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One One One

Classic Edition, 2019

By

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LULU PRESS

Morrisville, NC, United States

www.lulu.com

ONE ONE ONE

First published in the United States of America

in 2023 by Dewan Mukto Publishing

Lulu Edition 2023

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For **Barnali Debnath,**

Most talented member of Mux Anime Studios

Five Years Ago

"Wan, don't go climbing on trees again," his mother cautiously advised.

"I won't! Don't worry, Mom!" the voice of a fourteen-year-old rushed past the upcoming breeze. A mischievous smile was raked upon his lips. Scratching the rear of his head and trying to adopt the most innocent face he could don, his arms and legs fidgeted. He longed for action; he wanted to roam free.

His mother sighed.

"Little Wan, you never change... tsk tsk..." she watched him break into a sprint, darting off over the limits of her parental gaze. Within moments, her son disappeared beyond the boundaries of their cozy cottage.

Wan ran ahead, anticipating the rhythm of his movement as he throttled down a dirt track headed for the village market. Sakura trees enveloped parts of the village and fringed the edges of most buildings nearby.

Yafloria Village was a sanctuary dipped in harmony, certainly far away from bustling capital to the east and a treacherous border of the nation to the west.

"Oi Wan!" another voice stormed through the air, reaching Wan's ears.

"Huh?" turning around, he recognized a familiar face. His eyes lit up almost immediately.

"B-Bain!" he rushed forward and embraced him like a long-lost friend. Indeed, he had been away from home for a painfully long time. Despite being a 'tough guy' among his friend circle, Wan always shed tears of joy if situations ever arrived. "Bain! Oh... For so many months I have waited. Where have you been?!"

Bain wun Donn's parents were employed by the Sirutov, a military organization dedicated to serve the kingdom. Their grim tasks involved guarding the western border, also known as Humanity's Last Lesson. Mistakes had been committed in the past for which all current and future generations of people living in this kingdom have now been threatened for their own existence.

"Ah, hold it right there, dude," Bain tried shrugging Wan off. "Careful. Me and my parents just returned from the desert. Possibly my clothes could be contaminated with demonic flares and dust."

The hubbub of vendors, merchants, craftsmen and even villagers, both local and foreign, was not a calm one. The two teens luckily chose a spot further away from the mists of trade, being able to hear each other crisp clear.

"Oh-oh, right! I forgot!" he let go instantly, rethinking his activities for a second. "How

was the trip? Working right beside your parents?"

"Before that," Bain raised his hand, still gloved in the special gear resistant to corrosive liquids. "I would like to know what's changed. What did I miss? It's been three months, I bet," he shot his gaze here and there, excited to inspect any new updates to their homely village. "And how's everyone else? Where are they? Where's Takira? Where's Miyumi?"

"Haha, calm down, calm down, warrior!" Wan patted his best friend's shoulder. "You've just returned from a war zone and yet, you're more energetic than me! That's so unfair!" he grinned.

"Not really. My parents were the ones who were busy. I was locked up in a chamber in a watchtower. It was boring," he crossed his arms and turned his head to a side while grumbling. "All I could do was watch from the oversized windows as the Sirutov did their job. Me wishing to be there one day."

"Relax. Don't worry. You'll definitely be there. You're from a Sirutov family, after all," Wan assured.

It was common knowledge. A subtle history of the world was stapled into every newborn's pool of knowledge since the dawn of humanity on the entire planet of Harthwa.

Harthwa had a history ornately decorated with the feats of mankind, great and small. But beneath the layers of discussing about various kingdoms, continents and reigns, much of the 'spice' of their history remained tainted by the touch of otherworldly creatures.

For centuries, beings from other dimensional universes visited Harthwa – often disguised in human form – contributing to the human civilization in both advantageous and hostile ways. Many had been great rulers and wise men. A flurry of new inventions, new ideas and new chunks of knowledge were delivered

by these superior beings, unbeknownst to everyone else that they weren't, in truth, 'people'. Most crucially of all, they had introduced the art of magic.

Humans were quick learners, adopting the mystical technologies as equally as the brute strength of science.

However, not all such beings were generous in their will. Monstrous beings spread ill teachings throughout society, gradually corrupting the world of the living. It was not long before the humans evolved to a distinct scale of sentience where they could finally distinguish these alien-like people among their own.

The good ones were regarded as 'angels' and the evil ones as 'demons'. To turn the tables of fate, once the demons understood that their cover had been blown, they felt free to reveal their true selves, shedding away their human 'skins'.

Elves, orcs, humanoid animals and countless neutral creatures alike, too, staked their own claim on Harthwa, plundering and battling against each other as well as humans. The tides of war didn't settle down till each major race had conquered a patch of land they could call their own.

The demonic races, however, were not pleased with mere satisfaction of a certain patch of land. They desired more, and so 'more' they devoured. Out of jealousy, they had launched invasions to eliminate all other life forms – especially humanity.

Several millennia covered the pages of Harthwa's history simply describing constant ripples of rage and defense between hostile races and the kingdom. Three strong factions were formed to combat the darkness - the Akaminé, the Alkynes, and the Sirutov. Each of these three organizations boasted their own customs, motives and technological assets. Their goal: to protect the Kingdom, the

central domain were all surviving humans flourished under a single ruler.

