
BATTLE DIVAS
The Incorruptible Battle Blossom Princess
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Battle Divas
The Incorruptible Battle Blossom Princess


I-I'm your wife, so you can stare at me as much as you want. I'm prepared to be with you!
I'll do my best to be a good wife... and to make you all mine.
Subdera's Diva
Lesfina
King of the United States of Althos
Alnoa
Wh-What exactly are you prepared for!?
I came up with this ploy to ambush you! I call it 'Surprise, you're dead!'
I'm starting to doubt that you actually want to kill me.
Wait, what do you mean you don't feel anything looking at my cute body!?
Freiya's Diva
Sharon


Hahh!
Hahh!
HYAAAAAAA!
Oh, don't worry! I'm just demonstrating a **Heavenly Surge**!
Althos' Diva
Cecilia


Head maid of Althos' Royal Castle
Lilicia
I'm your loyal maid. Your wish is my command, King Al. Don't worry. What happens between us, stays between us.
Just this once, okay?

One day, a Valkyrie descended upon the sea of despair that was our world. Elegant and reassuring, she alone stood against the Demon King.

She was like a beautiful Goddess, gracefully dancing through the battlefield.

Like a mighty War God, blasting through the chaos.

Her incorruptible form shone through the battlefield as a bastion of hope—as a Battle Diva.

—Excerpt from the prologue of the battle record “Battle Divas”.

Prologue

That day, he met with a Goddess. Her long, red hair flowed down her back like a river of flames and her crimson eyes shimmered with determination. Her chest piece bulged, contrasting with her tight waist. Her plump thighs peeked out from under her short skirt, worn to enable freedom of movement on the battlefield. A set of leg armor completed her regalia, adding an extra layer of protection.

She looked like she'd walked straight out of a painting. But what this beautiful maiden offered the young king of Althos was not a bouquet of blessings, but the pointy end of a large sword ill-suited to the wielder's feminine frame.

"King of Althos, it's a pleasure to meet you. Sorry for being so abrupt, but it's time for you to die! "

She proclaimed her intent with a light tone and a cute smile. In the face of her dignified actions, the ongoing dust-filled gale appeared as little more than a gentle breeze. He could've kept watching her forever, but given his status and the situation, he couldn't let himself get lost in her eyes, as this marked the two-thousand-and-somethingth time that Althos had been attacked by the neighboring country of Freiya.

"Are you a *Diva* ?" the king asked the scarlet-haired, red-eyed beauty, her huge sword still pointing his way.

"Hehehe... What if I am?"

"Huh? Either you are, or you aren't..."

Instead of focusing on the sword, he was completely lost in her powerful eyes and her booming voice.

"What does it matter? You will die here and now!"

She charged forward and swung her sword with an elegance befitting of a Diva.

"I'll be taking..."

At long last, the young king returned to his senses. But he too was late. Much too late.

“...Your head!”

She struck down from above, the sound of her blade cutting through the wind providing her victory sonata.

The king could do naught but gulp in terror.

Every onlooker expected his head to fly off, but...

Boing!

The blade was repelled by an invisible force inches away from the king’s neck.

“What?!”

She didn’t understand. Why didn’t it hit?

The sudden deflection knocked her off balance and sent her tumbling towards her target.

“Watch out!”

The young king reflexively reached out to catch the girl, thinking only to save her.

She landed right in his arms.

“Um...”

“.....”

Dead silence. For a moment, nobody uttered a word. They say that anything can happen on the battlefield, but it’s quite rare to you find yourself holding a girl so close that you can feel her breath on your neck.

The girl’s cheeks slowly turned from white to pink, and then eventually, to bright red.

“Your hands...”

Her composure returned. She directed a sharp glare at her opponent, filled with a mixture of contempt and discomfort.

She didn’t understand what had just transpired. With her lying firmly in his hands, her body was heating up. Something felt off, something more than the awkwardness of this unfamiliar situation. She felt something she never experienced before, stirring her suspicion.

“Hey! What did you do to me!?” she asked loudly, their faces just an inch apart.

“Huh? Well, um, I just thought that you could’ve gotten hurt...” He looked at her, dumbfounded.

“Who cares!? Put me down!”

With burning-red cheeks, she forcefully untangled herself from his grasp and skillfully jumped out of his arms.

“What the hell did you do to me!? Tell me what exactly you did!”

She suppressed her discomfort with her burning spirit, raised her sword again, and stared at the king.

But the King of Althos did not return her look. He was instead looking behind her at the plume of smoke rising in the distance.

“Hey! Are you listening!?”

She glared at him with anger burning in her eyes.

Just as she lifted her sword and prepared another strike, a Freiyan army messenger ran out of the forest and interrupted her.

“Princess! Our supply train has been raided! Most of our supplies have been stolen and the slaves were set free!”

