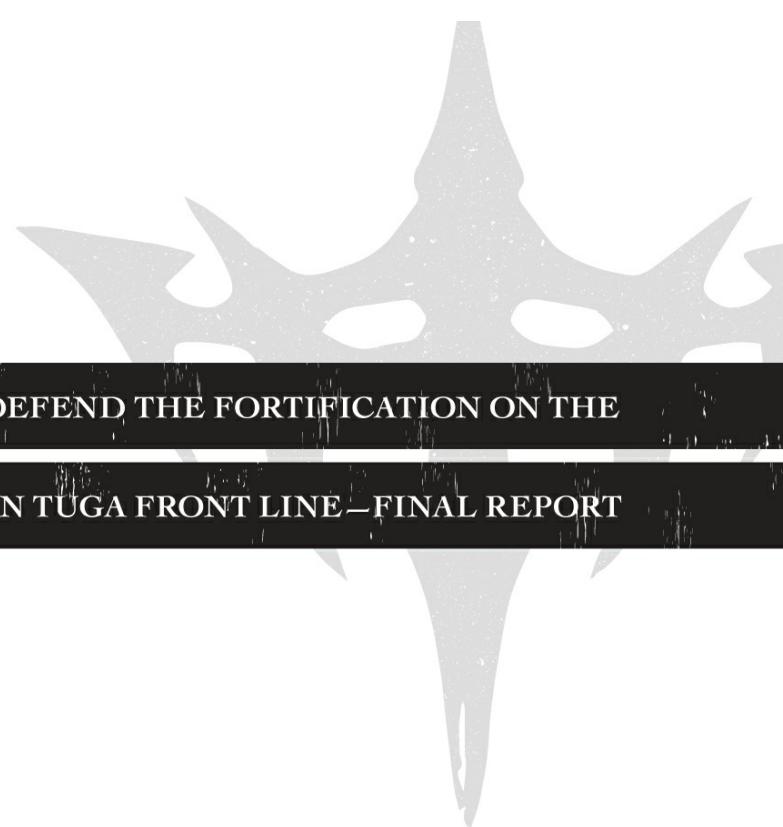
"Our position has become quite difficult, hasn't it? There have been many unforeseen developments."

"Yes, I'm aware!"

I didn't need Rhyno pointing out the obvious. What with our main force fleeing, multiple new demon lords, and a goddess who had already used her Holy Sword, we didn't have any secret weapons left. It had been one surprise after another, and it was starting to really piss me off.

This is ridiculous.

It would be only another half hour before our fortification was overrun by faeries and reduced to rubble.



PUNISHMENT: DEFEND THE FORTIFICATION ON THE

TUJIN TUGA FRONT LINE—FINAL REPORT

If you headed northeast through the Tujin Tuga Hills, you would come to a tributary of the Kinja Sheba River.

This tributary passed through the foothills of the Tujin and Tuga mountains and split into several smaller streams, branching off in different directions. And where there was water, settlements naturally followed, sprouting up along its banks. Our map listed a place called Kerpressh in the vicinity. It seemed to be a small settlement, but it was certainly better than nothing when it came to resting exhausted soldiers. What's more, its residents had already evacuated, so there was nobody there.

That was where we ended up after our grueling retreat.

From what I heard, the Ninth Order was doing a good job keeping the enemies at bay in the rear. They'd engaged two demon lords and managed to defeat one, so if we were keeping score, our two groups were currently tied. That said, the fact there were two demon lords still undefeated was not good news.

The demon lord the Ninth Order had failed to kill was a creature named Furiae. It had a humanoid form and could shoot rays of destructive light from

afar. Meanwhile, the bony demon lord that had forced us to retreat was known as Charon. It had formerly terrorized the lands to the east.

Once we'd put together a full picture of our situation, defeat seemed inevitable. The Ninth Order had suffered high casualties holding off the enemy, and while the Noble Alliance was in relatively good shape, they couldn't be relied on in battle. Their morale was low, and their commanders were mostly idiots.

The penal hero unit hadn't come out unscathed, either. Norgalle, of all people, had sustained an injury. Officers and nobles had already commandeered the houses in Kerpresh to use as resting places, so we set up a tent by the river and dragged His Majesty's heavy body inside. His right arm was mangled, and his torso was missing a chunk. He hadn't lost consciousness, but he kept repeating what sounded like delirious nonsense. In other words, he hadn't changed a bit. His eyes were sharp, and it seemed his wounds were less serious than they had initially appeared.

"It is for the sake of my brother and sister..." he said as I walked in to check on him, "...and thus for all the people, for they cannot be at peace should the royal bloodline come to an end. The king's blood is for his people, right down to the last drop."

He was clearly delirious. Relief washed over me. I didn't know what I'd do if he suddenly started making sense.

From what I was told, when the Ninth Order reached our former position, a group of overconfident faeries had rushed after them from the rear, and the strange siblings we'd rescued got caught up in the attack. The younger brother, who was barely even conscious and couldn't move, was in particular danger, and when an enemy moved to attack him, his sister courageously jumped into its path, followed by Norgalle, who had thrown himself in front of her.

Honestly, I thought it was a stupid move on his part. Norgalle was a large, strong man, but he had never trained as a soldier. At least I didn't think so, and he didn't act like it. He was an idiot for trying a stunt like that with no experience.

I was shooting him an exasperated glare when someone spoke.

"...He will be bedridden for a while, it seems." It was a goddess—Pelmerry of the Ninth Order. There was something gloomy about her gaze as she looked at me. "It seems his wounds are rather deep, and while I've managed to help him stay awake and clearheaded..." She stared at me through a gap in her absurdly long bangs. "...he should probably remain in bed until he is fully healed."

If memory served, the Ninth Order's goddess had the ability to summon different kinds of poison. But that poison wasn't always used to hurt and kill. Apparently, some poisons could numb pain and even heal. She must have used one of the latter on Norgalle.

"I'd like to use a poison...which will help him fall asleep," she said.

"Do it. He really needs to get some rest, and he sure as hell isn't gonna listen to me. He's the king, after all." I smiled at Pelmerry. "You have my thanks, since this guy probably won't give you any. I really appreciate it."

"It's nothing," she said, lowering her head in a quick bow. "More importantly, you should meet with Hord. He asked me to fetch you."

"Me?" I wasn't expecting him to ask for me by name. "What does he want with me?"

"Well... He was discussing how to proceed with your commander, um...the one called Venetim...but the conversation seemed to be going nowhere... So Hord asked to speak with you as soon as possible."

"Figured as much."

This was going to be a very serious, very dark conversation. No matter what decisions we made, a hellish battle was unavoidable. But of course it was—we were losing.



I found Hord Clivios, the captain of the Ninth Order, seated at the center of a tent. Behind him were the remaining representatives of the Noble Alliance. There seemed to be around seven of them left, but the only one I recognized was the one from House Dasmitur. Despite the circumstances, he was brazenly glaring at me with open disgust.

"...Allow me to explain the situation," said Hord, his voice grave. He looked haggard, his usual intensity weak and diminished. "Some time after you penal heroes left, our main camp was ambushed." Resting his elbows on the war room table before him, he continued in a low voice. "...The enemy forces included two demon lords—Wryneck and Furiae."

I had heard of Wryneck before. It had the ability to render itself and the faeries it commanded silent and invisible. I had no idea how it managed such a feat, but an ambush from a creature like that was sure to cause panic and confusion.

"We lost most of the Noble Alliance before they could even unsheathe their weapons. Though Wryneck's stealth abilities were exceptional, we managed to hold our ground and defeat it. However..."

So that's what happened, I thought. If the Ninth Order's goddess, Pelmerry, was allowed to attack indiscriminately, then it was well within their power to take out an opponent like Wryneck, though such an attack would necessitate casualties on their own side as well. As expected, the Holy Knights hadn't simply been crushed by the enemy.

"But that wasn't enough to turn the tide of battle. Our path to the south was cut off, so we had no choice but to flee here." Hord sighed deeply and narrowed his eyes at me. "I hear the penal hero unit defeated Ammit. Allow me to congratulate you for fulfilling your duty."

His tone sounded anything but congratulatory. To be honest, he sounded annoyed.

"Now, for our next course of action—"

"Captain Clivios, our only option is to retreat," argued a nobleman in the back. "We must withdraw to the port city of Ioff."

"I agree," said another. "There is no reason to debate. We were cut off from our allies and our supply line. We need to return to the city as soon as possible, whether that means making a detour around the enemy or breaking through their ranks."

"Yes, and once we've returned, we must denounce the nobles who ran away

without fighting and punish them."

Hord listened, clearly irritated. I knew what they were after. Their one and only objective was to punish those who had escaped ahead of them by confiscating their land and possessions and, if possible, by redistributing the property among themselves.

"Let Galtuile handle the Second Capital," suggested the man from House Dasmitur. "We southern nobles should band together and create a strong line of defense. We have the resources, and protecting the people is our number one priority." He seemed frustrated that he'd been made to join in a losing battle.

"...Hey, Xylo?" Venetim said suddenly, his eyes full of fear as he gazed at me. "Things are looking pretty bleak at the moment. What do you think we should do?"

"Well, retreating to Ioff is obviously a bad idea. We would probably lose any chance at retaking the Second Capital. In fact, there's not a single good thing about going back there."

The only ones who would gain anything from it were these seven noblemen from the southern regions. If we withdrew, the Demon Blight in the Second Capital could dedicate all its resources to the battle with Galtuile. And if we wore down our forces even further simply to return to the city, we would need to wait even longer to recover our strength. I couldn't begin to imagine how much it would delay us.

"We should stick to the original plan, no matter what."

"...All right. What will we need to do that?"

"Motivation and grit. Supply-wise, we're still good to go. What we have now should easily get us to Mount Tujin, at least. Our one issue is the fact that we lost."

After the main camp was ambushed, the path to our rear was closed off, dealing a huge blow to everyone psychologically. At the very least, I needed Hord to bounce back and rein in these nobles.

"Understood. So...you need me to change our loss into a win. Is that right?"

"I guess... Hey, wait. Don't—"

"May I have your attention, please!" Venetim said, raising his voice. At times like this, he could be so loud that his voice would drown out everyone else's. You couldn't argue. The only option was to listen to him say his piece. "There seems to be a misunderstanding. We still have the upper hand over the enemy, and battle after battle, we continue to defeat the Demon Blight!"

The nobles stared at him as if he was out of his mind. Hord was no different, and neither was I.

"You say we have been cut off from our supply line and separated from our allies, but have we not done the very same to our enemy?" Venetim continued. "The Demon Blight is locked between our army and the city of Ioff, unable to move."

"Yes, and Ioff is in danger," insisted one of the nobles. "The city could be attacked any moment now."

"That will not be a problem. The situation is already under control. This man's—Xylo Forbartz's—fiancée is a Southern Night-Gaunt and a member of the Mastibolt family..."

"Venetim, what the hell?" I nudged him in the side with my elbow, but his tongue didn't even falter.

"Frenci Mastibolt has called together her clansmen and mobilized her forces to defend Ioff. That city can withstand months of siege, and even if the enemy managed to infiltrate, I believe we are all aware of how capable its defenses are."

Apparently, Venetim had just assigned Frenci's forces the task of protecting Ioff. But regardless of what was really going on, he'd managed to shut up the nobles for the time being. There was currently no way for them to confirm the truth of his claim, but they all knew of the Night-Gaunts and the Mastibolt family, a clan that kept their word and boasted a long history of combat.

"We can ignore any demon lords behind us and advance as planned. The penal hero unit has defeated demon lord Ammit as ordered, and the Ninth Order has taken out another. In other words, only two remain. If you look at the

bigger picture, everything is going smoothly.”

“But the supply line...” The Dasmitur noble spoke up. He narrowed his eyes at Venetim and me, his face grim. “What are we going to do about the supply line? Even if we continue as planned and make it to Mount Tujin, we still need enough supplies to reclaim the Second Capital.”

“Yes, about that...” Venetim shifted his eyes to me. Military affairs were outside his realm of expertise, so I answered in his place.

“We can use the nearby Kinja Sheba River as a supply line to the Second Capital. All we have to do is send a message now and get another order of Holy Knights to join forces with us. If possible, the Sixth Order would be best—we can ask them to bring some good grub from the east. At any rate...”

I set my hands down on the war room table. What we needed to get the meeting moving was momentum and force. That, and a plan of attack. Those in the military loved to be on the attack. Defensive battles could drag on forever, but offensive ones had clear goals. I bet Hord, too, would prefer to switch to the offensive and focus on taking out the threat instead of holing up here to fight some sort of hopeless defensive battle. I felt the same.

“...What we need to do is move quickly and take control of Mount Tujin... Once we do that, the enemies behind us will start to panic and give chase, but we can stop them. Consider us your shields.”

“In other words...” Hord, who had been silent this entire time, finally spoke up. “You’re telling us to trust you? The penal hero unit? Garbage like you?”

Venetim tugged on my arm from the side and shot me a reproving glare. Maybe I’d said something I shouldn’t have. *Sorry, I thought, but I’m not a con man.*

“...I’ll consider your proposal,” said Hord. “Now, get out of here, filthy heroes.”

“Wait. We need to decide now. Speed is key. The longer we wait, the worse the situation will get.”

“I make the decisions here, and I told you to go. Do you want me to use those seals on your necks to blow your heads off?”

"Do it! If you have the guts, that is. Is this how you reward those that loyally carry out orders?"

"You better watch it—"

Trading comebacks was old hat for me. I was always getting reprimanded for it, but I couldn't sit back and let him insult us. We might be garbage, but we were working harder than anyone else here to make sure mankind came out of this on top. Of course, we were doing it because otherwise they'd detonate the sacred seals on our necks, and because we'd be resurrected even if we died.

Our motives were simple, but that meant we weren't fighting to preserve our own lives, or for something important to us personally, like most everyone else. Our goals were different, and we took what we did seriously and had the results to prove it. Results were everything in the end.

I wanted to give Hord a few more pieces of my mind. He might decide to refuse my input, but I just couldn't let it go. And then— "Excuse me."

—someone's voice came from the entrance of the tent. Everyone turned toward the sound. There they saw a young girl—the elder sister of the two children Dotta had insisted we rescue.

"I came because I heard you were here, Captain Clivios. I apologize for interrupting."

"Why...?" Hord blanched. He was so surprised, it seemed he wasn't sure how to react. "Third Princess, what are you doing here?"

Seriously? I thought. I'd figured she had something to do with the royal family, but I wasn't expecting her to be the third princess. So Norgalle hadn't simply been spouting nonsense. He'd really known who she was, and she'd known him as well.

The entire situation was incomprehensible to me.



TRIAL RECORD: LAWTZIR ZEF-ZEAL MEHT KIOH

There are currently three officially recognized princes within the royal family:

First Prince Rehnavor Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh—Status: Alive

Second Prince Rezufar Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh—Status: Deceased (Illness)

Third Prince Rykwell Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh—Status: Unknown (Disappeared during the attack on the Second Capital)

However, there is another prince, buried in the darkness of history, whose name can be found on no public record. This is the king's eldest son, Lawtzir Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh. There was even a time when he could have inherited the crown. But his mother was born into the former royal house of Meht, and her status and reputation among the other queens was low. Nevertheless, it was a long time before the king had another son, and until the birth of the current first prince, Rehnavor, Lawtzir was first in line to the throne.

The former royal house of Meht's complicated position can be traced back to the creation of the Federated Kingdom. The new kingdom was formed with the houses of Zef and Zeal at its political center, both of whom have a contentious past with House Meht. Furthermore, the lands of House Meht were located in the north and are now lost, and so they had to borrow land from the Zef-Zeal nobles. As a result, many saw them as usurpers who stole their way into the new kingdom. Even if Lawtzir did become the next king, there would have been no way to avoid a backlash from numerous powerful nobles.

Perhaps wanting to avoid a messy succession dispute, Lawtzir ultimately renounced his claim to the throne the moment his brother Rehnavor was born. After that, he became a student at the Temple,

cut himself off from the rest of the world, and eventually vanished into thin air. His mysterious disappearance, however, was immediately followed by a terrorist attack at the royal palace.

This was very likely a conspiracy engineered by the Zef-Zeal royal family in order to further delegitimize House Meht, carried out by the Crypt of Gray Lights, a secret society active behind the scenes throughout history.

A certain journalist at our company was looking into this very matter when he, too, disappeared. We can only surmise he came upon some dangerous information about this society during the course of his investigation...

Excerpt from “The Royal Family’s Missing Son: the Zef-Zeal Conspiracy.” The Livio Chronicle.



He could feel the presence of death.

It was like a smell, and its scent only grew stronger with each step Lawtzir Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh took. He was supporting his friend, Norgalle Senridge, and helping him walk, but the man’s massive body was slowly growing weaker and weaker. At this point, Lawtzir was essentially dragging him along. But even then, he still couldn’t give up. He continued trekking slowly through the damp darkness, taking one step at a time as quickly and quietly as he could. At the end of this underground passage was the royal palace. This way was secret, known only to the royal family, including Lawtzir.

“That’s enough,” said Norgalle, his voice like a sigh—it was even weaker than a whisper. “Leave me. I want to die here. I don’t want to slow you down...” There was a hint of jest in his voice, even at a time like this. That was the kind of man he was. “...I don’t want to delay the crown prince... You have to escape. You have to...make it to...the palace...at all costs...”

“I’m not the crown prince,” Lawtzir replied, picking up the pace. The blood running down his shoulder was warm. It was Norgalle’s. It was obvious he was hurt badly. The wound had to be treated as soon as possible. “Stop making me repeat myself. Are you trying to get me angry? I’ll really leave you behind if you keep it up.”

“Do it.”

“No way.”

Lawtzir had given up his right to the throne the moment his brother was born. He hadn't even given it a second thought. To do that, he had to enroll at the Temple and become a scholar. He thought it would be the best way to avoid confusion and conflict, since he knew his kingdom would not welcome a crown prince from House Meht.

Meeting Norgalle Senridge along the way had been an unexpected yet fortunate event. It was probably the only stroke of good luck Lawtzir ever had in his life. Those years had been truly fun—full of excitement and joy. They had studied together, debated each other, and talked about the future. They even chatted about trivial matters, like the ideal role of a king or how one might rule.

Norgalle Senridge was a genius. As far as Lawtzir knew, he was far brighter than anyone in the royal court, especially when it came to tuning sacred seals. He was a prodigy who would surely earn a place in history. His ideas were always progressive and groundbreaking, and so long as he lived, sacred seal technology would make thirty years of progress in the blink of an eye.

I can't let him die here.

Lawtzir felt a great weight on his shoulders. It wasn't only the weight of his friend gradually losing strength, it was the weight of history. This man's life would be an important turning point.

This is nothing compared to the value of his life... We're almost there.

That was what Lawtzir told himself, and Norgalle's talent was impressive enough to make him believe it.

"...I beg you, Lawtzir. Leave me."

"No," he replied. "I'm not as good a person as you think I am."

"I know..."

"If anything, I'm a really bad person."

"...You are..."

"I didn't want the responsibility that comes with being king. I'm a coward... totally spineless... That's what got us into this mess."

"Mm-hmm."

"I'm a bad person," Lawtzir said again. He felt like Norgalle wouldn't die if he kept talking. "You got caught up in all of this because of me."

Somebody had tried to kill him. He never thought they'd come all the way to the Temple's academy for him. It was the coexisters. He was astonished they'd target him at all—he'd already relinquished his right to the throne. Their information network was too good. Was there a traitor?

Norgalle had suffered deep wounds protecting Lawtzir. Yet somehow, they'd managed to defeat the assassin, escape the hostile Temple, and reach this underground passage.

"Say something, Norgalle."

"Mn."

Lawtzir heard a faint groan, but the voice was so weak that he decided to give his friend a little shake. "As your prince, I order you to answer me, Norgalle."

"Mn."

There it was—a voice. Or was it? Had the sound merely escaped from Lawtzir's own throat? With a prayer in his heart, he called out to his friend once more.

"Hey, are you angry? I understand. But I still need you to answer me. I admit it... This is my fault. And they have a legitimate reason to come after me. Because I..."

He stopped midsentence and came to a halt. He could see a light up ahead—artificial, not natural. It was coming from a sacred seal. But it wasn't a ray of hope that would lead them to safety. Shadowy figures gathered around it.

There were five of them. He didn't stand a chance. He'd never learned to fight, and he couldn't leave Norgalle behind. He had to save him, no matter what. *I'm not the one that needs to survive*, thought Lawtzir.

In order to defeat the Demon Blight and the coexisters—...

"My apologies, Sir Lawtzir." A slender figure with a calm, gentle voice stood in the center of the men blocking the exit. "But it's hopeless. We are everywhere. We are what's normal, so it's time for you to give up."

The man smiled apologetically. The expression was vague and somehow ordinary. "Do it for your beloved family and your numerous loyal retainers. But first, I need you to put down your friend."

"Not happening."

"What you are doing is meaningless. Dragging a corpse along like that can't be easy." There was nothing about his face that stood out, and he gave the impression of a quiet scholar. "Surely, you must know that he is already dead."



There was no doubt in Lawtzir's mind that he'd been locked in this cell to be tortured.

He could think of any number of things they might want to ask him.

How many days had gone by? He'd been stripped completely to make him more afraid of what was to come. He understood all this in his mind, but he couldn't do anything about his instincts. He was terrified.

Would telling them everything he knew make the pain stop? Most likely it wouldn't. He felt sure they would torture him to his limits, until he lost the energy to lie.

So before that happens...

Lawtzir peered into the dark of the underground cell as he pondered.

I will do what has to be done.

What should he do? What needed to be done? There wasn't that much to think about, really. He already had his answer. He was already determined. He just needed to focus on that and that alone. All that was left was to wait. And soon, it was time.

It had felt like an eternity, but maybe it wasn't that long, after all.

"...I apologize to have kept you waiting, Your Highness," said a voice from outside his cell. "I do not have much time, so I will keep this brief."

The man's voice was hushed. The only light was a faint glow from a sacred

seal outside the cell, so his face, too, was obscured. Nevertheless, Lawtzir knew who he was.

"Kafzen..." Lawtzir intended to speak normally, but his voice came out as a whisper. It reminded him of Norgalle Senridge during those final moments. "Can you get me out of here?"

"That is impossible," Kafzen declared. "Even sneaking in was extremely dangerous and required a diversion. And still, my time is short. So..." He reached into his clothes and pulled out a knife. "Our only choice is to have you die first."

"You'll resurrect me after?"

"Yes. There is a high chance we can reproduce your memories and personality with the First Goddess's powers."

Lawtzir knew all about this. Of course he did. He knew what it meant to be sentenced to serve as a hero. He knew the truth behind its history, and he knew the penal hero unit's true role.

"Mankind still needs you, Your Highness. I apologize, but you must live on, even if that means making you a hero."

"I'm sorry, but..." Lawtzir smirked, or at least he tried to. "I'm not a good person. If anything, I'm a bad person."

"...Yes. Otherwise, you would have never been able to do something so inhumane. But that is exactly why we need you."