The Akaminé were spellcasters and warriors following the teachings of what the superior beings had bestowed upon humanity ages ago. Using the power of magic, they hoped to defend and rescue those in danger.

The Alkynes were similarly spellcasters, but more liberal in their morals and less disciplined than the Akaminé. Nine cases out of ten, they ignored wisdom and chose the most appropriate strategies that may have an overall outcome in their favor – that included using the demons' own magic against them (and carrying a risk of being infected via long-term usage). They wished not only to rescue innocents but also to raid the demons' own territories, guided by their vendetta for vengeance.

Last, but surely not the least, the Sirutov were a military department directly endorsed by the Kingdom. Disciplined

enforcement of soldiers trained to the claw. Relying on the power of science and technology, they intended to lay waste to any and all unethical actions. Their primary aim, ofcourse, was to maintain a global unity between all races.

Away from the reaches of modern technology, Yafloria Village, where Wan Dé and his friends were born and raised, was cradled by the expanses of forests cushioning on all sides. Its inhabitants were hardly aware that a thousand kilometers away, there were cars, skyscrapers and unbelievable gadgets in active use. On the other side of the village, to the west, beyond the furthest tree at the edge of the Yaflorian forest, a major desert wasteland resided.

A row of Sirutov towers stood their ground as a physical mark for the outermost boundary of human civilization. Near the end of the last four decades, the demons had unleashed an assault too powerful to handle. A frighteningly large portion of the

landmass had been conquered or destroyed. The three anti-demon factions had united to distill the aftermaths but the Sirutov kept a wary watch on those borders to ward off any intruders ever since.

Indeed, Bain had just observed what it meant to be a Sirutov. Beneath the promise of respect and riches, potential candidates had to undergo toxic trials to test their passion and physique. The family trip had slightly shattered his expectations.

"You think so?" something caught Bain's eyes. "What? Oh... Oh hey! There she is! Takira!" he waved to someone behind Wan. His face momentarily guided an implicit comment as he whispered to Wan. "How's your relationship with Takira going, bro?"

"Aiii," Wan was shocked to hear him ask that in a moment like this. He nudged Bain in the ribs, making him bite his tongue in the process.

"Hiya!" Takira approached them, surprised to find Bain back. She waved back. "Bain!!! Wow, you're back. So soon?"

"A long story," Bain pronounced. "Erm... I gotta go now. Catch you guys later."

"Ehh? Why?" Takira Honé was curious. "What happened? It's been three months! Let's chat for a bit more, pleassseeee."

"No, Taki. Sorry," Bain inserted his hand into a pocket in his trousers. "I forgot to hand over something to my father. I'll be back by sunset."

"Huuuhh?" Takira's cloud of happiness popped. She frowned. "Why must you leave now? Is it really that urgent? I just got here."

"I... I'm really sorry; my father told me to get back home quickly," Bain announced. He gestured towards the rucksack on his back. "Need to drop this off, too."

Unaware to the three, the density of people currently in the market slowly, but suddenly, dispersed.

"Okay then, byee," Takira smiled merrily.
"Hope to meet up in the afternoon."

Wan watched his buddy leave the market square, feeling empty after a quick dive into such a heartfelt moment of meeting a cherished friend. But something hurt his eyes.

The sunlight.

"What's wrong, Wan?" Takira noticed.

"No, nothing. It's just the sun."

The sunlight. It seemed a bit too bright today.

Sudden screams flooded the atmosphere. A clangor of blades followed next.

"Wh-what's happening? There's trouble!"
Wan's pupils constricted. "Taki! Come with me."

He grabbed her hand without warning and rushed to the nearest house in sight.

A few flares flew from the direction of the sun and landed on the other side of the village market, blocked off by a wall. It set the stalls and stores on fire.

"Wan, what? What are you doing?!" Takira exclaimed, as she was forcefully led to a shelter. "Why are there screams? What's going on?!"

"I don't know either," he ignored the shade of nervousness painted on her face. He dared to peek out from behind the cover of the exterior surface of the house. "I guess we cannot stand here. Too unsafe. Come on."

"Huh?"

"Let's get moving. Please cooperate," Wan humbly advised.

While the locals' focal target was to extinguish the unexpected burning blaze, a horde of strange figures appeared, raining from the sky like silhouettes of silky darkness. To add salt to the wounds, a band of mysterious men walked out from behind the shadows of all trees and objects – as if spawning out of thin air.

"Wan!!! There are people. Weird people," Takira innocently pointed at them, as she struggled to match the pace of Wan's brisk walk.

"I know," his face was a mask of confidence, enabling him to act stoic in this situation.
"Where should we hide?"

"Wan!! The people are following us!"

"I know," he barged through the door of his own house and shouted for his mother.

"Mom! Mom!! Call Dad immediately. There are strange things going on in —"

Wan stopped. His grip on Takira's cotton-soft hand loosened.

He felt he was about to faint from the sight laid before him.

"Mo-mom... MOM! MOTHER!!!!"