“They freed the slaves!?”

The King of Althos grinned at their conversation. “That’s right! I won’t rest until every slave on this continent is liberated!”

The messenger’s report continued.

“We tried to catch them, but an Althos ambush stopped us and the slaves all ran away.”

The Freiyan princess hid her confusion and continued staring at the king, her eyes aflame with rage.

“I understand. Everyone, retreat!” She sheathed her sword and calmly but firmly ordered a retreat.

The displeasure was clear on her face as she glared at the king before her.

“Don’t think that you’ve won! I will have your head for sure next time!”

She turned on her heels and promptly left.

“She’s gorgeous, but terrifying... Good thing we won’t be seeing each other for a while,” he mused to himself as he reluctantly watched her leave. He had no idea what was to come.

Chapter 1: The Two Brides

“A royal marriage!?”

A few days after repelling the Freiyan army, the royal castle was busy with the post-battle dealings. In the royal chambers, the young King Alnoa was having an unexpected conversation over lunch with his sister, Cecilia.

“Yes. I agree with forming an alliance, but I’m not too fond of this royal marriage idea.”

Cecilia was gorgeous, as one would expect from a member of the royal family. Her golden hair was bundled up into a perfect bun, and she looked at the young king with sorrowful blue eyes.

“How did it come to this?”

Alnoa’s father, the legendary Witch King of Althos, had wielded numerous spells and fought valiantly alongside the Freiyan army. He’d passed away a year earlier due to an epidemic.

With his passing, Alnoa’s influence over Freiya weakened. Cecilia, Althos’ Diva and the rightful heir to the throne, declared herself a priestess and abdicated the throne. Alnoa, next in the line of succession, was crowned king instead.

The Witch King’s passing had destabilized the entire kingdom. Most of the ministers and generals who had loyally served the late king either resigned or retired. Many of the nobles gathered their riches and fled the country. The only ones who remained were citizens who lacked any means of escape and former slaves abandoned by their masters.

The legendary empire had been reduced to a minor power, not unlike those it once held dominion over. Severely lacking in manpower, even Cecilia had to help out with the diplomatic matters. Alnoa didn’t know what to think of a royal marriage while his own kingdom was in such poor shape.

Cecilia placed a cup of tea in front of her brother and explained the situation.

“To summarize, immediately after our battle with the Freiyan army, both Freiya and the neighboring kingdom of Subdera petitioned us for an alliance. As a proof of their good intentions, both countries wish to send their Divas here to marry into the royal family.”

The Divas were seven girls who’d inherited the power of the Valkyrie.

Long ago, the Valkyrie defeated the Demon King by sacrificing her own life to seal him away. In order to prevent the Demon King from ever returning, she created seven artifacts to be passed down to seven maidens each generation. Cecilia was one of them.

The original seven Divas were blessed by the Valkyrie with strength far surpassing that of a normal person’s. Each founded their own country, and the Valkyrie’s devastating powers were passed down in each kingdom’s royal bloodline. The current Divas, as descendants of the gods, were heralded as symbols of their respective countries and only rarely appeared on the battlefield.

Alnoa didn’t have to ask why they proposed to him so suddenly, as he instantly understood the issue at hand. The corners of his mouth curled up into a cynical smile upon hearing the details of the arrangement. The Divas would visit one month apart, and he’d have to make a choice between the two of them. The pieces were all laid out in front of him; he just had to play his cards right. The neighboring countries’ intentions were as clear as the sky.

His sister thought otherwise.

“You don’t need to marry anyone, Al. You have me.”

Cecilia gently hugged her brother’s head.

“Um, Cecilia!? I think I’m old enough to get married.”

He tried to resist her embrace. The constant physical contact from his half-sister had taken its toll on the 15-year-old Alnoa’s mind.

“The first visit is scheduled for tomorrow. How dare they force my little brother into a marriage?“

She looked affectionately at her precious brother.

“But I suppose you are a king. It’d be a good idea to at least meet them.”

“I’d appreciate it if you asked for my opinion once in a while, too.”

Alnoa couldn’t escape his sister’s suffocating embrace, despite his best efforts. He resigned himself to his fate upon seeing the look on her face.

“I’ll meet them if you want, but...”

Cecilia released her brother from her grasp and interrupted him by placing a finger on his lips. She then brought her face right in front of his.

“Don’t worry. You will never have to get married. I’ll always be here for you.“

Al didn’t know if she was joking or not, and he was too afraid to ask. With their noses nearly touching, he could feel the warmth in her gentle gaze.

“But you should be more proactive about meeting new people.“

She dealt the finishing blow with a smirk on her face.

The next day, Alnoa was standing at the gates under the warm sun, garbed in formal dress. He looked more like a young actor cast in the role of a king than an actual member of the royal family.