"You're wrong," Lawtzir said, his voice clear. "I'm a coward, I'm weak, and I have no skills. My only merit was being born into the royal family."

"However, you can be cruel at times, and that takes strength."

"I don't have what it takes to be a hero. Those who can become however strong they need to in order to protect their loved ones and achieve their goals... They will likely join the coexisters. What you need..." Lawtzir pondered for a few moments in search of the right words. Then he gave up. "What you need is someone weak...fragile...foolish—someone who would mess up and throw away the most important thing in the world to them. Someone who

would squander their own potential. That's who you need."

"Your Highness."

"I'm going to do something awful. There was a genius named Norgalle Senridge who was supposed to go down in history as the greatest sacred seal tuner who ever lived." Lawtzir sat up in the darkness. His entire body ached, and he was afraid. Soon, he would have to die. "Make him into a hero, not me. Yes... If you have enough memory to spare, then use it on someone else. The future...does not have much need of a person like me."

This was Lawtzir's conclusion, though it was painful to accept and to understand. He felt terrifyingly empty. Nevertheless, perhaps now his name would be remembered in the future—engraved in history. That was his one hope. He felt it was ridiculous to have such an absurd wish. It was vain. But even so...

"...Norgalle Senridge, you say? When did he pass away? If a few days have gone by and there is no body, then it will make resurrecting him far more difficult. Although Enfié may be able to draw the necessary information, the quality will suffer."

Lawtzir was well aware of this, too. It happened from time to time when the First Goddess summoned heroes. It had probably been days since Norgalle Senridge had passed, and there was no telling where his body was.

"Reproducing his memories and personality will be difficult. He could very well end up a completely different person."

"All we need is his knowledge and skill for tuning sacred seals. He should be good with his hands as well. Just focus on that. That should increase the chance of success." Even Lawtzir felt what he was saying was wicked. It was disrespectful to Norgalle. And yet... "His memories and personality aren't important... Wait. I'll tell you what you need to know. Write this down. We should fabricate some sort of crime for him as well. Do you have any ideas?"

"The royal palace is to be blown to bits any moment now to create a distraction."

"Then let's go with that." Lawtzir could remember him vividly—Norgalle

Senridge, a man with a firm vision of how a king should rule. “If it’s still not enough, then use my personality and memories.”

Mixing two people to create someone new... That was what they were doing. Such experiments had been conducted in the past, but not even one had been successful.

“In fact, feel free to use my body, too, if needed. I need you to kill me now. I’m a coward, and I don’t have the willpower. Who knows what I’ll tell them?”

“...Your idea concerns me. The person who comes out will be warped, a patchwork of personalities and memories. I doubt he will be anything like the men he is based on...”

“That’s fine. What’s important is the sacred seal technology. We need his knowledge and creativity.”

I really am a depraved man, thought Lawtzir. He wasn’t doing this for himself, and he wasn’t doing it for his friend, either. This was for another purpose—for a ridiculous, yet gripping tale. The thought of the Norgalle he created playing a part in defeating the Demon Blight filled him with joy.

“This is unprecedented,” said Kafzen, still resisting. “We would essentially be fabricating a hero. The man’s personality will be deeply flawed. I cannot even imagine what issues might arise.”

“You’re probably right. But you’re still going to do it.”

If they could fabricate a hero’s personality, they would be able to change the heroes they summoned however they liked. The fact that no one had done this in the past probably meant it was impossible.

But even then, the world needed Norgalle Senridge. He would surely become the secret weapon to help them win this war. That much Lawtzir was sure of.

“Kafzen, you look bored,” he complained, despite it having nothing to do with their conversation. Facing reality head-on at this moment would have broken him. “Smile like you’re having a good time. Like you always used to.”

“...There is only so much I can take. I truly cared about you, Your Highness.”

“I hated you. You always smiled like a bully who enjoyed picking on the weak.”

That's the real you, isn't it?"

Kafzen twisted up his face. Perhaps he was trying to smile. "Thanks to your words, I believe I finally have the confidence to fulfill my role."

"I thought so. This is my final order. There's no time, so I need you to write down everything I say as quickly and precisely as possible." Lawtzir inhaled deeply, then exhaled. "Ready? Norgalle Senridge was a man who—..."

He told Kafzen all about his friend: his opinions on the management of kingdoms, how he thought, how he saw the current king, and what changes he believed should be made. He spoke far longer than he had thought he would.

After that, nothing more was ever heard from the former prince, Lawtzir Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh. It was as if he had vanished into thin air.

That same day, the artificial hero, Norgalle Senridge, was born.



PUNISHMENT: RESUPPLYING IN KERPRESH, PART 1

The appearance of the third princess, Melneatis, had a big effect on the war council.

Her presence alone delegitimized the Noble Alliance's claims. They had sworn their loyalty to the royal family of the Federated Kingdom in exchange for their lands, and thus had no choice but to remain quiet. They couldn't ignore the validity of Melneatis's appeal, either. Taking perfectly good soldiers off the battlefield and leaving now would lead to considerable censure, and anyone who did so would become the enemy not only of the Holy Knights and their goddesses, but of the Temple as well.

"...We have to retake Mount Tujin, no matter what," said Hord, finishing his speech.

After a few tense minutes of discussion between Hord, the nobles, and the princess, the war council resumed. Of course, there was no room for us to join their conversation, so I was bored out of my mind, and Venetim was practically falling asleep.

"If we keep moving forward...then just as the penal heroes say, the Demon Blight will most likely come after us from the rear. And if we manage to reclaim

Mount Tujin, then it will be the enemy who is isolated from their allies, allowing us to easily dispose of the last two demon lords.” Hord glanced at Venetim and me as he spoke. His gaze was hard, and he only looked once, but I thought I could see disgust in his eyes. He still didn’t respect us.

“What do you say, Princess Melneatis?” Hord’s eyes swiftly shifted back to the girl. “Would it be possible to have a supply convoy and reinforcements from the Holy Knights meet us at the appointed location?”

“Yes,” she replied. “If we send the request under both my name and my brother’s.”

She rubbed a ring she wore on her right finger. It was engraved with the seal of the royal family—an item I’d only heard of in rumor. Not only was it a sacred seal itself, but it could also create a special seal on documents, so long as the one using it was of royal blood.

“The Eighth Order should come, given the circumstances,” she continued.

Seriously?

I tried to keep quiet and maintain a neutral expression, but that was probably impossible.

The Eighth Order’s Goddess of Shadows, Kelflora, and her Holy Knight were not my favorite type of people to be around. In fact, I was already losing my confidence. I thought back to the knight’s pompous, cynical gaze and his goddess’s cold, exasperated stares.

“Then we will move out as soon as possible,” Hord continued. “As long as we make it to the mountains and set up a base, we should be able to fight back. The Demon Blight will pursue us, of course, and they will come at us hard with the remaining mercenaries who escaped to the west.”

Thinking about it another way, as long as we defeated the two demon lords, we should be able to claim Mount Tujin without much difficulty. Then we could take our time setting up camp and building it into a fortress.

The only problem was...

“Penal Hero Unit 9004, I order you to slow down the Demon Blight,” Hord

commanded, his voice oppressive as his blue eyes locked onto mine. Looking at him head-on made me realize that he was far younger than I'd thought. He might have been even younger than I was. "Don't let them near us. I will give you command of the former Thirteenth Order's cavalry and snipers to do with as you please, but I need you to keep moving as you fight back, no matter what. Any questions?"

In other words, he wanted us to do this with the same number of soldiers we'd used in the previous battle. Putting the snipers and cavalry together didn't even make four hundred men, and that wasn't enough. I jabbed my elbow into Venetim's side.

"...Hey, uh... Xylo? The way you elbow me to get my attention really hurts. Do you think you could be a little gentler?"

"I'm being as gentle as I can," I whispered back. "More importantly, I need you to do something about this."

"You need more soldiers? Uh... How many, exactly?" He looked like he wanted to throw up.

"Twice as many. I need combat engineers. They don't have to be actual engineers, but I need two hundred of them. They should be good with their hands... As you know, Norgalle is injured, so they have to be able to listen to his directions and produce good results."

"...Is that all? Surely, that's enough, right?"

"Infantry. I need men who can work alongside the snipers. At least two hundred, but I'd prefer four."

"Is it just me, or is the number of soldiers going up...?"

"I'm counting on you."

After a brief sigh, Venetim raised his voice. It was just as loud as before. "I apologize for interrupting, but I would like to state my opinion! Captain Clivios, we need a few more soldiers in order to successfully fulfill our duty, because—"

"All right." Hord had agreed before Venetim even finished his sentence.

I was shocked. Had Venetim finally learned how to hypnotize people? But

when I glanced over at him, he looked even more astonished than I was. For some reason, he was pointing at himself in bewilderment. On second thought, there was no way in hell an idiot like this could ever learn to hypnotize someone.

"I will allow it, Venetim," Hord continued. "How many soldiers do you need?"

Had the man pulled himself together and calmed down? Had he found it in his heart to consider our opinions? Or...?

But before I could consider it any further, Hord glanced back at the princess behind him.

"Princess Melneatis insists we listen to you, and we shall bow to her wishes." Rather than to us, it sounded like he was talking to the nobles, and most of all to himself. "As commander, I shall...assist you to the best of my ability. After all, your duty as penal heroes is to accept the most grueling part of the fight. You will most likely have to contend with both demon lords by yourselves. If all you need is a few more men, then we can accommodate you."

"Hord Clivios, thank you for accepting my humble proposal." The speaker had a quiet, relaxed voice that was very different from Venetim's. It managed to grab everyone's attention despite the chaotic environment. The speaker, Princess Melneatis, was facing us now. "These people wasted no time risking their lives to save my brother and me, despite not knowing who we were."

Nobody said a word after that. The only person here in any position to challenge a member of the royal family was Hord Clivios, and even he kept quiet, though his expression made it obvious that he wasn't happy about the situation.

"We can trust the penal hero unit. They are highly skilled, high-minded people."

Now she's exaggerating, I thought. Was she blind? I wasn't sure how to feel about being called high-minded, especially when you considered how morally bankrupt most of us were. The few members of our unit who did have morals were clearly mentally unwell.

"If you plan to keep using the penal heroes as shields, then the least you can

do is give them every bit of support they need.”

Melneatis’s voice sounded soft, and yet her words were so sharp that nobody could argue with her. The noblemen scowled, but they kept their mouths shut. *So this is the power of royal blood.*

“I believe in you, brave warriors,” she said, smiling at Venetim and me. She was clearly accustomed to smiling like this at others.

“...You heard her, men. I have reached the same conclusion from a tactical standpoint as well. You penal heroes have proven your merits in battle and given me no choice but to acknowledge your value. However...” Hord closed his eyes. “Don’t get the wrong idea. We don’t have infinite supplies, so all we can offer you are soldiers.”

I’d figured as much. That was this unit’s weakness, after all. They had people to spare, but everything else was up to us to take care of.

“Now,” whispered Melneatis. “Captain Clivios, I have something I need to speak with you about in private. I must tell you why we had to escape from the Second Capital—and about the key.”



Unsurprisingly, we were kicked out when the princess and Hord decided to have their private conversation, so I went to check up on Norgalle. We had two hundred soldiers who would be temporarily assigned to him, and I needed him to agree to take them on.

Unfortunately, I ran into an aggravating obstacle on my way there. Jayce was in my path, and to make matters worse, he was yelling at about a dozen soldiers. The people being yelled at were most likely dragon knights, since they were all wearing thick, heavy coats like Jayce was. They were all sitting in the snow, looking exhausted. Maybe they didn’t have the strength left to stand.

What’s more, Neely was not by Jayce’s side. That was very bad news, since she was one of the few who could stop him. Without Neely to rein him in, Jayce could get extremely violent when dealing with humans.

“What were you idiots thinking?!” Jayce shouted. He seemed even more

pissed off than usual. “You left them behind so that worthless garbage like you could live? They all fought for you!”

Jayce was holding on to the lapels of one knight, with murderous rage in his eyes. The knight looked like he was about to cry. He was still young and visibly terrified by Jayce’s threats.

“Cordelia was worried about you! She was scared that someone so weak and kindhearted wouldn’t be able to make it back alive! How could you just leave her like that?!”

Was Cordelia the name of a dragon? ...I couldn’t sympathize with Jayce at all, and I couldn’t stop him, either. In fact, I didn’t really care to. When he got angry, it was always on behalf of dragons, never for his own sake. That was why I had no words to stop him.

As I stood, wondering how I could intervene, someone called to me from behind.

“Don’t even bother, Comrade Xylo. There’s no stopping him now.”

It was Rhyno. He was sitting in the snow, elegantly reading a book, with his suit of armor cast off and lying to his side. This was nothing new—he would often go out while the sun was up to enjoy a book and let his armor charge up its luminescence. He loved books and would read anything, though I wasn’t entirely convinced he understood what he was reading.

That day, he was reading *Chiv Bezalhip*, a book on insect dishes and the best ways to cook them—information I hoped he would soon forget.

“Comrade Jayce is mad because of what happened to the dragons,” he said.

“That’s obvious. In fact, I’ve never seen him mad about anything else.”

“Yes. He seems to be extremely upset about those dragon knights leaving their dragons behind.” As always, Rhyno was smiling, or at least it looked like he was smiling on the surface. He turned a page in his book, revealing a detailed diagram of some strange-looking insect. “They left their dragons locked up in the stables back at the main camp and ran away.”

“I see.” I knew Jayce, so I knew, if that were true, there was no use in trying to

stop him. "Yeah, that would piss him off. Just hope he doesn't accidentally kill any of them."

"As long as they seriously reflect on, regret, and despair over their mistakes, Comrade Jayce won't kill them. That's why he's shouting at them so much. If he believed they were a lost cause, they'd be disposed of immediately."

"...Good point." I turned back to Rhyno. Although he didn't seem to understand human ethics in the least, he appeared to have a good grip on each of our teammates' psychologies. "If that's the case, then we should be fine. We need Jayce to play a key role in the next battle."

"Does that mean a strategy has been decided upon?" Only then did Rhyno take his nose out of his book. "What do we need to do?"

"The Ninth Order is going to take back Mount Tujin, and we're going to defend them from the rear."

"That's a bit disappointing, though I suppose it's the way things have to be. There's only one problem." Rhyno sighed, then closed his book. "I am out of ammunition, and I have no way of getting my hands on any more, so I won't be able to help fight. We're out of numerous other supplies, too, yes? Blanks for sacred seal engravings, luminescence cylinders..."

"I know."

Sending supplies to the penal hero unit was essentially an afterthought, and we were always last in line to get anything, if we received them at all. We probably couldn't rely on any legitimate sources. Of course, we could always use Dotta, but getting him to steal would cause other problems, given the circumstances. Everyone was low on supplies right now, and stealing from our allies could be disastrous for us all.

"...I'll figure something out. You just think about how you're going to kill the demon lords, and don't do anything stupid."

"Oh my. What wonderful news." My rude remark seemed to make him happy, but his radiant smile only made me want to punch him in the face. "I will follow you until the bitter end. I admire you, and to tell the truth, I'd like to be like you and Comrade Jayce one day."

"Don't lump me together with that asshole. That's not even a compliment." I glared at Rhyno with the scariest face I could muster. "You're a real shady guy, you know?"

"Really? Even more so than Comrade Venetim?"

"That's not a fair comparison."

"I see. I suppose you have a point." He seemed to agree. "At any rate, I would like to discuss how we're going to kill these demon lords. Charon, for example. I have an idea of its true nature, but I would love to hear your opinion," he said, suddenly changing the subject.

"...You have an idea of how we can kill that thing?" I asked.

"An idea, at least. For starters, that demon lord—..."

Whenever Rhyno got like this, he wouldn't stop talking until he was satisfied. In the end, I wound up suffering through an extremely long explanation before I was finally able to leave.

At any rate, the plan was in motion, and there was no stopping it now.



When I finally went to check on Norgalle, he was sawing logs.

Pelmerry's poison must have worked, because he was sleeping like the dead. By his side were Teoritta and, to my surprise, Dotta. Teoritta was lying down, still fatigued from using the Holy Sword, and Dotta had somehow slipped out of his restraints. Wasn't Tsav supposed to be keeping an eye on him?

"Dotta, what are you doing free? What happened to Tsav?"

"No clue. He said he had something to do and left," replied Dotta awkwardly. I felt my head begin to hurt. We should have never put Tsav on watch duty at a time like this.

"He's probably gambling," I said.

"Figured. No wonder he dumped all his work on me before he left. He told me that Norgalle and Teoritta wouldn't be able to move for a while, so I had to keep an eye on them."

"You're...wrong..." Teoritta tried to sit up in her bunk, but even that seemed almost too much for her to handle. "I was keeping an eye...on these two troublemakers..." She proudly puffed out her chest in spite of her pale, sickly

complexion. “Impressive, yes? I am doing a good job, don’t you think?”

“...You are.” I was forced to acknowledge her “hard work.”

She responded with a proud snort. “Right? I am the goddess who watches over and protects this unit, after all.”

“Uh...? I don’t see how you can say that with a straight face in your condition,” said Dotta. “You know I’m the one who has been nursing you back to health, right? I even made you something to eat because neither of you could move.”

“Yes, I appreciated the meal, and I thank you for it. But I am fine now... I can fight...whenever you need me... See...?”

Teoritta raised both arms over her head as if she were doing some sort of strange exercise.

She’s lying. Her upper body was trembling, and she was obviously still weak. She definitely wasn’t going to be able to use the Holy Sword. We would have to see this fight through without our trump card.

“Stop that and go back to sleep,” I said.

“...! But—”

“We leave tomorrow morning, and I need you fully rested by then. Be ready to work your ass off, okay?”

I figured putting it that way would help ease Teoritta’s conscience so that she might actually rest. And just as I expected, she seemed relieved as she grabbed her blanket and pulled it all the way up to her nose before collapsing back down onto her bunk.

“You can count on me! I will rest...and by tomorrow morning, I will be in tip-top shape, so tell me the plan. What is our strategy?”

“Oh, right. About that...” Dotta leaned forward uneasily. “Xylo, what do you wanna do? I think we’ve already worked hard enough, so maybe we can withdraw.”

“Like hell we can. Our main force will be heading north, and our mission is to protect them by stopping any enemies that come after us.”

"Oh no..." Dotta's face clouded with despair. "You mean we have to fight more demon lords?"

"You look defeated already, Dotta. Show some spirit," Teoritta scolded. "This means that they acknowledge and appreciate all of our hard work. They are counting on us." I could tell that wasn't making him feel any better.

"Come on, cheer up," I said. "We'll probably run into a few problems, but we actually have a chance to win this battle."

"It's those 'few problems' that I'm worried about."

"We need supplies. Rhyno needs more ammo, Norgalle needs material for his devices, and all of us need food."

"Ugh..." Dotta scratched his head. We went through this every time, but right now, even the main unit was low on supplies. That meant we were in an even worse, more urgent position than usual. "So, uh... You want me to go do what I do best? I can't get everything you want in one go, you know?"

"No, I want you to stay put. Don't do a thing this time, okay? Stealing from the already supply-starved Holy Knights and soldiers would only doom us all."

Hord Clivios was a reliable, skilled commander, and that included managing supplies. Stealing from him would end up holding all of us back and putting everyone in danger.

"You actually did something good in that last battle, didn't you? Something other than stealing."

"Huh? Wh-what do you mean? You're making me really uneasy right now."

"The prince and princess. You're the idiot who said you wanted to save those two kids, right? Do you know something that we don't?"

"Oh, uh... I dunno..." Dotta smiled ambiguously. "Maybe? Do you think I noticed something?"

"What the hell? How should I know?"

"...In that case, forget it. Does that mean I don't have to do anything this time?"

"Ha-ha. Good one." I shot down Dotta's naive fantasy right away. "Our unit doesn't have that kind of luxury. In fact, it's time for you to be useful for a change."

"Huh?" Dotta's face twisted. "...What do you mean?"

"We don't keep you around just to steal from our allies, you know. It's time for you to do some work."

"Are you...being serious?"

"Yep. And if you do a good job, you'll end up saving us all."

"I can't say I'm excited about this... I mean, it's gonna be dangerous, right?"

"It will, but it's an extremely important role. If you can pull it off, you'll save lives. Listen, first—"

But right as I was about to launch into my explanation, we heard a voice coming from the tent's entrance.

"Excuse me." It was a soft yet strangely resonant voice that I'd last heard quite recently. I hastily turned around. "Penal Hero Unit 9004, yes? I apologize for my sudden visit."

It was Third Princess Melneatis, with an aureole behind her—a trick of the sunlight, perhaps. Nevertheless, her appearance was so sudden that even I was caught off guard. Dotta tried to hide behind me.

"I met you earlier," she said. "Xylo Forbartz, yes? And that must be Goddess Teoritta."

"Y-yes..." replied Teoritta, nodding awkwardly and sitting up straight. I understood how she felt. There was something about this girl that made you want to stand at attention. "I am the Goddess of Swords, Teoritta. Alongside my knight, Xylo, I grant the heroes my divine blessing."

"What an honor it is to meet you. I have heard so much about all of you heroes."

Where did she hear about us? It had to be Venetim. Not much time had passed since the war council, but it was more than long enough for him to run his stupid mouth and spread rumors.

"And Dotta," she continued. "I wish to express my gratitude to you for advising the others to save us. Let me thank you on behalf of my brother as well."

"Oh, uh... A-as you can see, I'm doing fine. Thank you..." sputtered Dotta. He bowed before disappearing completely behind me. Nothing he'd said even made sense.

"I heard you are an extremely brave man and that you used to be a hunter. I have heard many tales of the faerie-hunters of the Qwadai Mountains."

"Huh? Oh... Uh...?"

"I have also heard your sharp eyes and ears, and your experience and gut instincts, have helped save your unit from countless predicaments."

"Oh...?"

Dotta was getting more confused by the second. There was no telling who this story was about, but it was clear Venetim was the source. She'd been fed so many lies that I doubted anyone here had the energy to correct her.

"And Sir Norgalle... I never expected to run into him again in such a place."

"Yeah, about that..." I replied despite myself. "Do you know this man?"

I cast Norgalle a sidelong glance. He was still fast asleep. Even his profile looked dignified, perhaps due to his respectable moustache.

"Sir Norgalle was a scholar at the Temple's Academy with my brother, Lawtzir."

A scholar. I had heard such rumors before. Apparently, Norgalle had once been a promising scholar—a prodigy when it came to sacred seal engineering. I had always felt the rumors had to be true, based on his talent.

"We have spoken countless times before, and he was always kind to me. He reminds me of my elder brother that way. My brother was a modest, gentle man. When I was a child, I always felt like he knew everything about the world..." Princess Melneatis gazed at Norgalle as if she was remembering old times. "I had heard that he ran away and went into hiding after my brother's disappearance...but I never expected he would end up like this."

She didn't seem to know about the terrorist attack he'd plotted. In fact, I hadn't known the name of the terrorist, either. All I'd heard was the statement that Galtuile released, which said that extremists from House Meht had been responsible. I only found out Norgalle Senridge had done it single-handedly after I joined the penal hero unit.