Flute Of The Present Day

Wan's vision blurred away like the psychedelic effect of remembering memories. The world drifted out of its borders. Distressful darkness enclosed his surroundings in a veil of obstruction. He tried hard; he wanted to see what had happened to his mother. He walked forward in the void, only to hear his own footsteps resonating against the spiraling abyss of black and white. His environment was a helix of energies streaming in a hurricane of hope. Empty and desolate.

Voices. He heard reverberating voices attempting to slice into the shell of darkness. But against the rumbling of his own mind, the details were too blurry to contemplate on the words. They sounded like a woman's voice.

"W-----"

Streams of blank thoughts bombarded Wan's senses. Where was he? What was this place? Where did his mother go? What happened to Takira?

What was happening? Was he dreaming? Did he get killed by the oncoming strangers?

He clutched his chest.

'No, definitely not a dream,' he thought. Pain penetrated through his body, warming up his heart.

"Wa-----"

The voice. That voice. Who was it? What was she saying?

Wan's dead senses groveled their best to overcome the blanket of isolation. He wanted to burst out of his body just to see what was happening outside, even if it meant he would die. Trapped by his own senses.

"Wan! Wa-----"

"Huh?"

Finally, a crack appeared in the tide. Wan commanded his mind to focus. To return back to normal.

"Wan! Wan! Are you okay? Wan!"

"Aaaaah!" Wan was back, screaming at the top of his lungs.

He allowed a few more seconds for his senses to calibrate with the environment.

"Wan! What happened to you?"

He turned his face at the voice, still lying on the coarse ground. It was Takira; she looked older.

'No, it can't be Takira. How come she looks older? And how come...' Wan paused in his head. His own hands, they were bigger, too. Was he older as well? He sat up, cross-

legged. In front of him lay the dilapidated ruins of a house he once called his own.

"Wha-what has happened?! Why is..." he stood up, this time, noticing that he was now taller. "Why is everything broken?"

"Wan! Quit it. You're scaring me."

"What-who-when..."

Takira grabbed Wan's shoulders.

"..." Wan's tongue suddenly forgot how to produce words. His ashen irises locked onto the icy blue ones of hers. His eyes observed the beauty of Takira Honé.

"It's been five years since our village was razed. Did you forget, Wan?" she explained. Her eyes did the rest of the talking. Twinkling moonlight danced in her corneas.

It was night time.

No, not her eyes; Takira had been gifted with the talent of telepathy.

"I... I don't understand," Wan uttered out again, slightly relieved that his tongue was working fine. Although his voice had matured into a wonderful wine of heroic boldness with a youthful tune to it.

Takira sighed, letting go of his shoulders.

"You don't understand," Takira agreed. "But I do. Five years ago, at this very spot, you had encountered the greatest shock in your life... so far," she averted her eyes from his for a moment, out of remembrance of greater tragedies that may have occurred beyond that point in time. "No wonder why you collapsed right as soon as we investigated your home."

"F-five years?" Wan took a step back, caressed his forehead and tried to shoulder the burden of sudden realization of the fact. "It's been five years already?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, perhaps it was a bad idea to let you visit your place," she dropped her eye level before continuing, placing a hand over her chest to shield the blows of the past against her heart. "On this very day of this month, at this same village, all of us had lost many of our loved ones."

"I-I still don't get it..." Wan muttered to himself.

"C'mon! Wan! Quit it, please," Takira urged. Wan noticed she was holding a sword and dressed in the red attire of—

"Wait! I think I recognize the clothes you're—" Wan looked at his own arms and legs. He, too, was dressed in a similar outfit.

"Sssshh!" Takira clutched Wan's mouth, pointing towards his weapon resting on decaying grass beside him. A spear glaive – Wan's dedicated weapon. "I believe your memory needs to be refreshed," she lowered her vocal volume. "But for now, please do as I say. I sense gâguns nearby."

Having no time to think, Wan calibrated to the situation. His eyes drew a ring of suspicion over this woman who claimed to be Takira.

He picked up his weapon.

A Tune You Cannot Touch

It all occurred to him now. Present tense.

Five years had passed and yet he was indifferent in his mind.

"Wan! Look out!" Takira aimed her sword, balancing it between both hands. "Behind you!"

A gâgun pounced out of the shadows, lethal claws and fangs ready to strike. Despite its element of surprise, Wan thrust his glaive at the feral beast.

He remembered a page from a bestiary book he had read a week ago.

"Gâguns," the author had stated, "are creatures born out of darkness. They take on the form of a shadow wolf. It is usually common to find them prowling around at night. Although they pose little risk to humans, their ethereal bodies can administer physical attacks. That means you'll feel the pain throbbing in your body

even if you haven't actually been bitten or scratched."

The creature vanished out of view, transforming into a shapeless mass of plasmic shadows diffusing into the cool nocturnal breeze. Wan smiled proudly. Akaminé weapons were typically tipped with enchantments that are lethal to demonic entities. His glaive and Takira's sword were imbued with Light of the Unforgiven, capable of dispelling dark elemental forces with ease.

"Another one!" Takira alerted.

Wan swung the glaive in a 45-degree arc, chopping another gâgun in half, midair.