He suppressed his reluctance and waited patiently for the first of his marriage candidates. This would be his first foreign visitor since he was crowned king. The citizenry had caught wind of the royal visit and congregated near the castle gates to catch a glimpse of the foreign Diva. It felt as if a festival was taking place in the city. Alnoa was tired and grumpy, but looking through the sea of people warmed his heart.

“All this just because a foreign princess is visiting.“

Cecilia had informed him that the first candidate would be Subdera’s Diva. Subdera was a magically advanced neighbor of Althos, lying just over the mountains. They were a major producer of magic goods, dominating the market due to their advanced technology. Their royal castle was the Floating City, which floated in the air thanks to their technological prowess. It was rumored that the castle had once traveled through the skies, but such rumors had never been verified.

Did Subdera desire the kingdom's lands, its king's life, or both? Or perhaps they were simply interested in the legendary Witch King's son?

Alnoa's idle thoughts were soon interrupted.

"Miss Lesfina has arrived!"

The guard's voice resounded through the city, signaling the arrival of their guest. The crowd grew excited in response.

"Unbelievable. She's a minute late! Her tardiness reflects poorly on her ability to lead. Don't you think, Al?"

"I'm more worried about you and how you're turning into a mean mother-in-law."

He sighed, as this was not the first time he'd had to warn his sister about her comments.

"Oh, was that mean of me?"

She asked with a straight face.

Meanwhile, a dazzling black cart, escorted by a number of knights, pulled up right before the two of them. A servant opened the elaborately painted carriage door.

Time stopped for a moment and Alnoa's heart skipped a beat as the Diva stepped out of her carriage. He even forgot about the boisterous crowd around them.

"I'm Lesfina, Subdera's Diva of Sringara. Hello."

Her greeting was plain and terse, possibly indicating a hint of nervousness on her part.

The crowd's reaction was only appropriate, considering her title as the Diva of Sringara. Sringara was one of the eight elementary rasas. It was the principle that defines the love and adoration that sweeps through a performer's audience.

Lesfina's blue hair stopped just past her shoulders. Her somewhat plain blue dress emphasized her fair skin. With her short blue hair and sorrowful violet

eyes, she was like a captivating Gorgon. Lock eyes with her and you'd freeze up on the spot, unable to look away.

Captivated by her beauty, Al absentmindedly responded.

"Yes... Hi there."

He barely managed to escape her gaze and mutter those words.

Lesfina tilted her head at Al's response, clearly confused.

"Why can you respond to me? Did my charm spell not work?"

"Huh? What was that?"

Al tilted his head in kind, mimicking her.

Lesfina straightened her neck and then murmured,

"Fireball."

With her clasped hands and magic chant as the only warning, she shot a fireball right in front of Al's feet.

"Wha!?"

Al leapt into the air in panic.

"What are you doing!?"

Lesfina looked at him in disgust.

"...Worm."

"What?"

Worm? What does she mean by that!?

"I found a worm."

I guess I didn't mishear her.

"Oh, okay."

Al finally managed to collect his composure enough to give a half-hearted response to her baffling actions.

There were no traces of whatever she might have seen on the ground. A crater was all that remained after her fireball. The hole resembled one left by a

tree stump being torn from the ground. Any critter caught up in that blast would have turned to ash in an instant.

One mistake and her husband-to-be's legs would've been burnt to a crisp. Lesfina didn't show the slightest concern about this near-disaster.

Al looked back and forth between the crater and Lesfina's face, dumbfounded

"Don't worry. As long as I'm here, I won't let any lowly worms anywhere near you... Alnoa."

Al could feel a faint sense of achievement radiating from Lesfina's stoic expression.

"R-Right... Thanks."

He quietly thanked her in an attempt to hide his astonishment. She was looking to be quite a handful to deal with.

"Our little Diva here may not be very talkative, but she's not half-bad."

Al couldn't catch what Cecilia muttered under her breath.

"Anyway, thank you for visiting. Ours is a dull country with not much to see, but I hope you'll enjoy your stay nonetheless. Lilicia, please show her to her room."

He finally recalled and issued the opening lines he had rehearsed.

Lilicia, the castle maid, was standing behind Al in full maid dress, waiting to escort the princess to her room. While she looked to be the same age as her young master, she had been serving the family as their head maid ever since the Witch King's coronation. She was a truly mysterious woman.

"Certainly."

Lilicia bowed her head.

"This is our head maid, Lilicia. Feel free to call on her if you're ever in need of anything."

"Thank you."

Lesfina bowed to the maid and handed over her luggage.

That was a pretty intense introduction, but it was still no excuse for fumbling my greeting. At least now I can finally take a break.

But just as he thought that...

“Miss Sharon’s carriage has arrived from Freiya!”

The guard’s voice once again boomed throughout the city.

“What!?”

Alnoa shouted in surprise.

“Oh, what’s happening?”