There was no way the Temple would allow such information to go public. No one could know that a once-promising scholar had lost his mind and gone on a rampage. That went double when it came to the royal family. The only ones who knew the truth were probably the king and crown prince.

"Sir Norgalle...called me his sister." Her voice was trembling almost imperceptibly. "I do not know what happened to him, but..."

I had no idea what she'd wanted to say next.

"...I suppose I should be grateful that he at least remembers me," she said at last.

This young girl seemed to really look up to Norgalle, and I got the feeling I should probably head out before her.



After leaving the tent, I took a short walk.

The crimson evening sun reflected brilliantly off the nearby river's surface, and the walnut trees along the riverside seemed faded somehow, perhaps due to the harsh winds and snow.

Kerpresh Village was much larger than it had seemed at first. There was an inn for travelers, a small temple, and even a public hot spring. Although the residents had already evacuated, there were signs that the hot spring facility had been used recently, and the building was in better shape than I'd expected.

Hot spring drilling technology had evolved exponentially alongside the development of sacred seals in the Federated Kingdom. Nowadays, there was at least one per colony, save those that were extremely remote. Looking back, I'd visited hot springs quite often as a student. That was long before I became a captain in the Holy Knights, of course. I used to have a friend I'd get up to all

sorts of trouble with. Once or twice, we even hunted bandits to blow off some steam while we were visiting the countryside.

None of this helped me come up with any ideas for dealing with our lack of supplies, but I couldn't think of anything else.

Pull yourself together. There's no time to be reminiscing about the past.

I psyched myself up and tried to get down to business. We needed ammo and raw materials for sacred seal tuning. Even if we couldn't get our hands on high-quality iron plates, we could at least use wooden boards. Without supplies, both Rhyno and Norgalle would be of far less use to us in battle.

There has to be a way. Think.

Stealing from our allies was no good—I needed someone to lend them to us. In other words, we needed to ask a unit sympathetic to us.

A unit willing to cooperate with us?

That was a pipe dream. The only one I could think of was the former Thirteenth Order, and they were cavalry, so I doubted they'd have ammo for artillerymen or extra raw materials for tuning sacred seals. Put simply, we had reached a dead end.

Once I came to that realization, I saw something else that I didn't want to see. Soldiers were gathered underneath a tree by the riverside and rolling what appeared to be dice. They were clearly gambling, and where there was gambling, I could expect to find Tsav. And as it happened, he wasn't alone. Rhyno and Tatsuya were with him.

"What are you doing?" I said. Once I'd seen the three of them together, I couldn't simply leave them alone. In fact, I was pretty sure I'd specifically told Rhyno not to do anything stupid only moments ago.

"Oh! Bro! Things are getting intense!" Tsav waved at me gleefully. "Luck is on our side for once! Tatsuya's on a roll!"

"Are you serious? Don't teach these two how to play your stupid games."

"Oh, come on!" Tsav protested. "We're in the middle of solving our supply problem."

That sounded like pure sophistry to me. The few surplus materials they might win through gambling were nowhere near enough to change the course of battle.

"I figured this would be better than doing nothing," Rhyno said smugly, shooting me a thumbs-up. "We are in a tight spot, so I will do whatever it takes to contribute. Even a few supplies are better than none, yes? Comrade Tatsuya seems to be really motivated today... Come, now. It's your turn. Roll the dice."

"Gwarr. Rwagugeh," Tatsuya grunted nonsensically. Then he rolled a bunch of bone dice into a bowl, sending them bouncing and clinking about.

They appeared to be playing a game called *zudahare*, where you attempted to get specific combinations of numbers. The name combined the words for the lowest combination, *zuda*, with the highest, *hare*.

Tatsuya ended up getting all repeating digits, which was a combination known as the "big hare." As expected, it was followed by numerous groans and complaints.

"What is up with this guy?!"

"He's the luckiest man I've ever seen! What is going on here? You know what? I'm not gonna play anymore if he's here."

"He's got to be cheating. Is it really possible to get *hare* that many times? Tsk. Hey, admit it. You're cheating, aren't you?"

"Va-ke-ke-ke-keh! Kikikiki!" Tatsuya let out a bizarre shriek, as if someone was trying to strangle him.

"Guys, come on! Give my friend here a break! He's just really lucky. That's all." Tsav raised his hands in the air as he tried to defend Tatsuya. "I mean, look at me! I've lost every single round! And Rhyno might talk a big game, but he sucks, too."

"Yes, it's strange. I'm playing only when I have a chance to win, according to my calculations, and yet—"

"Don't waste your time calculating probability when it comes to gambling!" exclaimed Tsav. "In fact, you should throw away that useless notebook of yours."

It's not helping you one bit!"

It sounded as if Tatsuya was the only one winning, so it was probably safe to assume that they'd return with only a few extra supplies. It didn't seem like they'd be solving our problem anytime soon, so I waved them good-bye and turned to take my leave, when Tsav leaped up and whispered into my ear.

"Hey, Bro. Did you notice? You're being followed."

"Huh? By who?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not their target, and I only felt their presence really briefly. But, like...it's bad. I think someone wants to kill you... I don't know. On second thought, it's hard to explain what it felt like, but I don't think it's just one person. I think it's a whole group."

"How would a whole group of people manage to sneak into this village and follow me around?"

"Beats me. But..." Tsav patted me on the back. "Good luck, Bro! I'd love to help you out, but I'm in the middle of getting us some supplies! Besides, a few assassins wouldn't be able to kill you anyway, right?"

"Thanks for the concern, asshole." Tsav had done a great job of ruining my mood, so I decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. "By the way, Jayce was looking for you, and he seemed pissed. You should probably head back to the stable as soon as you can."

"Huh?!" The flippant smile on Tsav's face froze. Satisfied, I took my leave.

So I'm being followed, huh?

I wasn't quite as confident as Tsav that I could handle a group of assassins all by myself. People like that always waited for the moment you let your guard down to strike, so it was difficult to predict how they would attack. The more honest you were as a soldier, the harder it was to prepare. In fact, it would be near impossible for anyone but a specialist. And so I decided to lure them out of hiding instead. I picked up my pace until I was walking so quickly that whoever was following me would have to start hurrying as well. Soon I was jogging, and then I broke into a run. Then, all of a sudden, I whipped around.

...Seriously?

I was taken aback, and not in a good way. The least threatening “assassin” I had ever seen swiftly ducked behind a nearby walnut tree. After coming to a stop, I called out her name.

“Patausche, what are you doing?”

“...Oh, um.” She crossed her arms and leaned against the tree, scowling. “Nothing at all. I was simply going for a walk.”

“Don’t lie. You’ve been following me.”

“Well...yes! In fact, I have! I had to keep an eye on you to make sure you weren’t slacking off. I’m still not sure you have what it takes to be our unit’s commander.”

Her reasoning sure was something, all right. Technically, Venetim was our commander, but I decided not to mention that, since it wouldn’t help the situation.

“You’ve been unusually angsty, and that’s no way for a commander to act. So I figured I’d give you a warning. We can’t have you lowering morale and worrying everyone.”

“Yeah, my bad,” I said with a wry smile. I couldn’t argue with a former officer. “I’ll get my act together.”

“Good... Now, if something is bothering you, I suppose I wouldn’t mind listening if it would make you feel better,” she replied, fixing me with her sharp gaze.

There it is, I thought. That’s what this is all about.

I couldn’t blame her for being concerned about something bothering her unit’s commander right before a major battle.

“What’s going on?” she said. “Spit it out.”

“We don’t have enough supplies. We’re out of basically everything, and we need to restock without relying on Venetim or Dotta.”

“...Oh! That’s... That *is* rather troubling.” After hesitating for a few moments,

Patausche nodded slowly. It sounded like she'd been quite confident she could solve any problem I brought her. "How did you use to handle issues with supplies? I doubt military logistics is your forte."

"We were allotted an adequate number of supplies when I was in the Holy Knights, so I never really had to worry about running out. But when I did run into trouble, I had a friend I could go to for help... Hold on. What do you mean you doubt it's my forte? I feel like I could say the same thing to you."

"Wh-what makes you think that?!"

"I'll apologize if I'm wrong, but I'm right, aren't I?"

She lowered her voice and looked down. "...I, too, had a friend who was good at working behind the scenes to get what he wanted, so I often went to him for help..." It seemed we weren't that different: We were both terrible at managing supplies.

"I guess we're more alike than I thought," I said, laughing.

"Why are you looking at me like that?! I'm nothing like you! But...if I ask my former allies to lend us some supplies...then maybe..."

"Don't. We'd never be able to pay them back, and it's not like they have more than they need. It is what it is."

I stuffed a hand in my pocket and rooted around, then thrust my fist out at her. She looked at the wad of paper in my hand in bewilderment.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"Dried fruit soaked in honey. You know, grapes, pieces of apple, and whatnot. I figured you wouldn't know how to get ready-to-eat meals, either."

"I wasn't provided any."

"That's because you're a member of the penal hero unit now. The military doesn't provide us with food like this, so you have to make some yourself in your spare time. Smoked meat works great, by the way."

"Wait... I can't accept this. I have nothing to give you in return."

"Then pay me back some other time."

"Fff! Ah...!" Patausche shrieked when I grabbed her hand and forced the wrapped fruit into it. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"We take turns making meals like this, so hurry up and learn how to cook, okay? Because— Hmm?"

"Wh-what?! How...?!"

She was reaching for the sword at her hip before she'd even finished her sentence. I was just as shocked as she was, and I had my hand on a knife, ready to unsheathe and throw it.

Five of them? No—six?

We were surrounded. Tsav had been right. That said, our pursuers didn't seem to be hostile. Each one of them was dressed as a knight, a family crest sewn into their clothes. They must belong to the Noble Alliance. A lion holding a battle-ax in its mouth—House Dasmitur? Upon closer inspection, I recognized a few of them. They were all practically children.

These were the soldiers who were forced to take up the rear during the withdrawal.

"Hey, uh...," muttered one, taking a step forward.

"Stop right there!" yelled Patausche.

"Quit it. They mean no harm. You know that." I held out an arm, stopping her from unsheathing her sword. "Who are you?" I asked.

"M-my name is Siffritt." The young soldier seemed frightened, but he took in a deep breath and continued. "Penal heroes, uh... I heard you were having trouble with supplies."

"A little. But who isn't, right?"

"Our unit actually has a surplus. We have ammunition and even blanks for tuning sacred seals."

You've got to be kidding me. That was the Dasmitur nobles for you. I couldn't believe they'd managed to carry that many supplies all the way here. But why did they have so many? Of course, my question received the worst possible answer.

"Lord Dasmitur has yet to engage in meaningful combat, and I doubt he plans to start anytime soon. For the next battle, we will be positioned behind the Ninth Order."

That was likely the safest position on the battlefield. House Dasmitur was very powerful politically, and Hord Clivios seemed to be having trouble dealing with them.

"Interesting."

"...Therefore, we would like for the penal hero unit to use our supplies."

"What? Hold on."

"Please tell us what you need, and we will bring it to you tonight."

"I said hold on. That would be illegal. Do you think Dasmitur will allow it?"

"Of course not. But we wish to do it anyway."

Siffritt seemed to be telling the truth. The surrounding soldiers were all staring at me with solemn gazes—or perhaps that was hope in their eyes.

"Your unit saved us," grunted one soldier. Another followed, and then another.

"We would have been completely wiped out if it weren't for you."

"We'll do whatever it takes to support you if it means you can end this war. All the higher-ups care about are themselves and maybe their families."

Stop. Don't do this to me.

I didn't want to see that look in their eyes. I hated having people count on me like this.

"We believe it's the penal hero unit who will lead us to victory."

"...You better keep that to yourselves," I said, "or people are gonna think you've lost your goddamn minds."

"Not at all! There are plenty of soldiers in other units who look up to you all as well, especially the Thunder Falcon, Xylo Forbartz. You should hear the rumors. You have quite the reputation."

"Is the goddess killer really that popular?"

"None of us would dare call you that! You're— Oh, hey. Do you think I could get your autograph—?"

"Stop. That's close enough," said Patausche coldly as she slid in front of me. Her piercing glare alone was enough to make Siffritt flinch. "We are penal heroes. I recommend you regular soldiers keep your distance."

"Huh? But, uh... I just saw some penal heroes gambling by the riverside with soldiers just like us..."

"I recommend you avoid that as well."

Her overwhelming intensity caused Siffritt to take a step back. He opened his mouth once more, as if he wanted to say something, but then swallowed his words and simply lowered his head. "...In any event, thank you for saving us. We will bring you the supplies you need later tonight."

"All right," I said, unable to do anything else.

As if my words were some kind of signal, the young soldier left in a hurry. The others bowed before heading out as well. Patausche and I were the only ones remaining.

"...I'm sure you already know this, but let me say it just in case." Patausche spun around, her gaze even sharper than before. "I'm sure it's nice to have a young lady be sweet on you, but don't let it go to your head. Don't forget where we stand in all this."

"Huh?"

"That soldier you were just talking to."

"The boy?"

"Get your eyes checked! That wasn't a boy."

I fell silent. No wonder he'd looked so slender for a boy his age.

All that aside, we'd found a solution to our biggest problem. Once we had ammo and raw materials for tuning sacred seals, we could prepare for battle. I clenched my fist, then opened it again.

I finally felt like we had a shot at victory. But then again, hope and expectations were the heaviest of burdens.



"...Time to switch to phase two of our plan."

Trishil stood before a board plastered with details of their strategy, staring at Lentoby with an uncanny luster in her eyes. Her sharp, refined features seemed even more sinister than usual. Lentoby, however, found his eyes drawn to her right arm. It had been lopped off by an enemy cavalryman, and in its place was a new limb covered in jet-black scales. It had been replaced with the arm of a faerie, claws and all.

When she returned injured, Charon had granted her that arm. The demon lord had casually scooped up the arm of a dullahan and tossed it to her, then ordered Furiae to shove it into her wound. What followed had looked like some sort of demonic sorcery. The new arm had fused to her bloody nub. Her wound had bubbled, but within half a day it was healed. During the process, Trishil had been in terrible agony. She had tied herself to a bed to keep from moving and simply endured it. But once it was over, she had a new arm—jet-black, distorted, and ominous.

"Our enemy is the penal hero unit," she grunted, hatred clear in her voice. "Lentoby, there will be no next time for us. We have to kill them, no matter what. The problem is..."

Lentoby could easily imagine what she would say next.

"The problem is their commander, Hanged Fox," she continued. "If we can kill him, then...!"

"How about we try to snipe him?"

"We will try, of course. We're going to try everything we can." She fixed him with a cold glare. "You use that brain of yours to come up with a plan. If we fail again, we're in trouble. You must find a way to kill Hanged Fox. Without him, the others will be reduced to directionless sheep."

Lentoby could tell that his commander had her back up against the wall, that

she was desperate. Maybe it was time for him to jump ship. He still had things to do, after all. He might be working for a demon lord at the moment, but what he really wanted was to fight for mankind and be praised for his hard work. Perhaps it was mere vanity on his part, but...

...I have to kill her somehow and take over as commander.

That was the only way he could ensure his survival. As long as he kept sucking up to the Demon Blight and pretending to be a loyal servant, they would keep sparing him. And as long as he was alive, he would have his chance.

That day will come. I'm sure of it.

But until then, he was going to do whatever it took to survive, no matter how cruel. He had stolen others' positions to make it to the top, let the enemy into the city, and killed those he was supposed to protect. He'd even killed children and the elderly to "thin out the herd." In his mind, the only way he could ever make up for all his despicable acts was to survive.

He wanted to prove that he wasn't evil, that he'd always intended to do the right thing. That what he was doing now was all an act.

Yes, this isn't real. These are all lies.

Results aren't everything, he thought. The process and reasoning should be considered as well. And if that's the case, then I have already worried and suffered enough. I have already been punished for my crimes.

...So please, forgive me.

Lentoby fixed his gaze on his commander's profile, his eyes dark.



PUNISHMENT: SEAL OFF THE TUJIN RAVINE, PART 1

The sun rose and set, and once again night was upon us.

After leaving Kerpress Village, we walked and walked. Finally, we took the shortest possible break to eat and rest.

I took a bite out of my disgustingly awful ration. Known to many as “meat floss,” it was essentially jerky, oil, and dried fruit mashed together and shredded. Sand would probably taste better. I secretly vowed to one day do something to fundamentally improve this slop.

“All right, let me fill you in on the plan,” I said to Venetim after washing down the awful taste of the meat floss with water. “We penal heroes are the rear guard, and our mission is to employ an elastic defense to delay the enemy.”

“I see. Rear guards with an elastic defense...”

“You have no idea what I’m saying, do you? ...Whatever.”

Venetim was nodding and stroking his chin with his arms crossed, like he fully understood, but I didn’t trust the guy one bit.

“You and Tatsuya will travel with Hord and his men, just in case they need extra protection,” I continued. “I already got permission.”

"Wait. What?"

"Tatsuya's the strongest individual soldier we have, so he should be able to buy us some time if something goes south."

"...Then what do you need me for?"

"You're the backup plan's backup plan. I need you to keep Tatsuya under control. Besides, it's not like you're gonna be of any use to us once the battle starts in the rear."

"I can say with confidence that you're absolutely right."

"So you don't deny it?"

He grinned and nodded, earning a good laugh from me. With that, our discussion came to a close. After all, Venetim didn't have any opinions when it came to military affairs. If anything, I bet he was thrilled to be able to tag along with Hord and his men, since he probably assumed it would be much safer than fighting in the rear. He was right, too.

That's just about everything.

All that was left was to keep moving and make it to Mount Tujin as quickly as possible. A cold wind began to blow. It would probably start snowing later that night. Exhaling white puffs of air, I fixed my eyes on Mount Tujin, where it stood tall to the north.

Norgalle and his two hundred military engineers were already marching. They had a job to do up ahead: setting traps to the northwest. Specifically, I wanted traps that could be scattered across a wide area so we would have the greatest chance of slowing down the Demon Blight's pursuit of the Ninth Order. Despite the short amount of time, I was sure Norgalle would go above and beyond my expectations.

In fact, I had briefly spoken with the man just before we left the settlement.

"Melneatis and Rykwell are my younger siblings," he'd confirmed, finally able to move on his own. "Commander-in-Chief Xylo, I am counting on you to protect them at all costs. Understood?"

"You have my word."

He looked me right in the eye with an intimidating gaze, but in all honesty, there wasn't much for me to do. The two of them were royalty, so they'd follow Hord, where it was safest. I'd even sent Tatsuya with them, just in case.

"I'm counting on you, too, Your Majesty."

"I am going to make them regret ever stealing the Second Capital from me."

"Just don't go starting fights with your new soldiers, okay?"

That was my biggest concern. When Norgalle first greeted the military engineers, he'd claimed that he was the king of the Federated Kingdom. Usually, that wouldn't be a problem. But one of the soldiers, probably still quite young, had stupidly asked, "What do you mean you're 'the king'?" Unsurprisingly, Norgalle had flown into a rage and started lecturing him. I didn't even want to imagine what might have happened if Venetim hadn't been nearby to fix things and calm down Norgalle.

"I wasn't fighting with anyone! That boy needed to be reprimanded. I will not allow such disrespect. I put up with far too much insolence as it is."

"They're...probably just nervous to be around the king." I may have been talking out of my ass, but I didn't want to put him in a bad mood at a time like this. Maybe Venetim would have been able to come up with something better. "Low-level soldiers like that don't know how to talk to royalty, you know?"

"Hmm... I suppose the problem is education," muttered Norgalle, looking stern and stroking his moustache. "We can't allow the Temple to monopolize such matters. We'll have to use treasury funds to create a royal academy. Listen carefully, Commander-in-Chief Xylo. The wealth of a nation starts with—..."

I could tell this was going to run long, so I turned off my brain. King Norgalle's ideal political blueprint was a particularly useless subject, and I didn't understand most of what he was saying anyway. Once he was finished rambling about his grand ambitions, I had him start north. Dotta, leading a small party of his own, headed out soon after that. This was how our march to Mount Tujin began.

Sending scouts ahead, we marched toward the hills as quickly as possible. If we went without breaks, Mount Tujin was a little over a day away from

Kerpresh on foot. And once we arrived, we'd have to start climbing. The question was: How much time could we shave off that trip? Once the enemy discovered that we were marching north, they would surely come after us. They would quickly realize it was a waste of time to simply block our access to loff.

"Xylo, do you believe they've noticed what we're up to?" Patausche brought her horse up to mine so we could talk. "I want to hear your opinion. Do you think we'll make it to Mount Tujin?"

It was a bit late to be talking strategy, so I suspected she just wanted to chat and relieve some stress. Although Patausche was well-versed in military matters and a capable leader, considering her age, she probably didn't have a lot of battle experience.

I was gradually coming to understand the woman known as Patausche Kivia. She probably didn't know how to chat about anything other than formal matters during a mission, and there were no proper soldiers in the penal hero unit that she could relate to. If this were Tsav, he wouldn't hesitate to start jabbering about his tragic past or any other ridiculous subject no one cared about. And Venetim would probably start spinning some tall tale apropos of nothing. That was why I chose to give her an optimistic answer.

"Sure, if we're lucky."

"You're leaving it up to chance?"

"Yeah. I think we have a good enough shot that luck could tip the scales."

"Unbelievable. You're always like this. Do you ever think things through seriously?" Her words were harsh, but she wasn't trying to hurt me. She probably just didn't know how to put it any other way. Besides, I thought I caught a faint smirk on her face. "I suppose I should start praying for good luck, then, huh? It's a gamble, but winning would put us much closer to retaking the Second Capital."

"I'm surprised, Patausche. Didn't see you as the gambling type."

"I would never. It's a degenerate pastime."

"I bet you're a terrible gambler. In fact, I'm starting to worry about our mission."

"...I'm not terrible...or at least, I wouldn't be. I simply don't waste my time gambling...because it's degenerate!"

Leaving me with those words, Patausche sped up to rejoin the other cavalry.

That was probably enough to do the trick and soothe her nerves. How long had it been since I'd spoken like that with a proper soldier? It really brought me back.

However, it seemed we'd had an eavesdropper.

"Relying on luck, are we? Not very professional of you, Xylo Forbartz."

Before I realized it, Hord Clivios was right behind me, holding the reins of his horse with a cheerless expression as Pelmerry sat behind him. It sounded like he'd taken Patausche's and my exchange seriously.

"I agreed to this strategy and accepted your proposal," he continued, "so I would appreciate it if you didn't make me regret that decision."

"My bad." I waved apologetically in an attempt to shut him up. I didn't want to deal with him right now. "I'll make sure to keep my mouth closed from now on."

"You know, you have a piss-poor attitude, Xylo Forbartz. Even back when you captained the Fifth Order, I always felt like your appointment was a mistake."

It appeared someone wasn't a huge fan of mine. Come to think of it, Hord had never left much of an impression on me back in those days. We hardly ever talked, and now I knew why: He despised me.

Hord glared at me as if I were cursed.

"And it looks like I was right. Allowing you to become a Holy Knight was a mistake."