As retaliation to killing one of their brethren, a whole pack of gâguns were attracted by the noise.

"Where are these coming from?" Wan inquired, wrestling a third wolf, blade against claw. "Is it THAT common for them to spawn out of darkness?"

"Don't know," Takira answered, busy with swinging her sword at two more wolves. Her arms weren't trained to use heavy weapons, sadly. "Don't think so, either. We'll ask Master Hamadaw when we return back."

Takira blocked a blow from a gâgun that came gliding with the wind.

"Alright, Taki. This way!" Wan gestured to ask her to follow him.

He led her through the village, retracing their steps back to the marketplace – the same market where the ill incidents had originated half a decade ago. His vision was corrupt from the memories of his past flooding the environment randomly. All the houses were in shambles. Sakura trees reduced to stumps. Was this truly the world now?

His sweet childhood, his past, everyone's previous life then. It only seemed like he was there yesterday running free, playing around, not listening to his mother.

More and more shadowy gâguns donated themselves into the chase right behind him and Takira.

From the depths of the pocket of memories he stashed in his mind, he plucked a leaf of knowledge. He remembered a hiding spot.

'Before that, I need to get rid of these insects,' Wan thought to himself. Without hesitation, he stopped and massacred half the numbers of the wolf monsters. The remainders scattered and scrambled out of their instincts of survival.

They seemed easy prey for now, but he anticipated drawbacks to stick out soon. His attacks would grow weaker as the night progressed closer towards midnight. Soon, if he wasn't careful, their weapons' enchantments would be nullified by the gâguns completely.

He prioritized escaping out of Yafloria over asserting dominance over those wild monsters.

What he sought was situated at the end of Yafloria Village, behind the last hamlet. A tree, still untouched by the blight.

"Wan! Where are you headed? That is a tree! How can we hide there?"

"Just remain calm..." Wan slowed down as he approached the forsaken tree. He revealed a wooden key from one of his robe's pockets. "And trust me."

The gâguns lost their trail. But not for long, he knew.

By the aid of the natural lunar illumination, he searched around for a hidden groove inset in the bark of the tree. He inserted the key once he found it. Within moments, a mechanism sprung to life and a section of the tree's bark opened outwards; a camouflaged door.

Takira simply stood there, too awed to comment anything.

"Here," Wan guided Takira. "Down there."

Wan helped her climb down the trunk, before shutting the door behind him.

A world of darkness thrived under the tree's roots. One of the Akaminé agents previously built a base for their operations this far west from the Kingdom's center. By hollowing out a cavern beneath an especially resistant sakura tree, they had anchored a holding onto this village. Wan luckily remembered its exact location.

"It's too dark," Takira complained.

"Hold on! I know the spell for producing artificial light," Wan ordered his brain to remember. "Ignitus!"

A droplet of fire erupted from his finger and freely whizzed past his ears to land at a tiny chandelier behind him.

"You call THAT the spell of illumination?!" Takira giggled. "That's the wrong spell, Wan. But anyways, it worked."

"What do you mean it's the 'wrong' spell? I learnt it straight off the —"

"—wrong page of the Book of Alteration," she finished his sentence for him. "Oh, Wan, you sometimes behave so naïve."

"Hmm," the comment barely scratched his self-esteem. Besides, she was correct, he knew.

Wan took his time taking a look around the interior chamber of the tree. It was once an archive lockup for storing important documents between emissaries. It used to be. Now all that remained of it were some empty drawers engraved into the walls of hard-packed earth and wood.

Even the miniature chandelier held a limited number of candles.

'Wait... those candles,' Wan noticed something odd. He peered over the level of the chandelier. Something troubled him.

"What's wrong, Wan?" Takira bought the hint that he discovered something strange yet again.

"The candles..." this time, he spoke the words out rather than letting them echo in his mindscape.

"What about them?" Takira walked closer.

"I carefully check them everytime I enter this tree lodge," he counted them again, unsure if his eyes were being fooled. "As far as I remember, there were eighteen candles. Now there are only sixteen."

Takira blinked twice in silence, not getting any of this.

"What do you mean? What's the puzzling fact about it?"

Wan turned to face her, a fog of worry hovering over his face.

"Only a selected few knew about this hideout. Which means..."

Wan stepped back from the chandelier before chanting out a spell.

"Erv Vanglailis!"

A powdery burst of energy spawned into the chamber, creating an effect similar to a smoke bomb.

Wan and Takira coughed and waited for the smokescreen to fade away.

"Wan, you idiot! Wrong spell again!" Takira blamed him. "Just tell me what kind of spell you need."

"Clairvoyance," Wan coughed out the final remnants of the smoky substance.

"Clairvoyance with identification, please."

"Alright," she sipped air in a deep breath.

"Rasta Dekhao!"

A jet of electric-blue energy swirled about the enclosed space. Almost like a living being, it delicately flew across the chamber before navigating its path to the chandelier. It hovered and spun around it, orbiting while accelerating. It disappeared without displaying any further results.

"Huh?" Takira seemed confused about the outcome. "It... It was supposed to show the path of the last person who entered this

place before us. I don't understand why the spell didn't work."