Al and his sister struggled to grasp the situation. A magnificent carriage rolled through the gates and stopped right in front of them.

What’s going on? Why is the other candidate here already!? She was supposed to arrive next month! This is bad! This is real bad!

Fate was deaf to Al’s petty concerns. Without giving him any time to collect his thoughts, the doors of the carriage slowly opened.

Oh crap!

But no one stepped out of the carriage. In fact, the carriage was empty. Even the guest’s entourage was surprised.

“Huh!? The princess is missing!?”

But then, a loud shout came from above.

“King of Althos!”

Alnoa clearly remembered that voice.

“It’s time for you to die!”



Alnoa also remembered that exact arrogant line.

“Wait, are you—”

Before he could finish speaking, a girl in a red armor leapt off from the carriage roof and swung her giant sword at Al’s neck.

“I’m taking your head!”

Screams filled the air. The guards didn’t have the chance to react to the girl’s ambush. All they could do was hold their breath and expect the worst case scenario. But...

Boi-oi-oi-oing!

“Again!? What’s with this!?”

She couldn’t understand what was happening, but it was clear that she couldn’t hit him. *Something* was deflecting her sword.

The girl’s blade and Al were almost like magnets with two like poles facing each other. Both would be repelled backwards if they got too close.

“Gahh! What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

Al, disregarding the common diplomatic etiquette and his position as king, shot a crude remark towards Sharon. But whatever further rebuke he was planning was quickly forgotten once he laid eyes on her again.

“Ah!”

Instead of crashing into the carriage, as Al expected, she was hanging onto the door with her legs.

“Are you for real?”

She readied her next attack without a moment’s hesitation.

“Haaaah!”

The battle was not over yet. She leapt off the carriage once more, launching herself directly at Al. The carriage was left shaking behind the crimson maiden as she advanced towards her target.

This time, she was sure she had him dead to rights.

“Dieee!”

“Alnoa... I’ll save you.”

The icy-blue maiden approached from behind Al.

“I won’t let lowly worms anywhere near you.”

Lesfina, the other marriage candidate, had come to his help.

“Hey, be careful! Can you handle this?”

Lesfina nodded.

“I’m Subdera’s Diva, after all... And my plans would be... if you died now.”

Al couldn’t quite make out last part of her sentence.

But there was no time to waste, as the crimson maiden was still charging at him.

“Hey, what are you doing!?”

“Don’t worry. I’m deploying a shield. Oh, oops.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I gave my wand to the maid.”

“WHAT!?”

“It’s okay. I’ll figure something out.”

She discarded her plans for erecting a shield and readied herself for physical combat. Her fighting stance was less than impressive. It was apparent that she was a complete novice when it came to hand-to-hand combat.

She’ll get chopped up in a second.

“What are you doing!? Move! You’ll get hurt!“

He grabbed Lesfina from behind and swung her around, placing his back between her and the incoming sword.

“You’re dead!“

The blade closed in on Al’s back, and...

Boi-oi-oi-oing!

Repelled again.

“Ahh!”

The unexpected deflection of the red-haired Diva’s attack knocked her off balance.

“Huh?”

Al let Lesfina go and turned around, only to see Sharon flying towards him. She appeared equal-parts astonished and confused.

“Ugh!”

Sharon crashed into Al before he had the chance to say anything. Both of them tumbled down to the ground, with her landing on top of him. This made for the second time the two of them had ended up in such close proximity.

“Watch your hands!”

Al reached out with his hands in an attempt to get away, but...

Squishy squish.

“Kyah!”

Al’s right hand came into contact with something soft and springy.

Crap. This is bad.

Even an inexperienced young man such as Alnoa could figure out what he had ended up grabbing.

It’ll be hard to talk my way out of this one. This is so unfair! Is there no justice in this world!? If there’s a God watching over me now, then please, I’m begging you. Save me!

“Oh my, Al...”

Cecilia gasped in surprise.

“.....”

He felt compelled to silence by the ominous presence of his sister and Lesfina standing at the edge of his vision.

But then reality gave him a crude awakening.

“You filthy cur!”

At the source of the voice, he found her burning-red face. And just a little bit lower, he saw his hand right on her chest.

“Th-This was just an accident. I swear!”

“You...”

“Wait a second!”

“Let go of my chest, already!”

Small clouds dotted the warm spring sky, and the sound of bells reverberated through Althos. The crowd that had gathered in front of the castle slowly dispersed once the gates shut. They assumed that the farce they had witnessed was a planned play to entertain the masses.

“So is this how the King of Althos welcomes his future wife!? By groping her in front of the whole city!?“

“Yeah, right. Let’s not forget how about how you just tried to assassinate me! Wait, you are the Freiyan Diva, aren’t you?