I tried to come up with something to say, but I wasn't very interested in this topic. Besides, allowing me to become the captain of the Fifth Order probably *was* a mistake. I'd killed my goddess. A Holy Knight like that shouldn't exist. No one would believe me if I told them the truth, either. At any rate, I was fine with whatever insults people like him wanted to hurl at me, as long as they didn't speak ill of Senerva. I had grown used to this charade long ago, after all.

It seemed *someone* wasn't quite as forgiving, however.

"That is enough. Have you no decency?"

It was Teoritta, of course. She had poked her head out from behind me and started reprimanding Hord. She was back on her feet after a night of rest, but she'd been quiet all day, and it sounded like she had a lot of pent-up anger that she needed to vent.

"Xylo is my knight, and I chose him."

Ever since we left the settlement, she had been fiddling with the bistie in my jacket. I'd told her that it tickled and asked her to play with hers instead, but she was clearly not interested in anything I had to say.

Bisties, as it happened, were sacred seal tools with the ability to produce heat, used often during winter marches. The ore had to be mined in Zewan Gan, so they were rather valuable. The Dasmitur family's supply stash had included even items like this. It seemed they truly had plenty of everything.

"Hord Clivios, I will not allow you to speak that way to my knight."

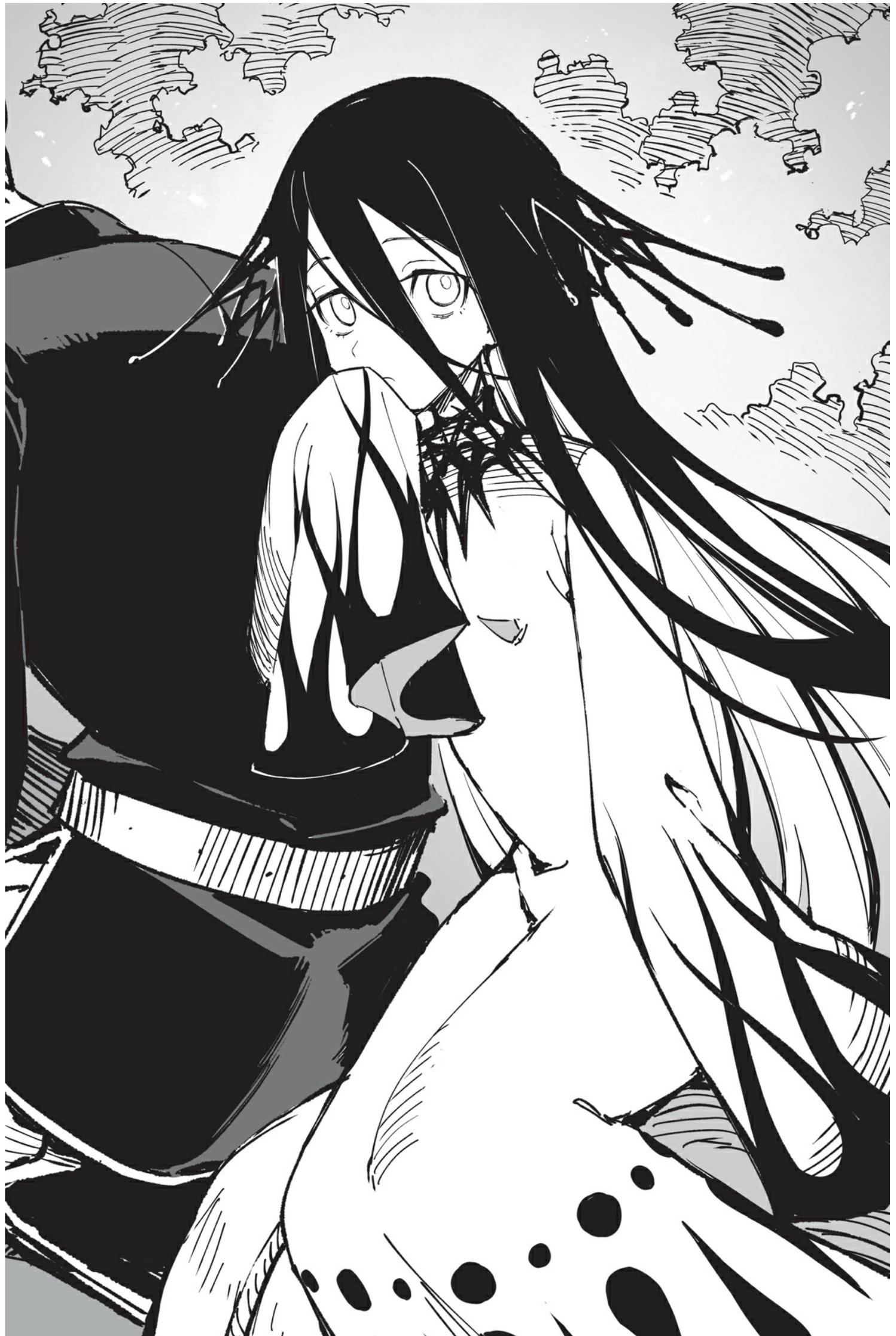
"I..." Hord hesitated for a moment. A goddess forging a pact with a penal hero was such a unique case, he probably had no idea how to interact with her. Eventually, though, he narrowed his eyes and bowed to his own principles. "My apologies, Goddess Teoritta."

"Do not let it happen again. It was no mistake that Xylo was chosen to become the captain of the Fifth Order, either." Teoritta snorted proudly.

She could have stopped there, but she then turned to Pelmerry, who was sitting behind Hord with fear in her eyes. Teoritta shot her the kind of grin a girl might give her little sister after a scolding.

"Goddess Pelmerry," she said. "You should really educate your knight on the proper way of speaking to others. I understand it may be difficult, but providing guidance to mankind is our duty."

Pelmerry lowered her gaze. Her long black hair covered her eyes, making it hard to read her expression. "... I am sure my knight Hord did not speak with malice. He can be somewhat...uptight at times, I suppose..."



"Pelmerry, stop," Hord said, swiftly cutting her off. "I despise those who ignore the rules and act however they please, and it makes me sick to see someone tell blatant lies, steal supplies, and behave in defiance of others. I will have every one of you punished once I have enough evidence."

"Okay."

I actually hoped he could pull it off. But how was a captain in the Holy Knights going to carry out his duty to the military while simultaneously gathering enough evidence to charge a group of people that even the Allied Administration Division's top mobile investigators were only barely able to apprehend?

"You're a real serious guy," I said. "I can see how you managed to unify this many soldiers even during a retreat."

The military always said that good work would be rewarded and bad work punished, but an officer who could actually make that distinction was invaluable. If someone wanted to lead with any kind of purity, they had to be strictly disciplined themselves—that or have a talented adjutant to play the villain. My old unit had been the latter—I used to make my adjutant do all the yelling to keep my men in check. So while people like Hord annoyed me, I couldn't hate them.

"Make sure your men survive," I told him.

"Of course," said Hord. "That is my duty as their captain. Don't think a little flattery is going to change my opinion of you all. But I won't let my personal feelings influence how I treat you, either." He maintained a blank expression throughout, making it clear that he was serious. He hated us, but he wasn't going to drag us down so long as we did our job. That was easy enough to understand.

"Um... Can I say something?" Pelmerry interrupted, smiling awkwardly. "The man I forged a pact with is an exceptional Holy Knight as well." However, this seemed only to kindle Teoritta's competitive nature.

"Yes, I suppose he is decent enough, but he is no match for my Xylo. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say my knight is the best of the best! Allow me

to explain why. First—..."

I was going to tell her to stop, but in the end I didn't have to. Her voice was immediately drowned out by the blaring of a horn. When it sounded a second time, I noticed it was coming from the west. It was one of the scouts signaling that they had found the enemy.

"They're here," said Hord. "It appears they discovered us. They're coming from the southwest—a few thousand of them."

Hord touched the small shield-like buckle on his belt. It was engraved with a sacred seal and could be used for communication. These devices were called by various names, such as "Howling Wind Seal" or "Echo," and they were even more valuable than bisties, and quite compact. If Dotta saw one of those things, he wouldn't be able to take his eyes off it.

"Men! Suit up and prepare for battle!" shouted Hord, placing what appeared to be a mask over his head. It was an eerie, steel-blue covering that completely hid his face. This was almost certainly the Ninth Order's famous anti-poison mask. I'd heard about it, but this was my first time seeing one in real life. This was how they survived fighting alongside the Goddess Pelmerry and her poisons.

"Are you ready, Pelmerry?" Hord asked.

"...Yes. But before we begin...aren't you going to tell me that I can do it, Hord?"

"You can do it."

"Then...yes, I can do it."

Although her head was still bowed, I could see her lips curling into a faint smile. I understood why Hord dealt so mechanically with her. He took things way too seriously and strove to give her exactly what she demanded. I felt sure that he believed what he was doing was correct.

"Xylo, we will continue heading north as planned," said Hord. "You and the rest of the penal heroes will stay here and stop the enemies from reaching us. I will give you the signal once we secure a post, so buy us time until then."

"I can't make any promises," I replied. "War is unpredictable, you know." I knew he would hate that. "But I'd rather not listen to you complain later, so I'll get it done."

There was nothing more difficult than satisfying a perfectionist. It looked like we would need an all-out victory to shut him up.

And besides, if we failed, there was a good chance we'd all end up dead.



PUNISHMENT: SEAL OFF THE TUJIN RAVINE, PART 2

I could see light in the western sky.

There were flames, lightning from sacred seals, and the glow of artillery shells, all starkly visible against the dark of the night.

That must be Rhyno.

Tsav could tell from the light alone. Furthermore, four shots had been fired in quick succession, and the only person he knew that shot like that was Rhyno. That man could think so abnormally fast, even Tsav couldn't keep up. There were times he could hardly believe his teammate was human.

Chaos had suddenly exploded everywhere around him. Xylo and the others in the rear had probably already started fighting. The goal was to keep the enemy from heading north by distracting them for as long as possible, and since Teoritta still couldn't use her powers fully, it was going to be a contest of strength.

But, well, I'm sure Bro will be okay.

Xylo would figure something out. He had instincts like a wild animal when it came to battle. Despite his fondness for common military practice on the

battlefield, he would sometimes ignore it with style and still come out on top.

The real problem is Jayce. He can be scary for totally different reasons than Bro can.

The cavalry had started fighting in earnest, and the infantry took off, lightning staffs in hand. Meanwhile, from Tsav's point of view, Jayce didn't seem to be panicking in the slightest. In fact, he seemed perfectly calm.

The other dragon knights were no different. The ones here had only barely managed to get their dragons out of the stable when the troops were forced to retreat. There were seventeen of them—eighteen including Jayce.

It was quite the spectacle. They calmly came to a stop, examined their dragons' harnesses and equipment, then began preparing the weapons they would carry. They didn't speak much, only a few soft whispers exchanged with their dragons. Tsav felt like he was witnessing the night after a funeral. In comparison, Jayce was downright chatty.

"It's fine, Neely." His voice now was far gentler than the one he used with other humans. "I don't regret it at all. I know I'll be able to do it. You know that, right?"

Neely was probably even more important to Jayce than family was. A simple word like that couldn't hope to encompass the strength of their bond. This puzzled Tsav—why, then, did Jayce always ride Neely into battle? She wasn't a penal hero like the rest of them. She could very well end up dead.

"Why?" Tsav muttered without thinking.

Ack. I did it again. He knew well that talkativeness was one of his few flaws. Still, he couldn't suppress his curiosity.

"Um, hey, Jayce. I've been wondering: Why do you always take Neely into battle with you? Like, isn't that kind of dangerous?"

"...Tsk." Jayce narrowed his eyes at Tsav. "Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much and ask too many questions?"

Tsav wasn't worried, however. He knew Jayce wouldn't get violent while Neely was watching. "Yeah, you know me. I grew up in the order of assassins,

and they were really strict about rules and being silent, you know?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't have to be so harsh! They really were, I swear! So being so talkative is kind of, like, a reaction to that. I'm still haunted by my tragic past. Like, I may act all bright and cheerful most of the time, but I'm actually full of darkness!"

"You wonder why *I* do it? ...Are you stupid or something? My reason doesn't matter. What's important is why Neely does it."

"Hmm? Oh, uh... Huh?"

A few seconds passed before Tsav realized Jayce was answering his question. Jayce was a man who never broke under pressure or let others influence him, after all.

"Neely is my top priority, along with the dragons as a whole—the descendants of the world's guardians, who seceded from Tír na nÓg."

"Uh-huh," replied Tsav vaguely. He had no idea what they were talking about anymore. Jayce, however, continued to ramble in his usual aggravated manner.

"Most humans are ungrateful, so I don't care what happens to them, but Neely and the others don't feel that way. And they're all counting on me—an unworthy human." As Jayce rubbed the nape of his neck, Neely roared softly, as if she were trying to sympathize with or console him. "...They say I can protect not just my own little world, but something much bigger. Hard to believe, isn't it? I still don't. But if it's what Neely and her brethren want, then..."

Jayce straddled Neely, and she spread her wings wide. Tsav instinctively leaned back.

"...I have to do it. I don't want them to give up on me, you know? ...Now let's do this, Tsav!"

Jayce held out a hand and invited Tsav onto Neely's back. Before Tsav had even realized it, all the other dragon knights had mounted their dragons and were ready for battle. In the distance, a vivid violet moon illuminated the night sky, revealing the shadows of countless faeries.

"We've got to hurry. It's time to avenge the dragons they killed." Dark flames burned in Jayce's eyes. "Our target is the demon lord Furiae. I'll give you one chance. If you miss, I'm going to push you off and let you fall to your death."

"Seriously? You really know how to make a guy nervous!"

The former assassin could feel himself smiling. Tsav was enjoying himself, and he knew it. It was times like this that made him really feel alive. As he slipped his legs into the stirrups, he turned to face the western sky.

There he saw a glittering crimson beam of light soar through the air and smash through their encampment.



"What was that?"

Lentoby instinctively turned back toward the source of the attack. He'd just seen a red beam of light strike the enemy camp up ahead. It had melted the snow and gouged out the ground. Several faeries were caught up in the blast as well, but the damage to the Federated Kingdom's forces was massive.

"Must be Furiae's doing," muttered Trishil flatly, her hands holding the reins of her horse. It was like she was a different person on the battlefield, impressively calm and composed. There was no sign of the heightened emotions she'd displayed only a little while earlier. She didn't even look back.
"Never seen it before, Lentoby?"

"Oh, uh... I've seen it a few times...from afar."

"They say it's some sort of heat ray, so the only way to block it is to focus solely on defense using sacred seal technology. In other words, they won't be going anywhere."

Even Lentoby could understand what she was getting at. The one to stop would be the unit that had something to protect at all costs—the unit with the prince and princess. Even if they wanted to push forward, they'd have to use decoys and irregular movements to try to throw off the enemy.

"The others are counting on us to back them up. We can't let them down this time."

"Yes, I know."

Lentoby couldn't afford to disagree here. He was really beginning to feel the weight of having let two members of the royal family escape.

"Fortunately, I already found the prince and princess. Charon is taking care of them."

Trishil must have found them with her stigma. She closed one eye, looking for their position. So they were already two steps ahead of the enemy. It seemed luck was on their side this time.

"Our mission is to stop Hanged Fox's unit," she continued. "But we need to be careful not to fall into any traps. Got it? Who knows what kind of dirty tricks that man has up his sleeve."

It seemed Trishil was still sore about their earlier loss, but Lentoby felt she had a point. Their current enemies were like magicians. They could pull off the impossible and win in ways no one imagined. Their fortification, for instance, was like nothing Lentoby had ever seen before, and it had somehow allowed them to overwhelm the Demon Blight's forces and kill countless faeries with what must have been under five hundred men. They had seemed to be constantly setting the pace of the battle.

Lentoby would be lying if he said he wasn't afraid.

"...It looks like Charon is getting ready to attack," said Trishil. "Let's move out. You have your mask for the poison, right?"

"Yes."

Lentoby shivered once, then followed Trishil.

They knew how the Ninth Order operated, and each member of their unit had been given a crude, all-purpose mask engraved with sacred seals to protect them from poison. They weren't sure how effective the masks would be, but they were better than nothing.

I have to survive, no matter what. That's my top priority. I've made it too far to die now, and I will do whatever it takes to make it out of this alive. After everything that has happened, dying here would be too miserable a fate.



The red ray of light had penetrated their defensive formation, reducing several soldiers and their shields to ash and sending six more flying, before finally dissipating.

I saw it happen at point-blank range. Our force consisted of the penal hero unit combined with House Kurdel's soldiers—some of the best fighters in the Noble Alliance. We totaled about one thousand four hundred men in all, and the blast had put a hole in our rear guard's battle line.

"They even sacrificed their own faeries to hit us!" shouted Patausche in disgust, from atop her horse. She continued to shout furiously while swinging her lance, goring a nearby bogie and flinging it into the distance. "What an aggressive attack! And what range! How are we supposed to defend against that?!"

"...I believe we can block the attack if we line up powerful sacred seal barriers and take a defensive position," replied Rhyno, sounding suspiciously calm. "Around ten soldiers with their shields piled together should do the trick." Though his tone was warm, he was merely communicating the results of his calculations. That was how it felt to me, at least. "Of course, if we did that, we wouldn't be able to move. Plus, the enemy clearly outnumbers us, so it wouldn't take long for them to wear us down and crush us."

"...I know. And we would be failing our mission as rear guard, since they could simply detour around us." Patausche grimaced. She probably didn't like taking directions from Rhyno. I knew exactly how she felt. "What do you think, Xylo? We can't simply defend the entire time and allow the enemy to attack us."

The battle had already begun, and who knew when another crimson beam of fiery light would be heading our way? We would be forced to keep fighting in a state of constant fear.

"There's one thing that's bothering me," I said at last. "Their offense is weak—too weak." The faeries had been attacking us for a while now, and yet something was missing. "Where are the demon lords? Obviously, Furiae just shot that beam at us, but where's Charon?"

Usually, you would expect a moving fortress like that to be on the front line, ready to crush us, but it was still nowhere in sight. Why? The faerie forces before us seemed somehow half-hearted as well. At most, there were about two thousand of the smaller, quicker faeries coming at us, but even if we assumed Furiae was in the rear with the main force, something still felt lacking. It was as if they weren't taking us seriously. Something else must be going on. I considered the worst possible scenario.

"...They must have gone around us."

They'd figured out what we were up to. Maybe we were unlucky and one of their scouts saw us, or maybe somebody leaked information to the enemy. It didn't matter. What mattered was that the force we were fighting was most likely a distraction, and the enemy's true target was somewhere else.

It appeared Hord Clivios's prediction had already been proved wrong. I tried to maintain a stoic front. "Don't worry about Furiae. Jayce said he'd handle it. Charon is the one we need to worry about."

"I was starting to get the feeling that this was a little too easy as well." Patausche and her cavalrymen had charged through enemy lines and made it back almost effortlessly. She knew what she was talking about. "But are you sure you're not jumping to conclusions? Charon hasn't even shown up yet."

"...No, it is already moving," Teoritta said suddenly. Her eyes were still dull, like the glowing remains of burnt firewood, but as she gazed into the northern sky, their flames began to return. "A demon lord...is heading north. Not here...but north."

"North? Teoritta, are you sure?"

"P-probably...!"

Teoritta knit her brows together, making it clear she still hadn't fully recovered. She'd usually say something nonsensical like, "Probably without a doubt!" But this time, she didn't even have the strength to do that.

"...The Ninth Order will need backup," I said. "I sent Venetim and Tatsuya north to guard them, so they should be able to buy us some time."

"Shall I go, then?" Rhyno said immediately, swinging his fist at a lunging faerie

and shattering its skull. “I’m interested in trying out the method we discussed to kill Charon.”

“Wait. How do you plan on catching up with them in that heavy suit of armor?”

That was perhaps the biggest weakness of an artilleryman. They were deadweight in battles where you had to keep moving, and although their sacred seals helped them run faster than the average person, there was no way they could catch up with a bunch of cavalry that already had a head start.

“...How disappointing. I can only hope that Lady Teoritta has made a mistake and Charon is heading this way.”

It was easy to misunderstand Rhyno, due to his language and behavior, but he was always extremely eager to fight the Demon Blight. Perhaps he had some sort of personal grudge against it. Maybe his parents or siblings had been killed by a demon lord. He wouldn’t be the only one.

“Then I suppose that leaves you, Comrade Xylo.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I turned my horse around and began heading north. The fighting there had most likely already begun. If Charon had found them, then they would be at an overwhelming disadvantage. Their defeat was practically inevitable. Charon was a powerful demon lord that could easily break through and crush defensive formations, and it probably had tens of thousands of faeries and heavily armed human mercenaries with it. It didn’t help that Furiae’s devastating light beam attack had an extremely long range as well.

If even one of our units failed, any of these factors could wipe out our entire army. There was no guarantee that I would be able to kill Charon or even make it past its legion of faeries, and there was no guarantee that Jayce and Tsav would be able to kill Furiae, either. If we truly valued our lives, we should be running.

But what if...?

What if Jayce and Tsav managed to pull it off? Where would that leave me? They’d never let me hear the end of it. *“That was the best you could do?”*

Pathetic. We took out our demon lord with no issue," they'd say. Plus, the soldiers working for House Dasmitur had entrusted us with their weapons and supplies, and we had accepted, so it didn't matter how ridiculous I found their belief in us. It was too late now.

Dammit.

I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to kick that smug demon lord Charon's ass and smirk like it was nothing. I wanted to laugh through my nose and tell the others, "*That was easy.*" But in order to do that, I was going to have to be reckless.

"Patausche, I need you to handle things here. You're the only one I can count on."

"What do you mean? What do you plan on doing?!"

"I gotta take out a demon lord to even the score."

"Do you think you can win? You understand how slim your chances are, right?" Patausche looked completely fed up with me. I was getting pretty used to that look. "Are you always like this?"

"Yes, my knight is always like this," replied Teoritta on my behalf as she wrapped her arms around me. "...Of course, you are taking me with you, yes? I can find Charon... I can be useful!"

"Don't worry," I replied. "I was planning on taking you with me whether you help out or not." I wasn't sure if I was lying.

I looked back and gave my final order. "Patausche, you better pull through. Charon may not be here, but there's no shortage of enemies."

"I know. You better not make a fool of yourself, either."

"Who do you think you're talkin' to?"

"...And don't die. I'll fulfill my end of the bargain. I won't let a single faerie past."

"Like hell I'm going to die here. Anyway, I'm counting on you."

After letting out a white breath into the cold air, I rode my horse north at a

gallop.

"Let's do this, Teoritta. We can't have Jayce and Neely showing us up. We're going to kill Charon, no matter what."

"Yes, that is fine, but..." Teoritta lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "I hope you and Jayce are not betting on such a thing."

"I can't answer that. Wouldn't want to lie to you," I joked.

"Xylo!"

I unsheathed a knife and threw it straight at a charging faerie to clear a path.

The howling wind carried a cacophony of sounds across the battlefield—shouts, screams, explosions, the screech of metal, and the echo of hooves. And through this raucous harmony, we charged straight into the climax of the battle of the Tujin Tuga Hills.