"But I do," Wan picked one of the candles up, noting the reduction in its wax body since the last time he had lit them.

"Someone highly skilled had masked his footmarks really well," he faced Takira to know if she was picking up on the pace of understanding. "Or should I say, 'her' footsteps."

Takira gasped.

"No way!"

"I know it's unbelievable, but I think it's the case. No other explanation for it."

Takira's eyes sparkled with tears. Tears of joy.

"Miyumi Rakken... is alive?!"

Wan nodded.

Miyumi had been Takira's best friend since birth. So was she one of Wan's friends. Over the past handful of years, Miyumi had suddenly gone missing ever since she was

assigned an expedition to spy on the Alkynes, another anti-demon faction like the Akaminé.

None knew her whereabouts save the elite few at the Akaminé headquarters. But they refused to spill the beans for some reason.

"Assuming it's her, Miyumi has left clues to follow and find her," Wan switched his focus and inspected the room. "So don't worry. We don't need magic to track her down. Or maybe she willingly doesn't want to be tracked."

Wan approached an empty deck of drawers and slid his hand inside, thrifting through cobwebs and dust. He expected to find nothing, but his hand grazed past a broken piece of a non-existent drawer. He pulled it out.

"We're seeing nothing because we aren't clearly looking," he turned the plank upside-down to reveal a paper attached to the side with wax. "So this is where the extra candles were expended, eh?"

"What's that?" Takira tilted her head to adjust with the angle at which Wan held the plank. It was an envelope.

"It's just a hunch but," Wan escorted his opinion. "This might actually be the key to not just locating Miyumi but also finding our parents."

Flash, Flight, Fear

"Ou-our p-parents?" Takira hardly believed her ears. "They're alive?"

"Hmm, most likely," Wan ripped the envelope off the plank. "The envelope bears the seal of my father. I know it because I've seen it all the time since I was born. No one else can copy his seal."

His heart also embraced the idea and hung onto the flight of hope that both his parents along with Takira's were still healthy and breathing.

Due to the absence of chairs or any furniture inside the cavern, they both knelt down to sit.

Tearing off the flap, Wan broke the seal.

Inside, he found a letter.

"What's this?"

To the dear fairy with white wings,

*For your spectacle my heart sings,
From the brink of chaos I'll
protect you always,
No one shall desecrate your
innocent grace.*

*A head, a heel, a hammer, a field,
From snake to whale, I'll be your
shield.*

Signed - Frland Honé

"Frland Honé... Is this one of your relatives, Takira?"

She threw a serious gaze at him that he'll never forget.

"That's my father's name, Wan."

"Oh..." he stared desolately at the piece of paper. A poem? Not what he was expecting. But why would Takira's father send a letter bearing the seal of Wan's father?

Something was implicitly hidden in the text, he presumed. "Okay. So that means he's alive, perhaps. The ink seems fresh. I

can still smell the scent of crushed rosemary. Hang on..."

Wan flipped the letter over and found another text, written by another hand.

Your father is alive. So are several others.

I wanted to protect you, Takira. Please do not follow me.

I'm going to hurt you if you do.

"This doesn't make any sense! Who could've written this?" Takira's mind seemed uneasy after reading the latter side of the letter.

"Was it Miyumi?"

"Could be," Wan was the one facing circles of confusion atop his head. "Right now, we need to get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because the Alkynes could be on their way."

The Alkynes were one of the three demon-slaying factions in the Kingdom. Their gang color was an iridescent purple, canonically

the color of corruption. Indeed, they had turned to the dark side when they began recruiting demons in disguise to hunt down bigger game.

Five years had passed under the protective shadow of the Akaminé, the demon-slaying faction Wan and Takira belonged to. If not for the Akaminé's helping hand, they would have perished under the weight of the rising forces of malice.

Since birth, Wan and Takira had heard tales about monsters and demons. Little did they know that they actually existed, until five years ago.

Only a year ago, the whole Akaminé army had clashed with the Alkynes in rivalry and accusation. The Akaminé sanctuary had been ambushed, their castle sieged and conquered. Hundreds of warriors, mages, druids and whatnot – demonslayers by moral rights – had been engulfed and overwhelmed by the might of the Alkynes. Most had fought till death. Several others ended up participating in heresy –

betraying their own kin and team to join the winning side. A few lucky survived – including Wan, Takira and Miyumi.

"What? Why would the Alkynes be here?" Takira hesitated to believe Wan. "They shouldn't have any business nor hatred towards us. We let them seize our prized castle for the sake of upholding our righteousness!"

"Silly girl. Remember, they're after us!" Wan informed. "The tragedy last year may keep them satisfied, but they live in fear that we survivors may stain their public image if the news reaches royal ears."

"Oh..."

"Those gâguns weren't spawned, by the way," Wan looked into Takira's eyes, his own beaming with determination. "They had been summoned. Be on guard, Taki."

Wan tucked the letter back into the envelope. He proceeded to store the envelope inside an inner pocket of his robe.

He eased the tree bark door ajar.

His glaive was ready at his disposal.

"Seems clear," Wan scanned the visible panorama of the outside world before stepping out. "Gotta hurry, Taki. The night will reach its peak soon, making all shadow demons immune till sunrise."