“Hahaha, that’s right. Do you feel sorry, now?“

“No. Not even a little.“

They looked like a couple of fierce dogs snarling at each other before an underground dogfight. Not the sight you’d expect to see between a (potential) married couple.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, King of Althos. I’m the princess of Freiya, Sharon. I’m looking forward to spending the following ‘month’ with you.”

After a few minutes of intense glaring, Sharon introduced herself with a fake smile and proper, ladylike manners. It was almost enough to make Al forget she was furiously after his head just moments ago. She was now nothing other than a maiden trying to win the heart of her potential fiancé.

“Oh my. I didn’t expect this from a Diva of such a war-ridden country. Here I thought you’d just be a big, hulking gorilla, but I have to admit—it was very sly

of you to seduce my brother with your body like that!”

Sharon didn’t flinch at Cecilia’s crude remarks. Her fake smile remained intact, even under everyone’s questioning gaze.

“Is there a problem?”

There’s a huge problem!

The problem wasn’t how she had just tried to kill him. Nor was it her captivating eyes as she cutely tilted her head in confusion. The real problem was something else entirely.

She’s the one I clashed with on the battlefield, and she even introduced herself. There’s no mistake that she’s Freiya’s Diva. But then, why...

“Weren’t you not supposed to come here for another month?”

“What?”

Sharon didn’t seem to have a clue as to what he was talking about.

“Ah!”

She gave a shout, realizing who was standing next to Al.

“Wait. I thought that I was supposed to come here first.”

Sharon was clearly confused. If this was an act, then she could have fooled even the best detectives in the world.

“.....”

She crossed her arms and thought about the situation. She was already here, so she may as well make the best of it, she figured.

“I was so excited to finally meet King Alnoa that I came a bit early! Hehe!”

“That’s not how it works!”

She seemed like a pretty easygoing girl for a princess who shouldered the fate of an entire country.

The crimson-eyed girl puffed out her chest proudly, having given a supposedly perfect excuse for her early arrival, but even with that wonderful smile on her face, her reasoning didn’t satisfy Al.

However, Cecilia felt differently about the issue.

“What’s the problem? You would have met sooner or later, anyway.”

Sharon immediately took her side, acting like as this was her plan all along.

“That’s right! I just wanted to get this annoying ordeal out of the way!”

“Annoying”!? Did she just call this an “annoying ordeal”!?

Al shot a glare at Sharon, who seemed oblivious to his anger.

With that exchange out of the way, Al decided to show the two Divas through the palace and introduce them to the staff. Of course, Sharon left her sword with Lilicia.

I guess I’m safe now... hopefully.

“They have pretty fitting nicknames, huh? The Diva of the Sword, and the Diva of the Wand,”

Al mumbled to himself as he showed the group the way down the stone-tiled castle corridors.

The rumors stated that Freiya’s Diva was a legendary swordswoman who was blessed by the Goddess of War, while Lesfina could cast countless spells without any preparation or chanting. Seeing Sharon and Lesfina in action first-hand cemented those rumors into fact in the young king’s mind.

“Which means they can probably go toe-to-toe with Cecilia.”

The day’s events had also lent credence to the myth that the only ones chosen to wield the power of the Valkyrie were beautiful women.

Al was pulled out of his thoughts by Sharon turning around and looking at him with disgust, as if he were a filthy molester.

“What are you staring at!?”

She was still on edge due to the incident at the courtyard.

“Nothing. I’m just looking where I’m going.”

Being caught off-guard, he couldn’t give her a proper answer. Instead, he chose to break eye contact with her.

“I’ll let this slide this time, but if I catch you staring at me again, I’ll rip your head off.“

“.....”

From her glare, it would be easy to assume the only reason for the Freiyan princess’ visit was to assassinate Al.

“You can stare at me, if you want...“

Lesfina’s bashful attempt at lightening the mood left Al dumbfounded. His pure mind raced, without success, to find the proper reaction. Seeing her rival’s flustered, rose-colored cheeks, Sharon took the opportunity to take a jab at Al.

“Her face is burning red. You didn’t do anything to her, did you?”

I can’t believe she’s still treating me a like a pervert because of that accident.

“We only met an hour ago. What could I have done?”

Al wished to dispel Sharon’s concerns, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“How should I know!?”

The barest hint of blush began to spread on Lesfina’s cheeks.

“I forgive your affair. From what I’ve read, our ‘aggressive cuddling’ earlier makes us... husband and wife.”

Lesfina casually dropped that bomb in her usual quiet manner.

“Wait, hold on a second. I think you’re misusing that expression! And ‘affair’!? That was just a mishap!”

“A mishap!? How dare you! You—”

“Oh, we’re here. Please follow me.”

Cecilia interrupted Sharon just before another long-winded argument broke out.

“Yes, Cecilia.”

On her way into the parlor, Lesfina’s eyes met with Al’s for a moment. She covered her face in embarrassment and rushed inside.