PUNISHMENT: SEAL OFF THE TUJIN RAVINE, PART 3

The sky was a far crueler environment than Tsav could have ever imagined. He probably would have been dead if not for the windproof goggles and snowsuit he was wearing.

This guy's out of his mind. Does he never get the urge to barf up here?

Tsav had done a few trial flights with Jayce before, but it couldn't compare to Neely's movement during actual battle, especially since Jayce's skills were on a completely different level than that of the other dragon knights. The sharp turns and sudden ascents were bad enough, but nothing was worse than the somersaults. Even if an enemy took their back, Jayce and Neely would slip behind them in the blink of an eye. The burden on the rider's body was so intense, however, that few could replicate the movement, even if they knew what they were doing.

Neely, too, seemed on a different level than the other dragons. Simply straddling her made it clear to Tsav that she was special. Even with his extra weight on her back, she could still gracefully control how quickly she accelerated and slowed down, as well as her posture. Her flame breath was incredibly accurate. It was even easier to see from the sky, where he could

watch her disintegrating the huge flying faeries called wyverns with a single breath. The only thing they had in common with Neely was size.

Jayce had said, “We’re going to take out every last wyvern, and if possible, all of them in one fell swoop.” From his tone, Tsav felt certain these faeries had once been dragons. He was positive.

Both Jayce and Neely were pursuing the wyverns with such intensity and speed that everything looked like a blur to Tsav. They were determined not to let a single one escape. With each confident strike, Neely’s fiery breath and Jayce’s javelin would take out another set of faeries. They made it look easy, but a quick glance at the other dragon knights made it clear to Tsav that these two were the exception.

The other knights were struggling to fight the wyverns one-on-one, and the hordes of gargoyles getting in their way weren’t helping. Eventually, the other dragon knights had to band together to fight back, and yet they were still mainly on the defense and spending most of their time dodging.

What’s more, they still had to worry about that crimson ray hitting them from below. The source was apparently the demon lord Furiae. One dragon knight had already been swallowed by the beam of light and scorched into nothing. And just now, Tsav saw another one take a hit. Jayce clicked his tongue.

“Dammit, Tsav! How much longer is this going to take? Shoot it already. How many more times does it have to fire that thing for you to find it?!”

“Yeah, I know.”

Tsav aimed his lightning staff, calculating the distance between himself and his opponent. The demon lord was positioned far to the rear of the enemy’s troops, but there were no other faeries surrounding it. Incidentally, the demon lord didn’t look like a monster. It looked...human? Tsav could see a shadowy humanoid figure shooting beams of light his way. All that was left was to determine if he could shoot that far.

“I don’t know if I can hit it from here, man,” he said. “Do you think you could get us a little closer?”

The lightning staff in Tsav’s hands was known as the “Daisy,” and it was

created by Verkle Development Corporation specifically for sniping. Norgalle, however, had tuned and modified it so much that it was hardly recognizable, and its range now far surpassed its original specifications. But he'd only focused on the range—Tsav had to somehow boost its power and precision by himself.

"I want to get close enough that I can be sure I'll kill it. You know I don't like to take potshots. I shoot to kill. It's like gambling. I like to wait for the right moment and then go all out and win big."

"Shut up." Jayce's reply was short and simple. "You're telling me you want me to break through the faeries in our way, all while dodging that red beam of light until I get close enough for you?"

"Yeah, uh... Is that too hard?"

"Excuse me? Hold on... Neely's saying something."

The azure dragon roared into the clear night sky. Her profile was almost chillingly beautiful in the deep violet light of the moon. *She's laughing*, thought Tsav.

"...She finds your doubt insulting. Hold on tight, dumbass. I'm going to kill you if you fall... Neely, let's descend first to pick up some speed."

The descent was so immediate and so rapid that Tsav thought his guts were going to come out of his mouth. Neely twisted and spun, weaving her way through the horde of faeries and incoming beams of crimson light. For a moment, Tsav didn't know which way was up. It wasn't just his eyes that were spinning—he could feel his organs twisting inside his body.

"Neely, now!"

He faintly heard the sound of Jayce's voice as a javelin flew through the sky, followed by a stream of fire. Two faeries dropped, almost in unison. A heat ray came within a hair's breadth of Neely's wing. The wind was howling. Tsav had no idea how she'd managed to make it out in one piece, but what he did know was that they were rapidly approaching the demon lord.

They were now isolated from the other dragon knights, making them the only target for an increasing number of faeries starting to surround them. This brief moment was going to be the only chance he got.

"Shoot!" shouted Jayce, but Tsav was already in position, the scope on his lightning staff locked on Furiae's head. He could see the creature clearly now. It looked like a woman with long silver hair that glittered in the night.

I can hit it. I'm close enough now. I mean, I'd look like an idiot if I missed from here.

He traced his finger along the sacred seal, activating it and unleashing a sharp bolt of lightning with a dry *pop*. He felt confident. His aim was perfect. The trail of lightning pierced the night sky and shot straight into Furiae's head.

So why was it still attached to the creature's body?

...Man, you've got to be kidding me. Seriously?

Tsav couldn't believe it. Furiae had shot its crimson beam right before the bolt of lightning landed, canceling out the attack. And its beam kept going, scorching a path through the sky and taking out another dragon knight. *It can do that?* thought Tsav. Its reaction speed was incomprehensible. Could it have predicted his shot?

All right, then. If that's how you wanna play it.

Tsav immediately formulated a plan. They needed a distraction if they were going to get through its impregnable defense—if they were going to bypass its crimson beam. Tsav was going to have to fire multiple shots in quick succession.

I need to confuse it and create an opening. Even a second will do.

"What do you think you're doing?! You screwed up, Tsav!" Jayce shouted furiously. "Worthless idiot. Xylo's never going to let me hear the end of this. Let's fall back—"

"Not yet. Like, you know I'm a prodigy, right?"

Tsav reloaded his weapon. His staff would take a few more seconds to cool down, but there was no time for that. He was going to do this, even if it blew the staff apart. He only had two shots left.

"This has got me even more pumped up. I need you to distract it."

"Excuse me? You want us to be decoys?"

"That should be easy for you and Neely, right? I'm gonna jump, so I need you guys to pretend like you're charging at it. I'll kill it before it gets you. Then all you have to do is catch me before I hit the ground, please."

"What now?"

"Easy, right?! I'm counting on you two!"

"Wait."

Tsav respected Jayce just about as much as he respected Xylo. He knew he'd understand. He and Neely could outmatch even him, and he was a prodigy. So he undid the fasteners that kept him fixed on Neely's back, and, without even waiting for Jayce to reply, he leaned forward.

The demon lord's not moving.

Tsav quietly activated his sacred seal and shot another ray of light from his lightning staff.

If I can't land a few shots like this, who even am I?

His next strike was just as accurate as the first, but again, it was swallowed by the demon lord's crimson heat ray. This thing's insane reaction speed was really starting to piss Tsav off. Right before the beam's fiery trail disappeared into the night sky, he jumped.

"Dammit!" cursed Jayce. "Neely!"

Tsav heard what sounded like the high-pitched shriek of a bird. Midair, he once again reloaded and activated his weapon's sacred seal with unbelievable speed. Meanwhile, Furiae raised a hand and stopped cold.

It's hesitating.

Tsav smirked. Who did the enemy see as a bigger threat? Tsav, falling through the air, or Jayce and Neely? Who would it aim for? This was the difference between humans and the Demon Blight. Their opponent had no scopes for long-range sniping. It had no tools to increase its physical capabilities.

Tsav got the feeling that Furiae couldn't tell the difference between individual humans at this distance. It probably had no idea whether Jayce or Tsav was the one trying to snipe it. Or perhaps it was simply terrified of Neely. Either way, it

hesitated for a brief moment, and that was all Tsav needed.

Yesss! Got her!

That moment of hesitation proved fatal. A third bolt of lightning scorched the air, so powerful that the lightning staff itself exploded, sending a small chunk of wood into Tsav's cheek. Pain shot through his face, but his aim had been perfect. Furiae's mouth opened in mute amazement as the bolt of lightning was sucked into its chest. It was over.

The demon lord's body exploded at the point of impact as Tsav continued to fall. He felt like he was floating until—*fwp!*

The impact was so powerful that Tsav thought his neck would snap.

"I should have let you fall!" shouted Jayce, the collar of Tsav's snowsuit gripped tightly in his fist. "Pretty cocky of you to make Neely and me play along with your little stunt. What's wrong with you?"

"I had a blast. Besides, it totally worked out in the end, right? Only we could've pulled that off."

"...Like I care. By the way..." Jayce's eyes locked onto what remained of Tsav's weapon, still dangling from his hand. It was charred black, bent, and broken. "Norgalle's going to be pissed when he sees what you did to your staff."

"Yeah... It's not gonna be pretty, huh?"



It was a race against time.

We needed to charge through the mobs of faeries and head north, and in order to do that, we needed to break through the center of the enemy line. Getting past the smaller faeries was easy; the real problem was the giant bipedal faeries: the trolls. They had both intelligence and speed.

The instant a troll noticed Teoritta and me, it threw its arms into the air and lunged at us.

"Hold on tight," I warned.

I didn't want to burden Teoritta, so I couldn't ask her to summon any swords. I unsheathed a knife and threw it toward the creature's legs. When it came to faeries this size, a blow to the body might not be enough to finish the job, and hitting its head would take luck, even with my aim. So I decided to destroy the ground beneath its feet and knocked it over as we galloped by. We didn't have the time or strength to do any more than that.



Dammit. There are way too many trolls.

This time there were two of them standing in our way, and to make matters worse, they each grabbed a smaller faerie from nearby and prepared to throw them at us.

“Seriously?!”

I had to strike first. I threw another knife; it exploded. How many knives were left? I had no time to count—another troll was charging right for us. I didn’t even have the time to draw another weapon. *Dammit.* We were going to have to ditch the horse.

But the instant that thought crossed my mind, the troll’s head exploded. Something must have hit it. A spear? Or was it a bolt from a lightning staff? There was no time to check.

But who...?

The answer came to me almost instantaneously.

“Hurry! The enemy has caught up with the Ninth Order, and they are already engaged in battle.”

I could hear Norgalle’s voice through a layer of noise. It was the military engineers. They had taken over a small hill and were sliding down it while firing their lightning staffs, blowing up all the enemies who stood in my way—the ones that didn’t flee, at least.

“Clear a path for our army’s commander-in-chief! Military engineers, fire! ... Commander-in-Chief Xylo, I know a shortcut, so listen carefully.”

“I appreciate it.” I truly did. “Let’s hear it.”

“Pass through the hill we’re occupying. We’ve blocked off the enemies to the west, so you can head straight north.”

“You have them ‘blocked off’? You can do that? How, Your Majesty?”

He must have used traps to stop them in their tracks, but I couldn’t imagine what kind. We were out of disintegration seals to pulverize the ground with, and there weren’t many things he could have prepared in such a short amount

of time. Perhaps some sort of small-scale explosion seals, but those shouldn't have been this effective. Any faeries that tried to go around and take them by surprise had been thrown into confusion.

Thanks to Norgalle's efforts, Hord Clivios and the rest of the Ninth Order were able to reach the foot of Mount Tujin facing only small groups of faeries. From there, the difficult terrain of the mountain would only buy us more time.

"I used wood clappers," Norgalle said, as if it were nothing.

Wood clappers were made by shoving wooden rods into the ground and tying boards to them. After that, you would connect them with string so that whenever anything ran into the string, it would move the boards and make a clapping sound. It was common to then engrave explosive sacred seals into them to create an impromptu trap. If you added a few clever adjustments to the string, you could make it really hard to go under, over, or around them.

There were at least two issues with this kind of trap, however. One was that it required a decent amount of time to engrave sacred seals into enough wooden boards to make it effective. The other problem was the fact that it was a very easy trap to detect.

"Did you make so many that they couldn't simply go through? How did you engrave that many sacred seals? And they must have needed time to store luminescence—"

"There's no need to engrave sacred seals into all of them." At times like this, Norgalle would turn into a patient teacher. *"I lined them up in what would appear to be a random order while following a diagram that only I knew. After that, I linked the clappers with the working sacred seals to increase their blast power."*

That was when I realized it—he *wanted* them to see the traps. It had been a while since I'd been in a battle under such good conditions, and the basics had slipped my mind. A trap could be effective at buying time simply by making the enemy hesitate. Add to that the military engineers pestering the enemy with their lightning staffs, and the faeries would be thrown into a state of panic. It wouldn't be long before they began trying to go around this forest of wooden stakes.

All I had to do now was hurry and meet up with Hord. He needed backup to kill Charon.

"Teoritta, how much strength have you recovered?"

"I—I am fine now. I feel great. I can briefly summon the Holy Sword if needed."

"Stop talkin' out of your ass like Venetim and tell me the truth."

"...I cannot summon the Holy Sword, but I can handle one big summons—no—two! Two summonses!"

"Are you being honest?"

"Yes, I know I can handle two!"

"Good."

I decided to trust her. Two summonses—I had to end the battle with that alone. I couldn't just wing it, though. I needed to set up a special move that I was sure would kill that bone monster. I needed— *"Xylo! Uh... Can you hear me? We're having a bit of an issue!"*

Venetim's desperate voice was loud enough to give me a headache. I instinctively covered my ears, even though I knew it was pointless, and yelled back: "The hell do you want?! I'm really busy right now, and I'd appreciate it if you could save the whining for later!"

"Please don't say that! There are tons of faeries heading this way, and the demon lord's almost here, too!" he shrieked. "From what I'm hearing, it's the one made of bones! I can see it from here. Do you think it'll really come for us? Xylo, I thought you said I was being sent to help the Ninth Order 'just in case' things went south!"

"Yeah, and things went south, okay? I'm on my way, so hold on until I get there. Tatsuya's with you, and he can do some serious damage. Just curl up in a ball and keep your head down."

"That's exactly what I was planning on doing, but the Noble Alliance has started to run! Isn't that demon lord pretty bad news? The poison rain or whatever that Goddess Pelmerry summoned didn't affect it at all!"

"I figured as much."

It was a bunch of bones, so I'd be more surprised if poison *did* affect it. What kind of poison worked on bones? At any rate, it sounded like Hord was having a hard time.

"Just get over here and save me! I'm going to die at this rate."

"Oh, shut up already. I need you to survive until I get there! Do your part to protect the front line!"

"Y-you know I can't—! Oh no! This is bad...! Captain Hord, please wait! Don't leave me!"

"...Just hold the enemy off until I get there!" I shouted, urging my horse to go faster. "You have Tatsuya with you, right? Use him!"

This was it. Both sides were giving it everything they had. At this point, it was down to guts, motivation, and luck—but there was no way I was going to lose. I had to convince myself that was true, or the battle would be over before it even began.

"Xylo, I really can't do this. I'm not a fighter."

"Stop whining. You're the commander, right? Connect me to Hord Clivios."

"What?! You're just going to ignore me when I'm in danger? And then you expect me to—?"

"Let me talk to him already, dammit! Do you want to die? All I'm thinking about is how to win. You know that! Now, connect me to Hord, or you're a goner!"

I wasn't sure if my threats were effective, but after a few more seconds of whining, there was a pause and Hord answered, taking me by surprise. I was sure Venetim had used some sort of trickery, but I didn't care. I had to talk with Hord.

"Xylo Forbartz, is there something you needed to say to me?"

I could hear a hard, serious voice amid noise and static. It was undoubtedly Hord Clivios.

"Supreme Commander, just the guy I wanted to talk to. We can save the chitchat for later. There's something urgent I need to tell you. That okay?"

"*Stop messing around,*" Hord scolded, his voice tense. He was clearly irritated, just as I'd expected. "*If you contacted me only to joke, then this conversation is over. I don't have time for your games.*"

"This is no joke. First off, did you memorize the terrain around Tujin Tuga?"

"*Are you trying to insult me? Of course I did.*"

"Then I need you to lure Charon to the ravine between the two mountains. There's an open space where one of the tributaries runs through, right? It's a little downstream from the Water Management Bureau."

I visualized the valley between Mount Tuga and Mount Tujin. On the whole, it was wide and shallow, but one area in particular had been carved out by the Kinja Sheba River, making it especially deep and broad. This ravine extended north before eventually turning into a dead end due to a particularly steep hill. In fact, the hill was so steep that it was practically a cliffside. And climbing this cliffside was actually a shortcut to the summit of Mount Tujin.

"...*What's special about this place? I need you to tell me why, first.*"

"We need it to use your goddess's poison."

Hord fell silent. It looked like bringing up this goddess was his weakness.

"I need you to trust me just this once," I pressed. "I was raised by the Southern Night-Gaunts—the Mastibolt family—and that's where I learned how to fight, too."

"*Taking you just 'this once' could get us all killed and ruin mankind's chance of ever retaking the Second Capital.*"

"Sure, but do you have a better idea?"

"...*Pelmerry's poison doesn't work on Charon. We already tried multiple types.*"

"You tried liquid poisons, right? What about gas?"

The wind right now was strong, and the battlefield was wide open, so I figured

they hadn't tried using a gas yet. It would just be dispersed by the wind, after all. Hord's silence confirmed my suspicions. Fortunately, the air was stagnant in the place I'd indicated, and there was a river as well.

"If I'm correct—actually, no. Rhyno was the one who came up with this one. He thought of a way to dispose of Charon based on its biology. It's a risky gamble, but I think we have a chance."

"A '*gamble*'?"

"You're a terrible gambler, too, huh? That worries me a bit, but we'll just have to give it our best shot. You in?"

Silence followed for a few seconds, but I knew what he was going to say, so I signaled for my horse to go even faster.



PUNISHMENT: SEAL OFF THE TUJIN RAVINE, PART 4

Venetim was terrified by what he saw.

The entrance to the Tujin Tuga Ravine was a bloodbath—the picture of despair.

Hord swung an arm down and shouted, “Fire!” signaling a vast stream of arrows to whistle through the sky as one. The Ninth Order carried few lightning staffs. Instead, they used arrows with poison tips. Venetim had heard the poison used was a highly lethal formula summoned by Goddess Pelmerry herself. Nevertheless, hundreds of those arrows seemed to have no effect on Charon as they bounced off its bony body. Not a single shot pierced it. Bolts of lightning and artillery shells seemed only to slow it down. In the meantime, it continued its approach, crushing anything in its path.

In the violet moonlight, the monster’s bones eclipsed fear, appearing almost mystical.

It’s over.

That much Venetim was sure of. There was no way to win this battle. The Ninth Order’s deadly poison, which could kill even a dragon, didn’t seem to be

working, especially since their arrows couldn't even penetrate the demon lord's body. Venetim could understand why all the Noble Alliance's officers had fled. Charon's legs tore through the ground, sending dirt and any soldier standing in its way flying into the distance.

Venetim could hear the noblemen screaming one after another as their battle lines were cut like butter meeting a hot blade. Only the Ninth Order still had the will to fight. However, Charon wasn't the only threat. They still had to worry about the legions of faeries that had come with it.

"Protect the prince and princess! Don't let a single faerie near them!" Hord shouted from atop his horse as he took off down a mountain path toward the ravine. Pelmerry desperately held on to him, glaring at Charon through the long bangs that hung over her eyes. Behind them were the royal siblings on horseback, surrounded by their guards.

I have to catch up with them, Venetim thought.

There was no doubt in his mind that it would be safer over there, so he put every bit of strength he had into his worn-out legs and forced them to move. But how to make it through the surrounding chaos? *I really wish I'd learned to ride a horse,* he thought, but it was too late now.

"No! I don't wanna die...!" A person who looked like an officer in the Noble Alliance shoved Venetim to the side in an attempt to escape. Venetim felt an impact like he'd been kicked. In fact, he probably had been. As he staggered, Venetim thought: *I don't want to die, either.*

He rubbed his thigh as the feeling grew.

I've been kicked, it's cold, and I'm exhausted. I really wish someone would do something about this.

"Venetim, hold out just a little longer!" shouted Hord though the sacred seal on his neck. *"Xylo told me he sent his strongest infantryman with you."*

What does he expect me to do? thought Venetim. Tatsuya was nearby, of course, but there were so many people trying to run away that he wouldn't be able to use him effectively. All those soldiers would just be caught up in the attack.

"You're a penal hero, too, right? Figure something out!" Hord demanded.

Venetim froze.

Hord better not expect him to pull off something like Xylo or Jayce could. He didn't have the skills for that. The only thing he was physically capable of doing was standing by helplessly. He couldn't throw away his life in battle. He couldn't even run away on these useless, stiff legs.

There was only one thing he could do—the same thing he'd always done: have someone capable do the hard work for him. And to get people to help, he had to lie. The moment Venetim came to this realization, he took a deep breath and shouted: "To all those fleeing battle, allow me to ask you this!"

His voice sounded loud even to him, but some of the soldiers stopped running. It was as if they expected him to provide some revolutionary strategy that would get them out of this mess. If they did, he would have to apologize.

"You are free to run away. After all, our enemy is extremely powerful, and our chances of winning are slim. However, what will be left for you? You may live, but what will you have? If you plan on wasting the rest of your life in hiding and accomplishing nothing, then you might as well die right here, right now!"

What he was saying was absurd, and that was exactly why it would take the soldiers a few moments to process it.

"We are backed by the prince and princess—two of the most important people in the only nation left to mankind!"

Venetim wanted to vomit. Even more soldiers were beginning to slow down.

Meanwhile, the Ninth Order continued to heroically fire arrows from their bows and crossbows. Some were even launching javelins engraved with sacred seals, though none of it had much effect. They had yet to scratch Charon's bones, and it still didn't look like the poison was working, though the impacts were slowing it down somewhat.

One soldier, noticing this from the corner of his eye, stopped running and fired an arrow. Perhaps he wanted to take out his anger and get one last hit in before turning tail again.

"Mankind's future can be saved," Venetim continued. "But in order to do that, we must protect the prince and princess at all costs!"

What am I even saying? he wondered. But in the end, it didn't matter. He'd say whatever came into his head. He just had to buy time until Xylo arrived.

Yes, that's it, he thought. *Xylo and his goddess are on their way.*

"The world will know that we still have the strength to fight. They will know that mankind's warriors are alive and going strong. All will see the significance of our battle!"

It was pure deceit. The average person wasn't going to see any meaning in a single battle. But this was exactly what was needed. An exciting fantasy would be far more enticing to fleeing soldiers than would dreary reality. And he was right: They were stopping in their tracks.

"By standing our ground here, we are protecting the whole world. And we will win, because we have one of the original saviors on our side!"

He placed a hand on Tatsuya's shoulder. The man stood, slumped completely over and grunting. Venetim might well be the only one who knew this special method to get Tatsuya fighting. Everyone's gaze shifted to Tatsuya as they cleared a path for him, opening a one-way road to the horde of faeries on the front line.

"This man here was one of the warriors who defeated the first demon lord. He is the only surviving champion of the First War of Subjugation, and he is here to fight by your side!"

Venetim then whispered into Tatsuya's ear, giving him the signal. "...Please fight like the true hero that you are. I'm counting on you."

Tatsuya instantly took off.