An owl fluttered somewhere in the distance. Wan ignored it.

He stepped out of the tree and helped Takira out behind him. They began walking north, away from the village and deeper into the bowels of the Yaflorian forest. Except for the village, all the other trees were unharmed.

"Phew... Everything's so quiet now, right Takira? Can't help but feel—" Wan glanced behind him to see if Takira was following or not. Startled by what he saw, he jerked the glaive in her direction.

"—Relieved?" a hooded figure finished Wan's sentence. His voice was a haunting mixture of a hardcore-pitched human and a threatening howl of a dragon.

Wan's eyes struggled to identify the tint on the figure's robe. Purple.

In the moonlight, a blade shone under the tiger-skinned pattern of light and shadow. Clean and bright. But it was positioned over Takira's fragile neck.

"No foolish steps, young warrior," the Alkyne agent warned. "Or your cute little friend will become a voodoo doll after losing her neck."

"YOU!" Wan stepped forward involuntarily, his spear glaive held at a menacing stance. "How did you..."

He heard Takira's muffled cry. Her arms were held behind her back at a painful angle. An angle further, and her bones and tendons were guaranteed to break. And a gloved hand curtailed her mouth from screaming.

"Ah," the hooded agent's sweet words feathered his grim tone. "Now now now... what did I just say? About no foolish steps?"

"You're the fool to dare challenge a Third Order Akaminé!"

"Oh really?" the Alkyne jeered, unwavering from the sudden jerky motion of Takira trying to flee from his grasp. "I heard all of your brothers and sisters had bravely fallen to their deaths. The Akaminé no longer exists. It's a shame to call yourself one of them now."

The hooded Alkyne broke into a fit of laughter. It reminded Wan of a hyena amplified to a demonic tease.

"St-stop! Or I will..."

"You'll what? Kill me with that toy of yours? A glaive? Ha!" he revealed his third arm, the mutated monstrous claws of his hand clutched his main weapon – an axe carved and designed out of an unknown metal. Carved, not forged. Yet the deadly shape of the impressive weapon itself was enough to make any elite demonslayer cry for mercy.

And Wan Dé was no elite.

"Fine..." Wan dropped his glaive on the ground.

'Yes, that's right. Focus on the glaive, you knucklehead,' Wan chuckled in his mind. With his foot, he kicked the bar of the weapon to send it flying vertically to the air. 'Yes, this is my chance. Focus on the flying object.'

Meanwhile, Wan sped forward at an astonishing velocity, creating a crackle of thunder as he threw himself head-on to collide at the Alkyne's head. Takira fell away, thanks to the momentum.

'That did the trick. Takira is saved. But now...'

Wan tried to anchor his opponent to the ground for as long as he could.

'...how do I save myself?'

"Yeeaaaargh!" the Alkyne roared. Almost inhumane.

"Takira! Run deeper into the forest! I'll meet you there soon."

"But Wan, you can't fight him on your own!"

"Just do as I say! PLEASE!"

The Alkyne got back to his feet and swung the axe aimed for Wan's left shoulder.

In a second, he hopped aside.

"Ha! You are a fool indeed!" the Alkyne taunted. "You left your weapon back there," he brandished his new weapon. "This glaive is now mine!"

He was well-armed with two lethal weapons.

Wan sighed and remained calm.

"Don't worry, monster," Wan's poker face accompanied his change in tone. "All I needed was to get her away from you."

The Alkyne swung the axe again, much faster – this time, he managed to slice out a corner of Wan's robe fabric.

"Ha! Who said she's away from me?" the Alkyne parked the axe down on the ground.

"Look around you, brat. Don't get so cocky with me!"

Wan turned around and felt goosebumps pricking his entire body.

Not one, not two... five more Alkynes joined the party, surrounding them in a circle.

Takira frantically searched around for an opening between the incoming Alkynes. Sadly, none were in sight now.

"Damn!" Wan cursed, to which the Alkyne axeman grinned.

"Tonight, we finally end our wars..." the hooded Alkyne coldly announced. "...by sacrificing the last of the Akaminé to our god!"

A Terrible Power

Miles away from the traces of Yafloria, in the ruins of the Akaminé castle, another brutal battle between man and demon was actively thriving with activity.

"There, that's the last of them!" a knight pointed at what appeared to be a shadow wraith. Unlike gagans, their attacks seemed to land physical damage to anything they touched. "Roguro! Be careful, this one's faster and stronger than the rest!"

The knight was armored with volcanic plates – the strongest material known to mankind so far. Yet, he kept his distance from the vapid monster. His weapon was a giant sword as tall as himself, but he couldn't swing it given the small range in the corridor they stood in.

"Relax, Jion," Roguro Ganis batted the knight's advice away like a fly. "No demon ever frightened me. But your sense of fear certainly annoys me."

The ghastly appearance of the wraith accompanied by its reflexes was a formidably intimidating combination.

Roguro lacked the both heavy armor and the weapon of the knight Jion. Atop his head, a feathered fedora capped his mullet. His torso was elaborately dressed by a purple coat. He was an Akaminé, born and raised, but during the Year of Forthcoming (when the Alkynes stormed the castle) he cold-bloodedly chose to be a traitor to his own kind.