“When did you two... Argh! You’re the worst! You’re scum!”

Sharon let out her frustration on the flabbergasted Al and then followed Lesfina inside.

They were led into the most extravagant parlor in the castle. The room was filled with the late Witch King's personal collection of exquisite furniture, gathered from all around the world. two beautiful sofas sat next to a mastfully made fireplace, brought in from the kingdom of Girlgon. The furniture was expertly coordinated, lending a sophisticated air to the room.

"Please have a seat."

Al offered the girls one of the sofas, and he sat on the opposite sofa.

"Thank you, darling."

Cecilia took the opportunity to prepare tea, a hobby of hers.

Al mulled over how he should start the awkward conversation he had to have with the two Divas sitting across from him. But before he could finish his thoughts, he found himself facing down a blade once again.

"Got you!"

"Whaa!"

The crimson-haired princess had just launched her third attack on King Alnoa.

Didn't she leave her weapons with Lilicia!?

Al pulled his head away just before his face could get sliced open.

"Tch."

Sharon clicked her tongue in frustration.

With that, another staredown began.

"What, did you think my sword was the only weapon on me?"

Sharon twirled her knife around and taunted Al with a smug look on her face.

"Why do you have a knife on you!?"

Al questioned Sharon while peeking his head out from behind the sofa he'd previously been sitting on.

"Would you cut it out, already?"

“With pleasure!”

“Whoa!”

Sharon lunged at Al behind the sofa. He narrowly dodged her attack.

She’s going way too far! Time to put a stop to this.

“Don’t underestimate me! Do you think I’ll just keep running forever!?”

“Too slow!”

Al’s attempt at a counter-attack was thwarted by Sharon, who had anticipated such a maneuver.

“Take this!”

“Wahh!”

Al was unable to react to her swift attack. He lost his balance and collapsed onto the sofa.

Sharon stood over the defenseless Al. She smiled victoriously. Certain of her victory, she raised her knife and swung down with all her might. However...

The knife blade broke clean in half before it reached him. Even with all her strength put into an attack, she still couldn’t reach him.

“Again!? What’s going on? Why can’t I ever hit you!?”

Fuming with rage, Sharon brought her right hand to her chest and pulled out another knife. They say that a woman’s body holds many secrets, but nobody would ever expect those secrets to be so deadly.

“Stop resisting, cur!”

Sharon once again went in for the kill without even trying to hide her intent.

Clang!

This time, it wasn’t his usual trick that saved him. Help came to his aid in the form of an ice ball flying in from the side and knocking the knife out of Sharon’s hand.

“That’s not how a princess... That’s not how a Diva should act.”

Lesfina, who had been quietly watching until now, pulled out her wand and drew a magic circle in front of her.

“And... it would be an issue if you killed my future husband before our wedding.”

An “issue”? That’s it? What, is my death on the same level as her losing her house keys!?

The two of them ignored Al’s displeasure, instead preferring to angrily face each other down.

“Wait a second! You can’t fight here!”

“It’s okay, darling. I also once read that you should protect your beloved at all costs.”

“Forget about that book. Just listen to me for a second!”

But Al’s desperate cry could not penetrate the thick veil of tension surrounding the two.

Lesfina thrust her arms out, a fireball starting to form in her palms. The rumors were true. She was able to use magic without chanting first.

I guess that’s the power of a Diva. Wait. Is she planning on blowing up this entire room!?

“Hah! Do you think that’s enough to scare me?”

Sharon smiled as the vicious ball of flames closed in on her.

“It’s pretty rare that I get to fight another Diva!”

She deflected the fireball with a skillful swing of her knife.

“Wait, how is that even possible!?”

Al was stunned. Too stunned to move out of the way of the incoming fireball.

Kaboom!

The explosion launched him spinning through the air.

Huh? What the heck happened?

To Al, the explosion wasn’t very hot or painful.

However, the beautifully arranged furniture wasn't so lucky. Caught in the blast was the pride and joy of the royal family.

"Nooo! That clock was my father's favorite! Do you have any idea how much it cost!?"

"Don't worry. I made sure you wouldn't get hurt, darling."

Alnoa could see Lesfina focusing on the threat in front of her as he soared through the air.

That clock was a national treasure. Would it kill you to feel at least a little bit of remorse?

"I'm fine, but that doesn't mean—Gahh!"

Al hit the ground mid-sentence.

The impact hurt more than the damn explosion.

"Are you okay!? That fireball blew up right in front of you!"

Al's would-be assassin checked on his health in a concerned tone.

"I just put on the tea. Could you please wait a few more minutes?"

Al fought off the pain and looked over to the side. There was Cecilia, peacefully preparing the tea with her personal tea set.

Right. Cecilia's a Diva too. It's almost impressive how unperturbed she is by this whole ruckus.