"Guh," he grunted. It sounded like a creaking coming from the back of his throat. He curled forward even farther, raising his battle-ax into the air. To Venetim, it looked like he'd vanished. Simply saying he was fast didn't do the man justice.

There was a rasping noise, followed by the sight of faerie parts flying into the

air. Tatsuya was sliding across the snowy plains toward the center of a group of incoming faeries as flesh and blood rained down upon him.

"Gigiiiruuuhhh!" A monstrous screech.

Venetim couldn't see his face, but could that be laughter?

"*What did that man do?*" came Hord's dubious voice. It was a tone Venetim was used to. "*I just saw faerie parts flying through the air.*"

"I used our secret weapon," Venetim replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

Tatsuya was able to maneuver with unnatural speed—so quick, Venetim's eyes couldn't follow him. With a single swift swing of his battle-ax, Tatsuya mowed down his enemies, then leaped into the center of the horde.

Naturally, his opponents tried banding together. A bogie lunged forward to bite his legs, a fuath hopped up in hopes of crushing him, and a barghest charged right for him, using its massive body like a battering ram. But Venetim knew that their attacks were futile. He knew that when Tatsuya got like this, his moves defied logic.

Tatsuya became a blur, his battle-ax forming a vortex of blood. Even the barghest's thick neck was cut clean through. No faerie could even get close to him. He was like a cyclone, ravaging anything that came near. Tatsuya pulverized every foe that approached, then lowered his posture like a wild beast, before leaping into the air once more, awash in violet moonlight like something out of a nightmare.

"It's one of the penal heroes... I've seen him before! That ax!"

"I saw him back in Ioff. That's Tatsuya. That's the Cackling Ogre! It's really him!"

"Is he even human?! I've never seen anything like this!"

The surrounding cheers grew louder and louder. More soldiers stopped fleeing; some even readied spears and bows.

"Did you hear that? Did you rascals see him?!"

A middle-aged nobleman dressed in a full suit of armor was yelling even louder than the rest. On his shield was the emblem of a skylark flying through a

tempest, but the bird was covered in blood, making it clear that the shield's holder had been fighting for a while.

"That man's a thousand times more useful than that coward Dasmitur. Don't fall behind, men! The skylark of House Kurdel flies stronger in the storm!"

So those were the knights of House Kurdel. The middle-aged man's subordinates let out a fierce battle cry and charged, pushing the enemy back.

"Commander! That was quite the speech." Mid-charge, the middle-aged man patted Venetim on the shoulder—so hard that he almost fell. "Looks like the rumors about the penal heroes were true: You're a real tough bunch."

"This is nothing," Venetim said, lying through his teeth. The truth was that there was nothing else they could have done. He smiled self-deprecatingly and finally said something that was true.

"I just want to survive this battle."

"Heh! And you're funny, too! Hilarious hearing something like that from someone that can't die!" The man from House Kurdel laughed, flashing his teeth. "Commander, you gave us the strength to keep going. We can't let those in the rear show us up, so let's do our part and hold the line."

Venetim wasn't sure how to respond. An awkward smile was all he could manage as the man picked up his colossal war hammer and rushed back into battle.

"Follow the legendary champion's lead! Kill as many faeries as you can!"

Footsteps rushed forward in Tatsuya's wake, shaking the earth. It was a charge, more or less, and it succeeded in pushing the faeries back. The bravery was contagious, and the battle cries spread like wildfire.

But...

Venetim knew that Tatsuya wouldn't be able to keep this up for long. His body couldn't take the stress. After who knew how many leaps and lightning-speed strikes, Venetim noticed Tatsuya's left leg break, throwing him to the ground. Powdery snow burst into the air. Smoke rose, and blood rained down. At best, Tatsuya could probably manage three more jumps, and then he would

need to be sent for repairs.

But it was enough.

Spurred on by the Kurdel soldiers, the others regained their will to fight. Venetim the con man had managed to fool them all, and they now had the strength to hold out.

Although Venetim himself wasn't conscious of it, the newfound resistance keeping the faeries at bay changed Charon's behavior as well. It began to avoid Tatsuya and his surroundings and focus instead on Hord and his men. Flashes of light and noise from the Ninth Order's numerous archers and three artillerymen aggressively firing at it had drawn its attention. Each arrow that connected bounced off the demon lord, and the artillery shells hardly connected at all. Not everyone was as extraordinarily accurate as Rhyno, after all.

But even then, their backup proved helpful. Their goal was not to damage the demon lord's body but to lure the creature into the ravine with light and sound.

And most importantly...

"You made it. Got the thing to change course, too, I see."

Venetim heard someone's voice as a knight on a black horse came charging through a group of faeries, blowing them to bits.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was Xylo and Teoritta. Tatsuya looked up as they passed by and grunted. Xylo, as if in answer, swung his arm, launching a knife at a faerie lunging toward them and blowing it up.

That man was truly born to fight, mused Venetim.

"I thought you'd have a harder time of it, but I guess I shouldn't have doubted you. Good job, Tatsuya."

"Hey, hold on now," Venetim protested. "I worked really hard, too, you know? It seemed pretty hopeless for a while there."

That was when Venetim realized how weary he was. There wasn't anyone you could count on more than Xylo when it came to violence, and so the complaints just spilled out of his mouth.

"What took you so long, Xylo?"

"I came as quickly as I could... And it looks like I made it in time. You can leave the rest to me." Xylo flashed him a savage grin. "It's about time someone buried that bag of bones."



The ravine was deep and wide.

The flat floor of the valley stretched north until it met a steep slope with a waterfall gushing down it, which acted as a dead end.

Of course, a valley like this was nothing compared to the grand ravines I remembered from the Mastibolt territory.

Still, it was large enough for Charon—a demon lord as big as a walking fortress—to easily pass through. River water, mud, and snow flew into the air as the monster's massive body slowly pushed forward. The other soldiers and I got into position, surrounding it from above on either side of the ravine.

In the meantime, I had those still in the rear temporarily stop retreating. There wasn't much point in it now. Once we'd led the demon lord this far into the ravine, all we could do was hope our gamble paid off.

My old man wouldn't be happy if he knew I was leaving battles up to chance like this, but...

I did have luck on my side. Teoritta was a goddess, after all. But seeing her now, clinging to my arm, I realized she barely had the strength to stand on her own. I was going to have to end this as quickly as possible.

"Xylo Forbartz." It was Hord Clivios's voice. He had already gotten off his horse and was glaring fussily at me through that creepy anti-poison mask, with Pelmerry behind him. "What's the situation? What's the rear guard doing?"

I found his high-handed attitude annoying, but I appreciated how he got right to the point.

"Rhyno is covering Patausche's cavalry, so the enemy shouldn't be able to break through our forces unless a demon lord shows up and starts giving the faeries orders. The rear guard should be able to keep the enemy busy until dawn."

"What's the status of Demon Blight Furiae?"

"Jayce and Neely flew out with Tsav. They'll take care of Furiae. If they can't do it, no one can. That just leaves the giant skeleton."

"You're wrong. There are human mercenaries as well. We must prepare for a possible attack."

"That's already been taken care of." I pointed to the west. "Dotta handled it."

Smoke could be seen rising in the distance. Flames were lighting up the western hills.

"Both humans and demon lords have to eat," I said. "They need weapons, too. In other words, they had to be keeping their supplies somewhere, so I sent Dotta to burn the place down."

"You destroyed the enemy's supplies? How did you even find out where they were keeping them?"

"I looked at the enemy's path of travel, and then, taking the surrounding terrain into consideration, I determined the ideal locations to store supplies. Then I had someone scout them out from above. I felt confident they would attack a settlement along the river and transform it into a base, so that narrowed down my choices."

"That sounds like quite a gamble as well. Speculating and hoping for the best—is that simply how you do battle?"

"More or less. It worked, didn't it? Now that their rations are gone, the mercenaries will have to surrender. They won't have the energy to fight anymore, and they'll be physically unable to continue the battle much longer. Now..."

I looked down at the valley floor below, where Charon was heading north at a steady pace. Up ahead was a steep incline with a waterfall, but those weren't exactly difficult obstacles for the demon lord to get around. It could probably skewer the cliffside with its bony legs and climb its way up fairly easily. And if it made it to the top, it was all over: We would lose. It would start producing faeries, and we'd end up on the offensive again.

"About Charon. You said that your poison didn't work on it, right?"

"Yes, we dropped a paralyzing poison onto it, but it did nothing. I highly doubt those bones have anything resembling nerves or organs. I doubt it's even a living creature." Hord sounded more irritated than usual. "Unfortunately, Pelmerry and I do not possess the means to kill it. Perhaps the Six or Seventh Order could, but..."

"It's a little too soon to be throwing in the towel. That thing is alive. No doubt about it," I declared.

"Our artilleryman managed to shatter some of its bones before, and I saw soft flesh inside. According to him, it's probably similar to a shellfish."

"A shellfish?" Hord stared at me dubiously. "Are you claiming that those bones are its shell? And *that* is what protected its insides from our poison rain?"

"Most likely. I once saw a type of large shellfish that moved around a lot, like Charon. Not nearly as big, but my father went out to the eastern islands and—Actually, that's not important. Anyway, it's probably something like that."

This wasn't something crazy like an inorganic material made into a faerie. This was something we could understand—something we could handle.

"It should have some central organ that it needs to survive," I said. "When it was being hit with artillery shells, it curled forward and crossed its front legs as if it was trying to protect its core. We'll need to narrow it down further, but we should focus our attacks there."

"...In that case, it should have sense organs in order to perceive its surroundings, too. They'd be exposed, though most likely covered by some sort of nictating membrane to protect against liquids... But if we used a gas, then... Wait..." Hord groaned. "I have an idea of my own, but it's extremely reckless..."

"Think you can be a little more decisive? This gamble's all we've got. Take the risk."

"Hmph. Easy for you to say, penal hero."

"There's no time to be scared. Make a decision already."

"Stop, Xylo! We did not come here to fight with our allies!" Right as I shot

Hord a piercing stare, Teoritta pulled on my arm like a sister scolding her younger brother. *Seriously?* “Now is the time for Holy Knights to work together and overcome the enemy, so we need to get along! ...Right, Pelmerry?”

“...I apologize, Hord,” Pelmerry whispered gently from behind her knight. “But please allow me to give you a word of advice as a goddess. Um... Perhaps you should behave more virtuously and cooperatively...as my knight. Wouldn’t you agree...?”

We could hear the sound of Charon making its way through the bottom of the ravine below us, mowing down any trees in its path. At last it reached the dead end to the north, and once there, it pierced the rocky walls with its front legs as if it were about to start climbing the mountain. We couldn’t let that happen, or we’d lose this thing before we even got started.

Hord and I exchanged glances, then looked away again. *This is getting awkward.*

“Come on, Xylo Forbartz,” said Hord at last. “Let’s defeat that demon lord.”

“I’ll get you the win as long as you don’t give up.”

“...Then I will attack Charon’s sense organs,” he declared, before turning suddenly to his goddess. “Pelmerry, is Red Number Ten ready to go?”

“Yes, it still hasn’t been used. I made sure to distribute enough containers to the archers.”

“Good. Let’s start the attack. Now.”

Hord moved his arm, signaling his men. Immediately, numerous flags relayed the signal all across the ravine, followed by a volley of arrows aimed at Charon. Each arrow had a cylinder attached to the tip, which burst the instant it landed, releasing red smoke. One after another exploded, until the demon lord’s entire body was enveloped in a red mist. The air in the ravine was stagnant, just as I’d expected, so the gas wasn’t going to be blown away by the wind anytime soon.

The poison had an immediate, severe effect on Charon, causing its body to jerk and twitch. It started shaking as if it were trying to fling something off.

“Impressive,” I said. “What kind of poison did you use?”

"Sleewak." The answer was so simple that it caught me off guard. "Powdered sleewak is extremely painful when it comes in contact with a mucus membrane. Although Demon Blight Charon appears to be nothing but bones, it can somehow perceive its surroundings. I have no idea if it uses sight or smell...but I presumed this would work."

And he'd been right. Charon began scratching the steep hillside with its bony legs until it lost balance and fell, writhing in agony and thrashing about until it caused part of the hillside to come crumbling down with an echoing roar. The demon lord immediately wrapped its bony legs around its body to protect its core as it rolled down to the valley floor.

I'd seen it—it was in the torso, slightly to the back.

"Xylo, now! Go!" shouted Hord.

"Yeah, yeah. I have eyes."

"My knight! What did I tell you about—?"

I picked up Teoritta in the middle of her sentence and leaped into the air. Then I raced into the ravine, half diving. My gut was telling me this would be the only chance we got.



The violet moonlight illuminated Charon's body as it slid. It resembled a crab, but with a torso like a flattened skull. Its core was clearly well protected—there were no joints or seams anywhere I could see. The creature let out an eerie, high-pitched screech from within the now fading red mist. It thrashed about wildly with its legs, tearing into the mountain and creating another small landslide. Each time it flailed, the river water at its feet splashed into the air. The water's surface was already as red as the mist.

It's obviously in pain. But of course it is—getting sleewak powder in your nose or eyes sounds like hell.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

At any rate, that seemed to have taken care of the enemy's sense organs. All that was left was to find the central organ controlling its body. But in order to

get a more precise idea of where that was...

I placed a hand on the seal on my neck and shouted: "Hord, keep the enemy distracted!"

"*What do you think I'm doing?*" he replied with irritation.

He already had his men setting up four massive crossbow-like devices around the demon lord. These weapons were originally designed to attack castles, but they had been modified to increase mobility for fights against giant demon lords like Charon.

All four fired simultaneously, and each shot hit its mark. Charon, however, deflected them all with its eight legs, despite the fact that every one of the arrows was as big as a small child. The feat wasn't easy, though. Charon was struggling, a fact made all the more clear when a crack shot down through one of its wildly flailing legs as it desperately tried to protect its core.

There it is. Now's my chance.

The way it had sacrificed that leg made it clear the shot had been aimed for its core. Just as I'd thought, the core was its torso, slightly toward the rear.

But even though I knew where to aim, I first had to get past Charon's attacks. I fixed my gaze on the enemy as its numerous white bony legs swung wildly at anything that came near, including me. A single leg swung right at me, like a scythe.

Asshole can't even see straight, and it's still this precise.

I kicked off the cliffside. Dodging the attack was simple, but the monster's leg tore into the cliff, sending boulder fragments and dirt flying into the air. I kicked off the cliffside once more and jumped higher, twisting my body to protect Teoritta as my back was pelted with sharp, heavy stones.

"Xylo!"

"This is nothing." We had more important things to worry about than a few scratches. "Teoritta, I'm counting on you! Time for the first sword!"

"As you wish...!"

Her hair sparked, discharging electricity, and the flames in her eyes briefly

swelled as an oversized sword emerged from the void. Usually, greatswords like this one were wielded with two hands, but as I slid down the cliffside on the balls of my feet, I grabbed it with just one and spun myself around.

It's time to end this...!

After kicking off the cliffside a third time, I used my flight seal to fling myself back at the demon lord. Then, infusing the blade with Zatte Finde's explosive powers, I threw the greatsword as hard as I could, capitalizing on the centrifugal force I'd created. Charon's wildly flailing legs just barely deflected it, causing it to explode. A flash of radiant light was followed by a roar as the leg cracked and blew off the monster's body, rendering it useless.

The first gamble failed... But it's not over yet.

I kicked off the cliffside again, softening my landing.

I still had another chance. In my opinion, the best way to gamble was to make sure you had enough assets to keep going until you won. I dashed across the valley floor, kicking water and mud into the air as I put distance between myself and my opponent.

"Xylo! To your left!" warned Teoritta as Charon swung one of its forelegs even farther out. More shattered rock went flying. Was it trying to hit me? Its legs began smashing into everything within range, creating a whirlwind of dirt and rock that was impossible to evade. Eventually, a stone the size of a child's head hit me in the side and almost completely knocked the wind out of me.

Like hell I'm going to lose now. This pain's only temporary. Pull yourself together and end this, Xylo!

Fortunately, Teoritta wasn't hit. *Good job, me. Not as useless as I thought.*

"Be on your guard, Xylo. It's going to try healing its wounds," Hord warned. I was already well aware.

Just as Hord said, Charon's shattered leg was feeling around for the fragments of its bones. A tentacle stretched out and started bubbling. It was getting ready to heal itself... But that wasn't all.

You've got to be kidding.

A shiver ran down my spine. Bubbles were spilling out of its wound, contaminating the river water. It seemed to be some sort of highly viscous fluid. There was a chance it might paralyze me if I touched it. Teoritta seemed to notice it, too, and tightened her feeble grip on me.

"My knight... We must distance ourselves... Get away from that stuff..."

"I know, but..."

Charon was flailing its forelegs, sending dirt and water mixed with the bubbles in every direction, and some landed on the tip of my foot. *Dammit*. I almost fell, and if the monster kept this up, it was only a matter of time before I wouldn't be able to move anymore.

"Hord! Hord Clivios! I need some backup! Don't worry about hitting me!"

"*Are you being serious?*"

"Yes! Do it!"

"*You realize you are asking me to harm Goddess Teoritta as well, correct?*"

"Teoritta understands the risks, and she's ready! Trust me!" I looked at Teoritta, glowing embers in her eyes. "Right?"

"Yes. Yes, Xylo," she said, nodding, overjoyed. I wasn't going to give her special treatment. I couldn't afford to anymore. I was going to fight alongside her as if she were no different from the human trash in the penal hero unit. If I could do that, then once again, I'd...

"Hord, fire!"

The Ninth Order's captain didn't reply, but after a brief moment of silence, cannons exploded in unison and fired into the ravine, illuminating the night with scorching, dizzying flashes.

The foreleg Charon was trying to heal was shattered once again, and the impact of the strikes seemed to be slowing it down. Soon, it stopped entirely. After fighting it back in the hills the other day, I had learned to expect this. The creature's entire body trembled, and it let loose an eerie, insect-like shriek.

I took off running, dodging the roaring, dust, and debris. But a fragment of rock still managed to slice open my forehead, and I was sure Teoritta wasn't

getting out unscathed, either. That was it, though. I kept going, easily deflecting a stone falling from the sky with Zatte Finde before throwing myself at the cliffside.

I can do this.

All I had to do was kick off the rock and jump. I ran up the cliffside, going higher and higher until I was once again at point-blank range to Charon. There was a brief silence. The wind was so cold that it felt like my lungs were frozen. I glared at the demon lord.

This asshole has no idea how much work we put into that fortification it destroyed.

That was the only thought that crossed my mind as we faced each other.

Right after that, a black rain fell. A void had opened in the sky, and countless sparks flashed across its surface as a liquid oozed out onto Charon, dousing its bones.

So this was how Goddess Pelmerry summoned poison.

"Black Number Two. Checkmate." Hord's voice was irritatingly calm. *"End this. If that poison rain gets inside its body, we'll have won. Do not mess up."*

"Who do you think you're talking to? You ready, Teoritta? I'm counting on you."

"Heh-heh." I could tell Teoritta was smiling without even looking. I could feel it. "Who do you think you are talking to, my knight?"

What a goddess she turned out to be, I thought. She's enjoying this.

I threw out any doubts I may have had. Her bluff was obvious. I knew she was still thoroughly exhausted from summoning the Holy Sword. But if she said she could do it, then she could do it. If she believed that she had to do this, then I wanted to believe in her, too.

In the end, I was going to repeat my mistakes. Just like with Senerva, I would make the wrong decision and force someone important to me to throw her life away for some worthless strangers that had nothing to do with us.

And if that happened, I would feel nothing but regret. I would probably wish

that I had never done any of this.

I always make the wrong decision. But...

“I am counting on you, Xylo!”

The sparks in her hair were weak, the fire in her eyes nothing but an afterglow. Even so, Teoritta summoned a sword twice as large as the previous one, making it clear how excited she was to do this.

...I'm gonna show you all just how terrifying an idiot like me can be!

I didn't even need to use Zatte Finde. I simply kicked the sword as hard as I could with my flight seal—so hard that I almost broke it.

“It is finally over,” muttered Teoritta. “We won, yes? Another easy victory for us prodigies!”

“Sounds like Tsav's personality is starting to rub off on you. Quit it. I'm serious.”

The sword had broken through Charon's shell and skewered its core while at the same time, the black rain poured into its gaping wound.

Charon's body twitched two—no, three times. It let loose an unbearable, ear-piercing shriek. And finally, it stopped, never to move again.

That was how Goddess Pelmerry's rain of death defeated demon lord Charon.



“Not bad.”

That was the first thing Hord Clivios said to me as I sat on the muddy riverside, exhausted.

“Keep it up.” He was no longer wearing his anti-poison mask, so I could see just how serious his expression was. “That is all,” he concluded before turning on his heel.

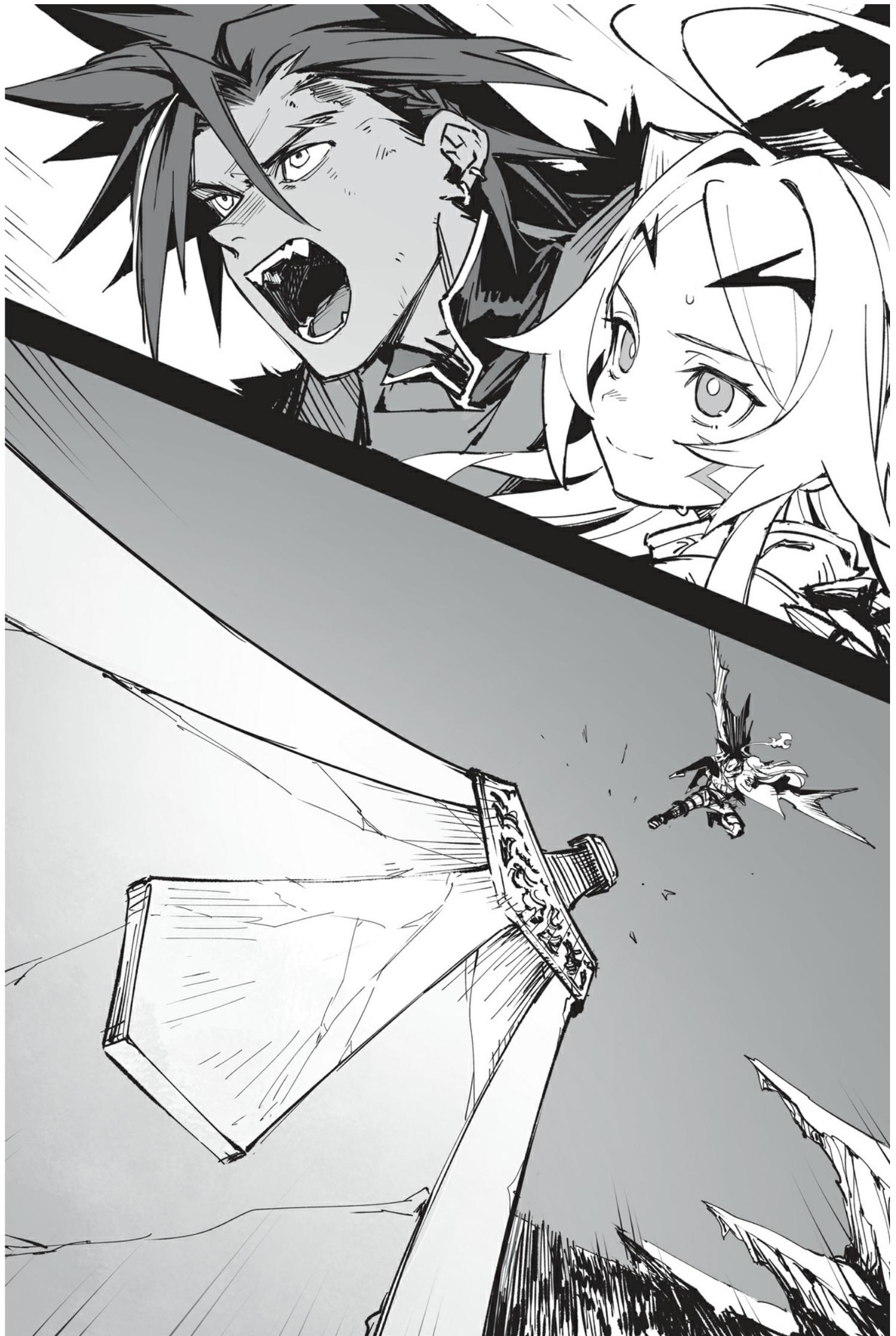
I didn't intend to make any snappy comebacks this time, and Teoritta was even more worn out than I was. She was panting heavily, her face pale, and her body sprawled out on the ground. *Her hair is covered in mud.* I was going to

have to wash it for her later.