Jion and Roguro had been assigned by their master to scour the castle for any remaining untamed monsters or demons lurking around.

'My life is forfeit,' Roguro looked up at the wraith, smiling widely and spreading his arms wide like an albatross. 'All my life, I was supposed to be an Akamine member. What have I done? How can I be saved?'

"Roguro, don't get too close," Jion warned. "Are you out of your mind? That's a tagahun!"

'I know,' Roguro silently replied in his mind. 'Perhaps only death is the rightful way to pay for my crimes. I have no purpose to live without the Akamine. How could I betray them?'

The wraith whizzed across the air. Jion Dankorun had spent eleven years as a knight to the ruler of the Kingdom before being recruited by the Alkynes. His experience whispered in his ears that tagahuns were dangerously different from other monsters.

Tagahuns could possess people and stab their souls from within.

No bleeding, no pain. Just sudden death.

Jion assumed that Roguro knew it, too. But he wished he hadn't.

"No!" Jion wasted no time and instantly rushed forward to save the fellow Alkyne. "ROGURO! WHAT'RE YOU DOING?!"

Roguro threw a smile at Jion before allowing himself be possessed by the shadow wraith.

"Argh...Ugh...Aaaah...AAAAH!" The wraith seized control over Roguro's body more firmly than a marionette. But it was short-lived. He knew what was about to happen next. The final fragments of his consciousness braced for the actual death blow.

Jion swung his blade, regardless of the consequences; a dead Akamine was safer to live with than a possessed Akamine.

Blood splattered over the castle's poshly decorated walls. Unfortunately for the Alkynes' brand guidelines, blood wasn't purple.

"What have you done?!" a voice boomed from a staircase ahead. "Jion Dankorun, speak!"

The knight loomed over the corpse of his freshly-murdered victim. The wraith had perished along with Roguro's soul. He withdrew his greatsword, letting it land on the ground.

"I have done," Jion puffed from the effort, "what had to be done. A tagahun conquered Roguro's body. It was too late, I'm sorry, Master Thozor."

Casio Thozor, the current leader of the Alkynes stepped down the remaining stairs, halting right in front of Roguro's corpse. He noticed the dents in the walls generated by Jion swinging his weapon in shortage of space.

"You... you have just killed one of our best hunters, foolish knight!" he complained. His dimly glowing eyes shone brighter at what he said next. "But to the Alkynes, death is only a state of being."

Jion nodded.

"Now step aside," Casio ordered. "And let me resurrect this champion. Unlike you, he atleast had the courage to face the wraith!"

Jion parted his lips to argue about what he felt truly happened, but his words gave up before he could utter a sound. All he could do was obey quietly.

"Moron Ke Dao Chodon," the leader of the Alkynes cast Banglai's Spell of Resurrection. (Eren Banglai was one of the founders of Conjuraton magic on Harthwa)

A blast of unstably white energy sprung out from Casio's hands, impaling Roguro's body before being absorbed by his materialistic form.

Roguro's eyes came back to life.

'Wha... What just...' he felt dizzy as the whole warped back into existence in front of him. 'Where... I am... I am alive?'

"Rise, my child," Casio knelt beside him, holding his hands now slowly warming up to normal temperature. "You have just tasted death. But know this... Death cannot stop Alkynes! With magic, anything is possible."

Jion jealously bit his lip and observed from a few feet away.

"Master Thozor!" Roguro identified. "Why are you here?"

'Blasted fate!' in his mind, Roguro cursed for his bad luck. 'Can't a person die in peace? What ridiculous ethics!'

"Ah, I just happened to be roaming our castle," Casio explained politely. "But my primary intention was to reward you."

"Reward me?" Roguro was surprised. "For what reason, master?"

The mention of the word 'reward' pulled an even more dissatisfied expression on Jion's face.

"Yes, indeed. What must a proud master of the Alkynes do if not wishing to bestow gifts for the most potential member of our entire faction?"

"Ah, I see," Roguro was an expert in the crafts of lying and deceit. Pretending to be intrigued was merely cutting butter with a sharp knife. "What, when and where, if I may ask?"

"Patience, Roguro," Casio patted his shoulder. "Walk with me back to the courtyard."

Roguro stood back up. He shot an aggressive gaze at Jion and Thozor behind their backs.

'One of you will die tonight,' he planned.

Back at the northern niche of Yafloria, Wan Dé and the Alkynes were locked in deep conflict. Wan peered into each of their eyes. And they all greeted him back with a promise of death.

"Surrender now, Akamine," the hooded Alkyne toted his hardened axe and Wan's glaive. "You have no weapons. You have no hope. Struggling will only make things worse. For your sake, just give up your lives."

Wan noticed the Alkynes were walking clockwise in a ring, with Wan and Takira situated at the center, back-on-back. Each of the violent villains took turns to taunt their prey. Worse, he realized they were decreasing their radius – inching closer and closer to where they stood their ground.

'Okay, this is bad,' Wan thought. 'Really bad. Plus, there's Takira. I cannot let her see me face defeat.'