"A-Anyway... Back to assassinating Al!"

"Is that really something you should say out loud!?"

As a king, countless assassins had made attempts on Al's life. Assassination was a wicked and cowardly act he would never respect.

"Sh-Shut up! This is my first time doing this!"

She's awfully moody for an assassin...

Even Sharon realized that her blatant murder attempt was on the aggressive side.

"I too wish to have my first time with King Alnoa..."

Lesfina injected an innuendo-laden remark from the sidelines.

“What do you mean by that, Lesfina? Actually, sorry. Forget I asked.”

Al’s headache was becoming the most painful part of this ordeal.

“King Alnoa, please call me Feena. That’s what those who are close to me call me.”

“Ah, alright! Then, please call me Al!”

“Al... Okay.”

Feena nodded in agreement. If you looked close enough, you could see a slight trace of happiness on her face befitting a teenage girl. For a moment, Al was captivated by the beautiful, bashfully smiling princess.

Feena puffed her (hopefully) developing chest out and shot an ice-cold glare at Sharon, who was standing next to Al.

“And to the brute over there. Make sure you address me as ‘Miss Lesfina’!”

“Hey, who are you calling a brute!?”

Sharon met Lesfina’s cold gaze with a fiery glare. Her expression was that of a wild beast, ready to attack.

“Sorry... I meant fiend.”

Feena pressed on without even flinching at Sharon’s fierce look.

“Oh, is that so? Don’t think that I’ll let you get away with this!”

She was fuming, grinding her teeth in frustration. A red aura began to emanate around her.

“Hey, hey, calm down...”

“Al. Watch out.”

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Feena jumped in front of Al to protect him.

“Oh my. Sorry to keep you all waiting. The tea is ready.”

Cecilia defused the bomb that was about to explode with a single, casual remark.

“Come on, sit down!”

She directed her gentle smile at Al and hurried him to the table. Al’s nerves settled down a little, but he still felt the need to warn his sister about the brewing storm.

“This isn’t the time for that, Cecilia!”

“I understand that you’re all wary of each other since you’ve just met, but would you mind joining me for a relaxing cup of tea? Oh, did something happen?”

Cecilia tilted her head in surprise, as if she had no idea what kind of situation she’d just walked into. Whether she planned this all along or was simply oblivious, Althos’ Diva was a master tactician who commanded a great sense of authority.

“Now, would you care to join me for a drink?”

Paying no heed to the intense showdown transpiring, Cecilia stood between the two girls and offered them each a cup of tea.

“Shut up! I didn’t come here to—Ah!”

A faint metallic clank reverberated through the room. Sharon’s knife knocked against the beautiful tea cup of tea being offered and a few drops spilled onto the floor.

It was an honest accident, yet Cecilia’s smile turned from warm to unsettling. She just stood there, quietly holding out the cup of tea to Sharon.

“Ah, um, I didn’t mean to...”

Sharon hurriedly took the cup from Cecilia’s hand.

Is she afraid of Cecilia? I wouldn’t be surprised. This could get ugly.

“Thank you, Miss Cecilia.”

Feena got the message and took her cup as well.

“I’m honored to—Ah!”

Something crashed on the ground.

“Ah... I’m... sorry...”

Feena turned pale in an instant. Cecilia again stood there quietly with an unsettling smile on her face.

Feena understood the situation after Sharon grazed the cup with her knife, but she was perhaps too tense. Her shaking fingers dropped the cup as she was taking it, and it crashed onto the ground.

Okay. This is definitely going to get ugly.

The tension in the room was palpable. You could nearly see the anger seeping out of Cecilia. Get too close to it, and it would tear you apart.

“Oh my... It’s one thing ruin the extravagant furniture my father collected and cared for over his entire life, but how dare you break my tea set?”

In the midst of this suffocating situation, Cecilia made her move.

Crap, this is bad. This is really bad!

The three of them held their breath in front of Cecilia’s unnerving smile.

Then, a few minutes later...

“There’s plenty of tea left, so drink up!”

Cecilia watched on as Al, Sharon, and Feena sipped their tea, her smile as unsettling as ever. The three of them bowed down and complimented her.

“It’s delicious!”

Their smiles were stiff. It was a thin rope they were walking across.

“This tea comes from plants from my personal garden. How do you like it?”

“I-It’s very... aromatic...”

Sharon answered, forcefully curving her mouth into a smile, while Feena’s answered in a quivering voice.

“It’s... delicious.”

“N-Nothing beats your tea, dear sister!”

And finally, Al responded. The three of them tried their best to placate the still-smiling Cecilia.

“I didn’t do anything! How did I get mixed up in this!?”

Al whispered in complaint to Sharon and Feena the moment Cecilia turned her back.

“Why would I know!? Why didn’t you tell us how your sister turns into a monster when she gets mad!?”