"Um..."

I heard a feeble voice and looked up to find Goddess Pelmerry towering over me. She was far taller than I remembered and looked quite a bit older than Teoritta.

"I-I'm sorry... Hord was just acknowledging...all of your hard work...and in his mind, what he said to you was the greatest compliment he could give."



"I figured as much." I waved my hand dismissively. "His subordinates have it pretty rough, huh?"

Pelmerry didn't answer, instead jogging after Hord to catch up. And then there was silence. Soon, the sun would rise.

"Xylo..." Teoritta said weakly. "I am exhausted."

"I bet. Get some sleep. I'll keep watch."

"But—"

"Sleep."

She slid a hand down her face to close her eyes, and almost immediately I heard her softly breathing in her sleep. Alone, I searched for the violet moon. *It must be hiding behind Mount Tujin*, I thought. I felt like a poem was coming to me, and I was racking my brain for just the right words, when— "*Xylo, we're finished over here.*" It was Patausche's voice. How conscientious of her to keep updating me. *The enemy has begun to scatter and most likely lacks the cohesion to regroup.*"

"All right."

"There is one issue, however."

"Give me a break already. I don't want to hear it. I can't even move over here."

I could hardly keep myself from falling onto my back, and now this? Was there another threat?

But what Patausche said next was nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, it was starting to become a routine occurrence in our unit.

"Rhyno is missing. All I can find is his suit of armor."

"Oh, okay."

For whatever reason, Rhyno almost always disappeared right after battles.

"Leaving his post and disobeying orders yet again. *Tsk.*" I heaved an irritated sigh. "Maybe we should start putting a leash on that guy."



PUNISHMENT: SEAL OFF THE TUJIN

RAVINE—FINAL REPORT

Flames danced in the air.

Fire lit up the night sky as it consumed the settlement.

Bad night they're having, thought Dotta Luzulas, as though he had no part in what was happening. He could hear angry shouting and screams coming from the mercenaries. The original residents had left this place long ago.

Guess that means I don't need to feel guilty...

Dotta and his subordinates had set fire to stacks of supplies, dumped filthy water on others, and broken whatever they could break. Sneaking into the settlement wasn't that difficult. The area was guarded by a few dozen mercenaries and faeries, but their surveillance system could only be described as sloppy.

Dotta blended in with the darkness and slipped through fences, climbed over walls, and walked along rooftops. The ten soldiers that came with him, who Xylo referred to as "Dotta's Goons," had proved useful as well. He'd had them kill any guards in his way.

Now we just have to get out of here.

That wouldn't be too difficult, thanks to the fire and the shouting. The chaos was only creating more chaos, and there were numerous mercenaries already running away.

I've done enough. It's time for me to disappear.

Dotta hopped on a horse he'd stashed outside the settlement. His so-called Goons had already scattered and fled, just as he'd ordered them to. To Dotta, unlike martial arts and the like, skill at sneaking depended entirely on the individual. Shorter people and taller people each had their own unique strategies. People with large hands, small hands, men, women—every person had their own special way of sneaking, and when you got down to it, very few skills could be shared.

That was why it was best for them to scatter and flee.

Time to go. I better not hang around.

He left the settlement in a hurry.

He was going to meet up with Xylo and the others, since the only safe spot was around them. In his pockets were wine produced in the south, silver coins, a handful of salt, herbs, and deer meat. He figured this should be enough to let them live like kings for the next few days or so. Either Xylo or Jayce could use it to cook up something good.

But a part of him wanted to go back and grab a little more, just in case. There was still time. He could slip back inside amid the chaos, grab whatever precious metals he could get his hands on, and—... This wicked little impulse was what got him into trouble.

"There you are," exclaimed a voice. It sounded like a woman. Was he being pursued already? Or had she been waiting outside for the intruders this entire time? Either way, Dotta felt a shiver run down his spine and a cold sweat begin to soak his clothes. He'd run out of luck. Perhaps this was karma biting him back for all his misdeeds.

"Hanged Fox," grumbled the woman, whatever that meant. She had smoky red hair and a bizarre, distorted arm covered in bandages. Behind her was another person, most likely one of her men. The woman maneuvered her horse

so that Dotta couldn't escape.

"You're not getting away from me."

There was an urgency in her voice, as though she were afraid that she would never get another chance if she let Dotta escape.

Great. There's no way I'm outrunning her.

Dotta recognized immediately how much better she was at riding. She held a spear in one hand and kept pace with him perfectly. He couldn't lose her, no matter how hard he tried.

"Give me a break," pleaded Dotta from atop his horse. He didn't have Venetim's silver tongue, but talking her down was the only thing he could think of. His skill set was all about avoiding situations like this. Once the enemy found him, there was nothing he could do.

"No good's gonna come from killing me!" he shouted from the bottom of his heart. "You guys lost. There's no reason for us to fight anymore. I'm sure Xylo and Jayce have already killed the demon lords! You might not know it, but those two are pretty crazy!" He continued to ramble like Venetim would. He figured if the mercenaries knew they had lost, then they'd surely withdraw. There was no reason to come after a single man on horseback like this. Dotta felt like he was being very persuasive, too. "So come on. Let me go. This is pointless. Don't waste your time on me!"

"...'Pointless,' you say? Well, you're right that it won't change our loss." But the woman with the smokey red hair still didn't back down. In fact, not only was she riding parallel to him, she was slowly getting closer. "Declaring your victory already, Hanged Fox? It's true you had us twisted around your little finger this whole time, leading us by the nose. I've got to admit it. You're an exceptional commander."

Dotta's jaw dropped in mute astonishment. He had no idea what she was talking about. Nothing coming out of her mouth made any sense to him. *Hanged Fox? Commander?*

And so he tried to clarify the situation. "What was that? Just who are you anyway?"

"Hmm, I see..." The redhead woman's lips twisted. Whether she was smiling or frowning was a mystery to Dotta, but he instantly sensed her animosity. He was in danger.

"A lowly mercenary like me isn't even worth noticing, huh? I get it, Hanged Fox. The name's Trishil—Trishil of the Burning Eyes!" she roared. Dotta could tell she was angry, but angry at what, exactly? He had no idea.

"We may have lost, but I'm still going to kill you." Trishil got into stance with her spear. "Let's see if your fighting's as good as your commanding, Hanged Fox!"

Dotta felt an amorphous fear as she rapidly closed in on him. There was nowhere to run. Was there any chance of turning this around? He recalled the subordinate who had been standing behind her earlier and glanced in the man's direction.

There he was. A man dressed in gray furs. He was brandishing a lightning staff, ready to fire. But the way he was holding it didn't make any sense. It looked like he was pointing it at Trishil...

Huh? Why? Um, what the hell?

In a bout of desperation, Dotta leaped off his horse. Actually, "fell off" his horse would probably be a more accurate description, but he managed to dodge Trishil's attack. The tip of her spear turned into some sort of scythe, extending unnaturally and lopping his horse's head clean off. It landed with a heavy, wet thud, sending up a cloud of snow.

Just then, Dotta felt a sharp pain in his left leg. Perhaps he hadn't missed the attack after all. The agony was followed closely by a dull ache in his chest as he hit the ground and began rolling uncontrollably, without a second to think.

But as he fell, he saw it.

Trishil's subordinate had shot her. Three or four bolts of lightning soared through the air. Trishil screamed and turned back toward the man before tumbling off her horse.

"...Lentoby!" she cried.

That must have been the man's name. Trishil gripped her right shoulder as the smell of burned flesh rose into the air. Her shoulder was scorched and gouged so deeply, it had almost been torn off. There was a wound on her muscular thigh as well.

"What do you think...you're doing...?!"

The man seemed frightened as he said, "It's over, Lady Trishil." He quickly reloaded his weapon. He must have come prepared. "We lost, and everyone will know you were a commander for the Demon Blight. But this time, I'm siding with humankind." The man looked like he was about to cry. Trishil cursed and clicked her tongue.

Are they fighting among themselves?

Dotta wrapped his hands around his own lightning staff.

I don't want any part of this. Both of them...

He held his weapon out to fire.

Both of them can disappear, for all I care. Why are they doing this?

That was his earnest wish. He was infuriated by the unfairness of it all. He fired his lightning staff, unleashing all four remaining shots one after the other at the two of them, hoping that at least one shot would connect. He figured all of them would miss.

But one, just one of the shots hit its mark, piercing the man's stomach—the most likely thing for it to hit, given the man's girth. At the same time, Trishil swung the spear in her torn right hand. Despite the injury, her movement was still extraordinarily swift. Her arm's joints bent in directions that shouldn't be possible as the blade became a scythe and tore into the man's arm.

"Ah, ah...! Why...?!" He screamed and writhed. Still, he managed to ride off, leaving Trishil and Dotta behind. Neither of them was in any position to chase after him.

...This can't get any worse. My leg's hurt, I've lost my horse, and there's still one enemy left.

Dotta would need at least ten seconds to catch his breath. He couldn't sit up,

let alone talk. It was cold. Every breath he took hurt his lungs, and he could hardly feel his shredded left leg anymore.

"...Why?" groaned Trishil. "Why did...you save me?"

Dotta wanted to say that he hadn't—that it was all a misunderstanding, but he couldn't put that thought into words. All he could do was pant, grunting as he tried to catch his breath. It was probably a good thing he couldn't speak. It felt like another ten or twenty seconds of silence went by after that—more than enough time for Dotta to give up and accept what was about to happen.

"How...did this happen...?" Eventually, Trishil sat up. The sound of cloth ripping tickled Dotta's ear. She must have been tearing her clothes...but why? "...We need to stop the bleeding." She looked down at him. "You're going to die if I leave you like this."



I don't want that, Dotta thought. His head felt like a rock. Maybe I just need to get some sleep...



Lentoby had no choice but to abandon his horse. Hanged Fox's strike had hit not only his side but also one of his horse's forelegs. He was filled with regret.

I messed up.

He'd needed to kill Trishil with a single blow. This was simply the consequence of his failure.

He'd never imagined Hanged Fox would attack *him*.

Did he think that was merely some internal conflict? Some struggle for power?

His original plan was to kill Trishil in a single hit to make Hanged Fox feel indebted to him, but everything had gone wrong. He couldn't believe how badly he'd blundered it. *Why did I run away?* he wondered. It had been almost instinctive once he was shot. He probably could have gotten Hanged Fox to understand if he'd stayed and explained things, and yet...

Why did I run?

The question still bothered him. When Hanged Fox had looked at him, he'd felt like he was being criticized and condemned. Perhaps that had caused him to flee.

What am I going to do now?

He continued to totter along, clutching his side as the cold wind battered him. *I guess I should head back to the Second Capital. Or should I find the Ninth Order's camp and join mankind? The latter would give me a better chance of survival.*

Somebody...help me... I still haven't done anything. I'm going to go down in history as a traitor. I don't want to die alone, some forgotten nobody. I still haven't shown anyone the real me. I don't want to die a fake.

That was when he saw it. Perhaps it was merely his wishful thinking showing

him some kind of mirage—or so he thought at first.

“Oh?”

A man was dragging some sort of bloody sack of meat with him across the snow. He was large, and he looked down at Lentoby with a gentle smile. Was this some spirit of the plains? That was the first thought that came to mind. The man’s smile was simply that handsome.

“I’m surprised. I wasn’t expecting to run into a human out here. Are you all right?”

Lentoby couldn’t even reply. He was so overcome with relief that he collapsed at the man’s feet. He was exhausted. His side hurt. He wanted something to drink.

“Oh no. You’re injured, aren’t you?” The man tossed the bloody sack of meat to the side and helped Lentoby up. “What are you doing out here? What an unexpected find. To think I’d get the chance to save a human on my way back from finishing off Furiae... Hey, are you okay? Is it your side?”

Furiae—that was the name of a demon lord. Lentoby had no idea what the man was talking about, but it sounded like he was going to help him, and he would take help from anyone right now.

“Please...save me... I can’t die here... I don’t want to die here.” He was talking almost deliriously as he peered into the man’s dubious face. “I have done terrible things. I have hurt countless people while helping the Demon Blight.”

The admission took every bit of strength he had left. Even he knew how wretched he was. A word like “hurt” didn’t even come close to what he’d really done. He’d killed so many people. But he could still make up for it, he thought. If he lived and gave the rest of his life to helping mankind, then surely he could make up for his sins. He’d throw away his life for the cause and be forgiven. That was what he believed.

This is my chance to make up for it all.

“But I’m really not that kind of person,” he continued. “I want to fight for mankind, and I want to use the rest of my life to do so. I am willing to give up everything to fight for humanity.” He was speaking from the bottom of his

heart. "I will dedicate myself and my every last waking moment to saving mankind. I will sacrifice everything if it means I can help humanity."

"...Incredible!" the man looked down at Lentoby with pure admiration. "You are an incredible man. What is your name?"

"Lentoby..." Lentoby forced the words out of his mouth. "Lentoby Kisco."

"Lentoby Kisco, I will never forget you. You have my utmost respect for your sacrifice."

The man smiled as he signed a sacred seal with his fingers. He drew a circle in the air, then made a slash down the middle. It was at this point that Lentoby noticed something was off. The man's eyes showed more than admiration—some primitive impulse.

"Dedicating yourself for the sake of mankind is truly impressive, and your sacrifice will not be in vain. You have my word. You know, the energy you get from eating something fresh and raw is truly of a different quality."

The man grabbed Lentoby's neck. Something wasn't right. Lentoby tried to escape the man's grasp, but it was no use. The man was so strong that he seemed about to snap Lentoby's neck.

"Allow me to grant you your wish. Rest assured, Lentoby. I will make your dream come true."

That was when Lentoby realized what that look in the man's eyes was: hunger.

No...!

Lentoby tried to resist.

I can't die here. I still have to live life being true to myself. I can't die a fake.

"You have my word. I will lead mankind to victory. Now come, Lentoby Kisco. Let your flesh and blood join me on my quest."

His gentle voice and sharp fangs slowly approached Lentoby's neck. Only when the pain kicked in did he realize that he was screaming, and within thirty seconds, Lentoby Kisco lost consciousness.





Every part of the temporary fort was hastily thrown together, but this camp built on Mount Tujin would be the key to retaking the Second Capital.

Galtuile called this place Temporary Fortress Tujin Bahark, but in reality, it was barely fit to house a group of low-level bandits. In the language of the old kingdom, “Bahark” meant something like “wedge,” and that was what this was—a wedge between enemy lines. You could tell how important this place was to Galtuile from the name alone.

As it happened, we penal heroes had been thrown into a cruddy little hut inside this so-called temporary fortress. They called it the barracks, but there was a distinct difference between the quality of the other buildings and the one they gave us. The space was divided by strips of cloth with two people to a “room.” The only ones to receive slightly better treatment were Teoritta and her caretaker Patausche, who were given their own, somewhat more comfortable-looking hut. Jayce had complained about being put with Tsav, but he shut up when I asked him if he’d prefer Rhyno or Norgalle instead. Norgalle was known to be loud, and Rhyno was Rhyno.

We had been ordered to stand by for the time being.

I idled away the days in my room with Venetim. We couldn't even enjoy our time off in style, since both Tatsuya and Dotta had been sent in for repairs. It would've been nice to have a little booze. I regretted not cracking open the wine Dotta had brought back before it was confiscated.

Dotta...

He had returned to our camp incapacitated from blood loss and hypothermia. A mercenary named Trishil brought him to us. She had smoky red hair, and her right arm was wrapped in bandages. I had no idea what had happened between them, but before long, she disappeared without a trace. It really was a mystery.

After a serious discussion of the matter, Venetim, Tsav, and I came to the conclusion that she was the spirit of some insect Dotta had saved in the distant past. Initially, we'd invited everyone to join the discussion, but Patausche and Norgalle quickly grew fed up and left, and Jayce was uninterested and declined to participate. Teoritta had stayed until the end, doggedly insisting that there was no way our conclusion could be right, and as for Rhyno—what he said wasn't even worth mentioning.

In short, we had way too much free time and far too little to do. I caught up on my reading until I ran out of poetry anthologies, and from then on, aside from the time I had to spend training, I dedicated the rest of my days to playing zigg with Teoritta. According to her, Patausche wasn't very good at the game.

As it happened, there was one big reason why we'd been given so much free time.

"...Galtuile Fortress is in the middle of holding a council to discuss their future plans regarding Goddess Teoritta and the rest of us penal heroes," Patausche announced gravely.

She had stopped by my room just as Venetim was out doing what he did best: negotiating a better deal for us.

"The Third, Fourth, Sixth, and Tenth Orders of the Holy Knights will each state their opinion at this council," she continued.

"Makes sense."

The other Orders were busy at the moment, and those were the only four

that could make it to Galtuile to have any sort of discussion. The Seventh Order couldn't leave the eastern front, and the Eleventh Order had its hands full with matters in the north.

"...What's going to happen now?" she asked.

Patausche seemed restless, which made sense. She'd only just joined the penal hero unit, and then all this had happened.

Galtuile now knew of Teoritta's Holy Sword, and they were starting to understand that we could be useful in battle. On the one hand, it seemed like Teoritta's position would improve, both from a religious perspective, and in terms of our unit's treatment in general. But on the other hand, this could put us in a tricky position. There was a high chance they would give us an even more ridiculous assignment during the campaign to retake the Second Capital.

"Hmph. You seem to be rather laid-back about all of this, Xylo," Patausche complained. She was probably upset that I was lying in bed, but it wasn't like we could do anything about the council, and it was cold, so I wanted to be under my blanket.

"I mean...it's not like stressing yourself out is going to solve anything," I said.

I rolled over in bed and looked up at Patausche, who was sitting on her knees with her back straight. For some reason, she scooted her knees to the side, looked away, and muttered, "B-but even then, there are things we could consider—"

She seemed about to give me some honest advice, and I had to praise her sense of loyalty. Unfortunately, a voice at the entrance cut her off.

"Uh... Am I interrupting something?"

My "room" had no door, of course, just a single piece of cloth hanging from the ceiling. A tall man was standing under it, lifting it up. I knew him, and Patausche probably did as well. There was no way a former Holy Knight wouldn't recognize this man.

"Xylo," he continued. "I apologize for disturbing you on your break, especially when you're enjoying some private time with a lady."

He had light brown hair, which looked gold in certain lights, and this helpless, stringy beanpole of a body. His name was Adhiff Twevel, captain of the Eighth Order of the Holy Knights. I knew him very well, including his rotten personality.

"Ugh," Patausche spat.

"What do you want?" I casually replied, despite Patausche's wary expression. "Did you come all the way here to chat with a penal hero like me? I don't think that's a good idea, Adhiff."

"Me? Come to chat with you? Of course not. What would I have in common with you, other than war and killing demon lords?" He was a rude man hidden within a thin veneer of politeness. "A very noble individual wishes to speak with you, however, so I brought him here."

His phrasing gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I was immediately proved right. Hidden behind the tall knight was a young boy.

"My apologies for disturbing you."

He was a slender, delicate young man with very handsome features—Rykwell Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh—the third prince of the Federated Kingdom. There weren't many who had more authority than he did. In fact, you could probably count them all on one hand. At any rate, my gut had been right. I was probably about to be drawn into something I wanted no part of.

"My name is Rykwell." Though the boy introduced himself nervously, his speech was clear and concise. "I still have not officially expressed my gratitude to you. Penal Hero Xylo, Patausche, thank you for everything. It is only a shame that Dotta is currently absent."

"It is an honor!" Patausche swiftly dipped her head in a reverent bow.

"...Yeah." A few moments later, I followed her example and bowed, too. Obviously, I got out of bed to do so. I didn't want anyone to think I was rude or lacked common sense like Jayce and Norgalle. "Thank you very much for your kind words."

I was trying to suggest that his words alone were enough, but Rykwell didn't stop there. I supposed I should have seen it coming.

"As a token of my gratitude, there is something that I wish to tell you two. In addition, I have a special favor to ask of you as well."

There it is, I thought. Unfortunately, the prince wasn't the kind of person I could joke with, so I couldn't tell him to stop or that I didn't want to hear it. Seeing Adhiff smirking at me really pissed me off, too.

"The reason we escaped the Second Capital alone was to deliver a certain secret artifact of the royal family."

Rykwell lifted an item sheathed in white cloth and slowly began to unwrap it. Neither Patausche nor I could look away. A secret royal artifact. I had heard rumors that the Zef-Zeal royal family had three symbols that served as proof of their right to the throne, and a special sacred seal was engraved into each item. The First Capital held the Sacred Beetle, the Great Temple was in possession of the Sacred Brush, and resting in the Second Capital was...

"The Sacred Key, Kaer Vourke." Hidden underneath the white cloth was a tool that resembled a dagger with a hilt and a blade. The blade was decorated with an intricate sacred seal and gave off a silver, glistening light. "We could not allow this to fall into enemy hands, no matter what. I am sure you are already aware, but this key possesses a special power," he said, lowering his voice. *So the rumors were true,* I thought.

"This key can lock and unlock a sacred seal's power."

That would make it an extremely powerful tool. I understood now why they'd want to smuggle it out of the Second Capital, no matter the cost. We were extremely fortunate it hadn't wound up in the hands of the Demon Blight. Government-run facilities in the Second Capital were mainly controlled with sacred seals. With this key, you would have full control to activate and deactivate those facilities. All of a sudden, the plan to retake the Second Capital was starting to feel realistic. But why would the prince be telling us all this?

Rykwell wasted no time in answering my question. The next thing he said was beyond ridiculous.

"Xylo, I would like for the penal hero unit to use this key and sneak into the Second Capital."