'Oh no,' Takira thought, simultaneously. 'What do I do? Wan has lost his weapon. I could lend him mine. But I don't want him to see me cowering.'

The Alkyne marched in the circumference in synchrony, their footsteps acting like a clock's ticks. Each step followed the next one heartbeat later.

'This isn't a trap,' Wan realized. 'It's a TIMED trap.'

He felt their eyes pinning them down with the likeness of wolves rejoicing at the sight and scent of fresh prey. Soon, he couldn't bear it any further.

Wan charged straight for the Alkyne who hijacked his glaive.

"Shoumenshjkai!" a spell burst out of his mouth; his hand propelled an arc of darkness searing through the air and flying at lightspeed, aimed for the Alkyne's head.

"Ah, let's see who you are, shall we? Let your hood drop off."

Without his weapons, Wan could only rely on his field of magic – shadowmancy, adept level proficiency.

The hooded Alkyne grunted in an attempt to parry the blow. His cloth hood danced to the tune of Wan's spell of the Shadow Sonic Blade. Wan's glaive still remained clutched by his buffalo muscles, rage and irritation flowing among blood in the bulging veins. The Alkyne was not pleased.

"You! If my face is revealed, I'll be stealing yours!" he thrust Wan's glaive in his direction.

"Deal," Wan sprang up from his position behind Takira, seizing opportunities in a frenzy of impatience. Petals of excitement crowned his mind as his eyes focused harder after a quick sip of adrenaline. "Only if you can grab mine first—"

"Don't get cocky, boy," the hooded Alkyne cautioned again. Something made Wan

slow down in his actions for a fraction of a second. "This time, my brethren will not hold back."

A millisecond was all it took.

One of the other Alkynes immediately charged at Wan, grabbed his head midair and slammed him to the ground like a mad chef smashing an egg on a table with full strength.

'Wh-what?' Wan felt dizzy, let alone suffocated by his own unexpected failure. All around him, he heard laughter. Humiliating laughter. As if he was a frog being tortured by evil schoolchildren. 'Wh-what we-went wrong? I wonder... ugh...'

Takira gasped and held her hands over her mouth, open with horror and terror at the sight of what just happened to her friend.

Even in the dimly lit forest floor, she could see traces of blood on the damp grass where Wan lay lifelessly rigid.

'Oh no... Wan! Wan? What happened to you?! Are you okay?' Takira wanted to

speak the words out directly, but she prayed that the monstrous Alkynes didn't pay attention to her yet. Even if they did, she was utterly helpless if someone like Wan Dé could be so easily defeated by them.

"Let's eliminate this one first," another Alkyne walked in with a suggestion, intended for the Alkyne who just struck Wan cruelly. "We can imprison the girl in our hold. Maybe she can even marry one of the princes," he swiftly looked at Takira from afar. "She does look very appealing. Worthy as a bride for a leader."

Takira exhaled heavily, her temper heated to a melting point. She couldn't tolerate being humiliated in front of a friend.

"What did you just say?" she began walking up to where the Alkynes stood, dragging her sword along the ground in the posture of a sassy heroine seeking revenge for her lover. "Make me a prisoner? Make me marry a— Aaaaah!"

The fourth Alkyne clasped her hair, enjoying her yells.

A fifth one promptly arrived chuckling. He punched her forehead with an impact that could've split a brick in half.

"Takira! NO!!!"

Wan semi-consciously watched in horror as Takira's limp body went flying away like a broken porcelain doll before crashing to the ground with a thump.

The six Alkynes basked in the glory of their ambush.

For ten unbearable seconds, the forest fell silent save for the hostile humans' footsteps and mockery.

'Is she... dead?'

Three words were what Wan's mind could summon.

"ENOUGH!" he jumped back to his feet, shedding some dirt off his robes with his dexterous hands. He spat out a blob of blood and rubbed some off his forehead.

His eyebrows tightened to a serious mood.
"Dead or fainted, atleast now I am safe to use my actual abilities. Good thing you shut her down."

Puzzled. That's the mood the Alkynes expressed on their visible faces, as they turned towards Wan. Naturally, they emptied more barrels of taunts and comments :

"Oh, so you still didn't learn your lesson, bug?"

"Ehh? Still not dead, boy?"

"Hey! This guy's not out cold yet. Hit him harder!"

"Die!"

Wan noticed their relative positions. In a hurry, they lost their initial formation and dropped their bag of discipline. Weapons wielded. Ready to attack in unison.

'Ah, this couldn't be a better chance!' Wan let an oncoming wind play with his hair for

a moment. 'Finally, the odds are now in MY favor!'

Lifting his index finger at the Alkynes, he waited for one last adjustment.

Wan prayed that they were about to do what he had predicted they would do.

His grey irises sparkled with delight and his face morphed into a sinister smile deceptive enough to curdle rotten wine.

All six Alkynes rose to the air to land a finishing blow from above.

"ONE!" Wan shouted, keeping his finger aimed at his enemies.

This was his trump card. A power so terrible he tried to keep it a secret. A spell so dreadful and dangerous that he wanted to forget the fact he ever had such a skill.