"Hey, hold it right there..."

Rude words rolled off my tongue before I knew what I was saying. But not even Patausche reprimanded me this time.

"In other words, Xylo, this is a mission for a small group of elite soldiers whose loyalty we can count on absolutely," said Adhiff, still smiling. "Hord and I suggested your unit for several reasons. First, we always know where you are, thanks to the sacred seals on your necks, and second, we can kill you at any time if you ever violate orders. Furthermore, my goddess can always retrieve the key if an emergency arises."

"I am hoping that you consider this offer," said Rykwell.

While we were stunned speechless, he took the opportunity to say something even more unbelievable.

"If you decide to accept, Xylo, then I promise to render my full assistance to you as a member of the royal family." The boy tightened his grip around the Sacred Key. "I can unlock one of the sacred seals on your body. I have already received permission to do so."

One of the sacred seals on my body. I thought back to the powers I once had. Most of them were sealed away when I was sentenced, save for a couple like Zatte Finde and Sakara.

"What is your decision?"

What a stupid thing to ask, I thought, groaning as I stared into the nervous boy's eyes.

When it came down to it, a direct request from royalty was no different from an order.



PROOF OF CRIMINAL RECORD: TOVITZ HUGHKER

Tovitz Hughker heard footsteps echoing in the darkness.

It's not just my imagination, he thought. He hadn't yet completely lost his mind. He had already grown accustomed to this place and its darkness, but he no longer had any concept of time. Day and night had no meaning to him.

But he had known this moment would come.

And that was why he had been able to wait. If nothing else, he knew it had been less than a month since he'd almost escaped, and if his prediction was correct, during that time, the Demon Blight had lost at least once to mankind's army.

And that means...

He slowly sat up. His muscles had atrophied a great deal after all the time he'd spent in this cell. His brain, however, was just as good as ever. He, as a human, was simply built that way.

...it's my time to shine.

Tovitz had been locked away in a cell under the Second Capital's royal palace. Once a prison for the most heinous criminals, this underground pen was now

used to hold rebellious humans. After the Second Capital fell, a portion of those who fought back against the Demon Blight were locked up here. Not to be killed or eaten, but simply to be stored away, and Tovitz had figured out why. There was no way the Demon Blight would do something without a purpose. They were going to *use* these people. That was why they put not only criminals down here, but anyone they felt was dangerous.

“...Tovitz Hughker,” said a voice. It belonged to a woman with an awkward monotone. This was the voice he’d wanted to hear. “Are you still there? Are you still alive?”

“Of course.” He lifted his head and strained his eyes, peering through the bars and into the darkness beyond. “I would never die without telling you, Anise.”

Tovitz had always felt that the word “noblewoman” best described Anise’s ladylike appearance. She had jet-black hair and eyes, the latter of which he found especially beautiful. There was something unchangingly cold about her gaze that humans simply couldn’t replicate. Her name was Anise, and she was a demon lord—no different than Abaddon and Sugaar, with whom she had joined forces before swiftly seizing this palace.

During that time, Tovitz had used the chaos to his advantage and tried to escape, leading the other prisoners out of their cells, killing the human guards, and racing to their freedom. That was when he saw her, and it was how he ended up like this. But all of it had happened for a reason. There was meaning to it.

“...You were right, Tovitz,” said Anise. “Wryneck, Furiae, Ammit, and Charon were all killed. How could you have predicted such a thing? Is this the power of what you humans call a stigma?”

“No, I don’t have any special powers like that. It was just a simple prediction.” Tovitz straightened his back and faced Anise with a radiant smile that stretched from ear to ear. “The humans’ army seems to have very recently gotten their hands on a secret weapon of some sort, and from what you told me and what I heard, I couldn’t imagine the battle turning out any other way. Iblis’s death at Mureed Fortress and the humans’ unexpected wins in so many recent localized clashes only further back up my hypothesis.”

Anise remained silent. She was apparently planning to listen to everything Tovitz had to say. Abaddon had probably ordered her to. But Tovitz was fine with that. For now, it would do.

"I think it's most likely a single unit on a special mission. They will be extremely powerful when it comes to smaller, localized battles, especially considering their secret weapon that can kill even an immortal demon lord."

"I see. And what kind of people are they? How can we deal with them?"

"What kind of people...? I have no idea." Tovitz smiled wryly. He figured trying to bluff his way through this wouldn't help, since Anise wasn't the kind of creature you could bargain with. "All I know is that they have a very powerful method that allows them to kill demon lords without fail. And...I assume they're a small group of elite warriors with specialized expertise in assassination."

He had concluded that it must be a small group consisting of various members, each with some sort of unique skill set. The unit excelled in covert operations, possessed a method of killing demon lords, and were able to forge a path by which to use it. In that way, they were like a small group of assassins. Although it would depend greatly on the conditions, they would be a difficult force to reckon with.

"However, dealing with them is easy," said Tovitz. That much he was sure of. "Don't fight them. Ignore them. That's your best bet until you find a means of disposing of them. If you must do something, focus solely on slowing them down."

If there was an invincible band of warriors, then the best strategy would be to not engage them at all. If possible, weakening them or preventing them from acting effectively would be ideal.

In addition, the Demon Blight would need to be even more careful when considering which of their units to match up against the enemy's remaining forces. The Holy Knights were especially strong and possessed unique abilities. Depending on the individual demon lord, they could wind up at an extreme disadvantage, or the opposite might be true. But then that begged the question: Why hadn't they started doing this earlier?

It's probably because they don't yet understand humans very well. Before,

there weren't many demon lords capable of that level of thought.

But the number of intelligent demon lords was gradually increasing. Though Tovitz had no idea why, he could say with confidence that they were evolving. There were clearly far more demon lords who could speak human language now compared to when the Fourth War of Subjugation had just begun. Mankind had been losing in incremental steps ever since.

Either that, or they had already lost and were just lying to themselves and continuing to struggle so that their loss would seem less pathetic.

But...

Tovitz paused mid-thought.

Who cares which it is?

Thinking about the world and mankind was depressing. He didn't enjoy it. He was but a small, insignificant man, after all, and he had always felt that way. Saying he was doing something for the sake of mankind would be a lie, and he couldn't risk his life for something like that. The things he could do were much less significant.

"...So there is only one strategy I can suggest in good conscience," he said, as calmly as possible. "Don't bother with them. Focus on fighting the other enemy units."

"I see. Lord Abaddon said the same thing."

When he heard that, Tovitz decided to push his luck a little. "I believe I could be of more use to you all if you freed me and gave me more detailed information."

"You should be careful what you say. Are you claiming that Lord Abaddon is beneath you in intelligence and wisdom?"

"All I'm saying is that I understand how humans think more than my lord does." Tovitz carefully selected his words so that he wouldn't anger Anise. "Please use my knowledge. I won't let you or my lord down."

Anise seemed to consider this—or perhaps she was only waiting a moment before telling him what had already been decided. The latter was starting to

feel more realistic.

"The leader of the mercenaries, Trishil, and the man in charge of this city's security both disappeared after losing in battle. We need someone new who can manage the humans. This is what Lord Abaddon has decided."

Tovitz had won a small victory—their leader had already made up its mind.

"...Tovitz Hughker, answer these two questions for me." Anise stared down at him with her jet-black eyes, void of any emotion. He felt a coldness in his heart, as if the temperature had suddenly dropped a few degrees. "First, why were you locked away in this cell in the first place? You said you were a soldier. What crime did you commit?"

"I was part of a revolt. We failed, though, obviously." Tovitz flashed her a smile, as if to hide his embarrassment. "I was getting bored, and I thought a rebellion would be really fun, so I helped out. I thought the leader seemed like an interesting fellow as well, and that helped convince me."

The world from his eyes lacked color. He was born a noble, enlisted in the military, and contributed to society when his skills were needed. Tovitz had been on his way to becoming an exceptional soldier. But he had never made a choice for himself, and that bored him beyond what he could bear. That was one of the reasons why he decided to help a certain man who wished to start a rebellion—a rather strange dragon knight.

"And then you were arrested, yes?"

"Yep. I underestimated the military's intelligence network. It was a huge mistake on my part."

The mission was to lead the dragons into battle and attack the capital. It was a very fresh idea, and they appeared to be very close to establishing an independent government. However, the military had beaten them on land. They'd set up nets along a route no one could have predicted they would use. Whether the ambush was due to the power of a stigma or to one of the goddesses, he wasn't sure. Whatever the case, they'd have to consider such things going forward. He would have to come up with a strategy under the assumption that the enemy possessed extraordinary military intelligence.

"Now, for my next question: Why do you wish to join us?" There was no skepticism in Anise's voice. "You are human, correct? So why? For the sake of the new world after this war is over?" Anise herself didn't seem to find this strange. She was merely acting like a puppet, repeating what she had been told to ask. Tovitz found that beautiful. "When you ran into me, you shot all of your friends in the back and killed them. That sounds like rather strange behavior for a human. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I don't know." He exhaled. His breath was white, reminding him once again of how cold it was. "It's hard to explain. My reasoning is a little extreme, but it's probably not that unique. I think such behavior is common among my fellow humans."

"Speak in a way I can understand, for I must report what you say to Lord Abaddon."

"...I am willing to turn the entire world against me to protect what I consider truly important." He repeated what he had told her once before. "And in my case, that's love, Anise. I decided to love you, and if that means fighting against mankind, I'll do it."

"I see." Her reply was no different this time, either; it was utterly devoid of emotion. And that was exactly what Tovitz desired. "I will have to ask Lord Abaddon if he finds your behavior strange. Now, come." The door to the cell creaked open. "It is time for you to work, Tovitz Hughker."

He finally got a clear view of her face and was once again taken aback by her beauty.

I could throw my life away for her, and I would not regret it, he thought. I would do anything for her, even if it meant turning the entire world against me.

Claims such as those had always sounded so empty and boring to him before. Even the rebellion was nothing more than a temporary escape from his boredom. He'd envied its leader.

Jayce Partiract.

That man had something truly important to him. He was the complete opposite of Tovitz.

But I think I understand how he felt now.

He finally had something more important than life itself. Fighting for that was more exhilarating than anything he'd ever experienced.

"So that's Tovitz Hughker?"

Once he left his cell, he noticed a few shadows in the darkness and immediately began to observe them. He could make out three creatures. One was a large insect-like faerie, one was humanoid, and one was...like nothing he had ever seen. It looked like a pile of black, dirty rags. The humanlike creature was the one who had spoken. It had a gloomy, somehow rusty-sounding voice. It looked like a tall man with eerily hunched shoulders. *No, that's no ordinary faerie. That's a demon lord,* Tovitz concluded. The man's complexion was sickly and pale.

"Boojum, why are you here?" asked Anise icily. Her words made the dungeon feel even colder. "Did you bring the others? Did Lord Abaddon send you because he doesn't trust me?"

"No. I felt I should greet our newest member. That would be considered the polite thing to do."

"The polite thing to do," Anise repeated awkwardly. Tovitz had never heard her speak this way before. "What does that mean...? I don't understand..."

"That is no surprise. This is a concept based on extremely complex human culture and is still difficult even for me to understand." The man called Boojum lowered his head in a surprisingly graceful manner.

"My name is Boojum. I am a demon lord. I am glad to make your acquaintance... This is how it is done." Boojum looked back at Anise. "You introduce yourself to make your existence known to the listener in a concise manner. You two try it as well."

"I—I...am...Afanc." Much to Tovitz's surprise, it was the pile of black, dirty rags that answered first, but after closer inspection, he realized that this creature was somewhat humanoid as well. The tips of its rags wiggled like fingertips. "Glad to...make your...acquaintance...? ...How did I do, Boojum?"

"Good."

"U-u-u-ummm..." There was an eerie, high-pitched sound coming from behind the pile of rags. Numerous lines suddenly appeared on the wall, but it happened so quickly that Tovitz couldn't process what had happened. "I'm so... nervous... I-I'm s-sorry... I... Uh..."

The sound was heard two more times, and more sharp lines were etched randomly into the wall.

"I find humans...difficult... All sorts of things—no, even beyond those, I..."

"There is nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone has things they're good at and things they're not good at." Boojum nodded with evident satisfaction before bending down and picking something up.

It was an arm. Boojum's arm had been cut clean off without Tovitz even realizing it. Did that Afanc creature do that to him? Tovitz had absolutely no way to know.

"Our final member lacks the functions necessary for language. Therefore, allow me to handle her introduction."

Boojum shoved his arm into the wound at his shoulder, which wasn't even bleeding, and it reattached itself to his body, as if it had been welded back on. There was something clearly unique about his physiology.

"This lady is Sugaar. She is in charge of the Second Capital's air defense."

The insect-like faerie suddenly spread its wings and began to chirp as what appeared to be a mouth emitted glowing golden sparks that then faded into the darkness. *Lady?* Tovitz thought. *So that one's supposed to be female.* Boojum glanced at Sugaar from the corner of his eye and nodded once more with satisfaction.

"Tovitz Hughker, we welcome you to the new Second Capital. From now on —"

"Stop right there, Boojum. Since when did you become our representative?" Anise coldly cut him off. "You are being disrespectful to Lord Abaddon."

"...I see. You have my apologies."

Boojum looked clearly deflated, and Tovitz couldn't help but laugh. *This*

Boojum guy is one eccentric demon lord. At least, he was nothing like any demon lord Tovitz had ever met before. He flashed him a bright smile and held out a hand.

"Thank you for your kindness, Boojum. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Tovitz Hughker. I look forward to working with you."

"I will do my best." Boojum's hand felt dry and limp.

Tovitz then held his hand out to Anise. This was the real reason he'd started shaking hands. "Anise, will you take my hand and accept me as one of your own as well?"

"I do not see the necessity," she said blankly, refusing him. "You need to prove yourself, Tovitz Hughker. We do not care about the process or the motivation. All we need are results."

"Well, you've come to the right guy."

This was exactly why he was attracted to Anise, and he was going to do everything he could to get her the results she wanted, even if that meant the end of mankind or even his own life.





PROOF OF CRIMINAL RECORD: KAFFZEN DACHROME

There were numerous temples in the Federated Kingdom's First Capital, Zephent, with a whopping eight of them being officially recognized by the kingdom.

The most famous, however, was the grand temple built beside the royal palace and known as the Gray Cradle. On important religious days, it was usually packed. It was even a popular place for sightseeing, and most people on vacation in the First Capital would visit it at least once. That was why it made for the perfect camouflage.

When the captain of the Twelfth Order of the Holy Knights, Kafzen Dachrome, arrived that evening, the temple was still packed with priests, thegns, and tourists. After making his way through the crowd and down the corridors that were purposefully designed to form a maze, he arrived at the northernmost part of the temple, where seasoned security guards kept watch. Nearby was a nameless room that at first glance appeared to be merely a storage area. However, this was no storage area, and in fact this room did have a name, known only by those who needed to know it. They called it the Crypt of Gray Lights, and it was a room easily overlooked if one wasn't actively searching for

it. The only thing that stood out about it was its large, sturdy door.

It's been a while.

Kafzen stuck a card, so small that it could hide in the palm of one's hand, into the keyhole, activating the sacred seal carved into it. *Click.* The door opened.

It's been half a year, at least. I've been on the battlefield far too long.

When he closed the door behind him, the room grew dim. Its windows were completely shut. Only the faint light of a flickering sacred seal lamp illuminated his path.

This is the heart of humankind, our hope against the Demon Blight and the coexisters.

It was quite plain for something so grand. There were no beautiful decorations in the room, only bookshelves lined up against the walls, packed full of books. In the center was a roundtable with a woman sprawled out over it as if she had fallen asleep while reading something. But she was not to be disturbed, for she had probably been working for the past one or two nights without rest. Sitting nearby her was an old man writing something with a fountain pen. He didn't even look up.

Nothing new here.

Kafzen's eyes were naturally drawn to the back of the room, where a shadowy figure of small stature was sitting.

"My apologies." He took a knee before the small, shadowy figure and bowed.
"How do you feel today, my—?"

"Save the sarcasm. You know how I feel," interrupted the shadowy figure.
"You arrived earlier than I expected, Kafzen."

The figure's voice sounded listless, but Kafzen knew it was merely the voice of someone trying to mask their exhaustion. It appeared this individual, whom Kafzen served—whom every member of the Crypt of Gray Lights served—was as busy as always.

"I figured it would take you longer. Your and your men's services are required on countless battlefields, so I have to wonder: Did you solve your issues that

quickly?"

"Not at all. As you pointed out, we still have an endless amount of work that must be done. However, the situation has changed greatly."

"The Second Capital, yes?" Their leader sighed gloomily. "I'm not in the mood for such tiresome subjects right now."

"But you must hear it. I would like to share this headache with you, my Lord."

"What an awful subordinate you are," the leader said, grinning. It was close to a scoff. *Our little leader, thought Kafzen, is slowly becoming so much like—...*

"Very well. But if you have good news, then I'd like to hear that first."

"The penal heroes are doing far better than we could have ever hoped for. They claimed the Tujin Tuga Hills and worked alongside the Ninth Order to defeat four demon lords."

"Ha-ha! Right? I knew it." This next smile was far more natural. Kafzen felt it held a power that could repel some of the darkness in this world. "That's our heroes for you, and I expect no less from them."

"They saved Prince Rykwell and Princess Melneatis as well. The two of them are safe now."

"Good." A few seconds of silence followed. The leader lowered his gaze, but in the end, he still wouldn't reveal anything resembling emotion where Kafzen could see. "What about the Kaer Vourke? Did they manage to escape with the Sacred Key?"

"Yes, rest assured. And it, along with the penal hero unit, will prove powerful weapons when we move to reclaim the Second Capital."

"Good. That much is fine, but I'm starting to get the feeling that there's some bad news as well."

"Yes, the Administration Division approved Galtuile's newly drawn up plan for Project Saint."

"I see."

There was no way to stop those officially in power from acting, even if their

actions would lead to the downfall of mankind. Neither Kafzen nor the Crypt of Gray Lights had the power to stop them directly.

How will Xylo Forbartz react once he learns of Project Saint? wondered Kafzen. He'll be furious. There's no doubt about that. Because...

"They plan on transplanting Goddess Senerva's remains into a compatible individual in order to create this so-called Saint. They believe she will be the key to retaking the Second Capital. In addition, they are claiming she will serve as mankind's guiding light going forward."

"They're making a grave mistake, and they'll be digging their own graves if they go through with this."

As the petite figure waved a hand and stood up, the faint light dimly lit his still youthful, delicate profile. He could easily pass as a young boy—a young nobleman, in fact, if one ignored the shadows of exhaustion and anxiety clouding his face.

"So you couldn't stop it, hmm?" he asked.

"It wasn't possible. Shall we try assassinating the Saint?"

"No, they'd just find somebody else compatible. If we want to stop this, we need to kill all those responsible for the project, including every coexister involved, and that's simply not feasible."

"But we cannot merely sit back and do nothing."

"...We will replace the current head high priest. It's about time he retired anyway. Then we can restrict the Temple's usage of the Saint. As long as they plan on using the remains of a goddess, the military won't be able to ignore the Temple's say in the matter."

"You wish to replace the Temple's leader? Is that even possible?"

"I'll come up with something. In addition, I want to send someone to Galtuile—someone highly skilled. I would also like to increase our presence in the Twelfth Order. Would that be possible?"

"Finding people we can trust will take time. It is not a simple matter."

"I know. We still need eyes on the Noble Alliance, so we can't transfer anyone

from there."

Adding members to Kafzen's Twelfth Order wasn't easy. Furthermore, they were always short on people, due to their underground war against the coexisters.

"...There's a limit to how much I can look into these nobles myself," muttered the boy as he shifted his gaze toward the roundtable. Spread out over the table was a detailed map of the Federated Kingdom's—that is to say, mankind's—territory.

"We must continue our efforts to reconcile with the eastern forces, and I would like to reduce the chancellor's influence as well."

"Please do not try to handle these issues alone. We cannot let anything happen to you."

"How restrictive."

"Bear with it for now."

The future of mankind unquestionably depended on this boy—the Federated Kingdom's first prince, Rehnavor Zef-Zeal Meht Kioh. *He* was mankind's greatest hope, especially now that the current king was no longer of any help, and Kafzen's priority was putting this boy on the throne, no matter what. He was currently adopting various measures to achieve this goal, but he still had to keep Rehnavor safe until the current king could be forced to relinquish his position.

"I know they're not exactly free, either," Rehnavor said with a sneer, "but I'm very envious of the penal heroes."

He's really starting to remind me of his brother.

Day by day, Rehnavor became more and more like his older brother, the late Lawtzir. That in itself was fine, but it bewildered him now and again. He had to hurry up and get used to it, he told himself. The world would go on, even without Lawtzir. It had to.

Because I was the one that killed him.

But I'm not doing this to atone for my sins. I can't atone for them, and I won't.

In fact, I'm planning on making this boy the next king and using him as a tool to ensure mankind's victory.

"I wonder how Dotta's doing?"

Rehnavor looked not at the map but at the ceiling as he recalled the brazen thief who once tried to help him escape from the palace. Four years had gone by since then, and the first prince had grown at an astounding rate, both mentally and physically. The crying boy from back then was now the leader of the Crypt of Gray Lights. Kafzen had made sure of it.

"I know I'm the reason the heroes are finding themselves in all these miserable situations, but I fantasize about meeting them someday."

"And that is how it should remain: a fantasy."

Kafzen decided to keep quiet about Dotta being sent in for repairs. Rehnavor needed hope, more than anything else, and the penal hero unit was that hope. Their success in battle was slowly becoming Kafzen's hope as well.

"Kafzen, I need you to promise me something. If anything ever happens to me, please make me a penal hero."

"But of course."

If that were ever to happen, mankind would surely fall. It was a terrible joke, and that was why Kafzen smiled and quickly agreed.

"I would do everything in my power to have you sentenced to be a hero."



AFTERWORD

Hey, Rocket Shokai here.

I was considering once again talking about weak villains who scream “*kehyaaa!*” before dropping down from the ceiling to attack, but all of the additional pages I thought I would have ended up being used for the main story, so I am going to keep it short and simply tell you why I like such villains.

I like them because they always seem like they’re having fun, they’re always excited, and they’re always living life to the fullest. They say, “Do what you love, and you’ll never have to work a day in your life,” and these villains have made what they love into their whole lives. They have combined the means and the goal. To them, things like licking their knives and screeching before attacking are the goal.

And honestly, I am touched by how happy they are and how much they enjoy life. There’s a beauty to it, and it’s gratifying to see. Of course, I’m not at all interested in living my life like they do... But if I were ever to gain the ability to turn myself invisible and stick to the ceiling, then I’d probably find myself doing the same stuff they would. In fact, I think I’m going to start practicing licking knives.

Now that I have wasted your time with such nonsense, I would like to take a moment to thank you all. I cannot express how grateful I am to each and every one of you.

Until next time.

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Rocket Shokai

Illustration by MEPHISTO

Translation by Matt Rutsohn
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III

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

YUSHAKEI NI SHOSU CHOBATSU YUSHA 9004TAI KEIMU KIROKU Vol.3

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