“Not like I had the time. You jumped on me the moment we entered the room!”

Their quiet argument was on the verge of turning into another full-blown fight.

“Oh, would you like seconds?”

As Cecilia turned back, all of them straightened up again.

“Ah, I forgot the cakes!”

Cecilia rushed out of the room. Sharon waited a few seconds and then snapped at Al.

“Explain yourself to me right now!”

“Huh, what are you talking about?”

So many things had happened between the two of them already. Al struggled to pinpoint what, exactly, Sharon was talking about, though he could make some educated guesses. Why couldn’t her attacks ever hit him? Why did she intensely heat up when he held her in his arms?

“Did you really think that I would overlook you fondling me!?”

You tried to kill me, and I accidentally touched your chest a little when you fell on top of me! Which of those two do you think is worse!?

“Ah... I want to hear about that too.”

Why are you betraying me, Feena!?

“Please explain yourself nice and slowly.”

Sharon stood up and walked towards Al. He looked away, overpowered by Sharon’s unforgiving crimson eyes.

Cecilia returned to the room and stood next to Al. She took a sip of tea and then addressed the other girls.

“Were you talking about how the Demon King and the Divas are related?”

“Cecilia!”

She held up her finger, stopping Al’s interjection.

“It’s okay. It would be unreasonable to have them stay here for a month without knowing anything.”

You’re right, but...

“And by my power as a messenger of God, I’ll have them swear to never talk about this to outsiders.”

She turned towards Sharon and Feena and started chanting a spell in a melodic tone.

Cecilia was not only Althos’ Diva, but a priestess as well. She had been a cheerful little girl, but after a certain point, she had become unable to erase her smile from her face. And so everyone in the kingdom—be them peasants, nobles, or naval officers—praised her as the eternally kind Smiling Diva.

Of course, everyone had expected her to become the next monarch of Althos. But after her father’s death, Cecilia insisted on becoming a priestess instead.

It wasn’t rare for Divas to join the church, which revered the Valkyrie, but Cecilia had her own very special set of reasons. One of which was so Al could succeed the crown. But her main reason for abdicating and becoming a priestess was because...

“Once I become a priestess, we won’t be recognized as brother and sister anymore. I can finally marry Al!”

Becoming a priestess would nullify her legal ties to her family, rendering the two of them brother and sister no longer. Even better, the church conveniently allowed their clergy to marry.

But Cecilia had failed to account for how gentle and caring Al was towards her. One day, when she was pretending to be devastated over their relation being nullified...

“Don’t worry, Cecilia! God may not recognize us as siblings anymore, but you’ll always be my big sister in my heart!”

It was a critical blow to her aspirations. But building on that experience, she was now working behind the scenes to make her dream of brother-sister marriage a reality, a fact unknown to all but Lilicia.

Without letting her true intentions show, she finished the ritual, raised her left hand, and then recited the binding words.

“I am a messenger of God. Those who swear an oath to me shall never break it.”

Her left hand lit up with a divine light. Looking at her sublime form, one could mistake the room for a sacred church.

All they have to do now is make their pledges to God.

But Cecilia’s lips curved up into a mischievous smile.

“If these filthy peasants dare to break their promise to my dearest Al, have them experience xxxx and then xxxx their xxxx, so that they can never xxxx again♪”

She can’t just end it normally, can she?

“What!?”

“M-Miss Cecilia?”

Sharon and Feena looked at their soon-to-be sister-in-law in bewilderment. They couldn’t process what they had just heard.

“Cecilia, what are you saying!? What kind of god are you making an oath with!?”

“Oh, don’t worry. There won’t be a problem as long as they keep their promise.”

Fair point.

Sharon and Feena meekly nodded in agreement, running contrary to their usual confident behavior.

“Alright, let’s do it! I swear!”

“I understand.”

With that, their vows were complete.

“Well then... Al!”

When the spell completed, Cecilia looked at Al.

“Okay. I’ll explain everything.”

Unaware of his sister’s true intentions, Al reluctantly agreed.

“The Demon King’s reincarnation!?”

Al’s heart skipped a beat as he looked at the girl’s puzzled expression. He had no idea why Cecilia would have him tell them such a closely guarded secret, one only a select few people knew before.

Is she planning on scaring them away by revealing my lineage?

“You know the story of the Demon King and the Valkyrie, right?”

Al asked them, partially out of frustration.

“Of course. A really long time ago, some king hosted the Demon King in his body to fend off an invasion from his neighbor. He couldn’t control the Demon King inside him and went crazy. Seven of his beautiful servants sacrificed their lives to summon a Valkyrie who sealed the Demon King away.”

Sharon proudly puffed her chest out upon finishing her explanation. Her breasts were a sight to behold, but Al didn’t have the luxury to appreciate them.

“To prevent the Demon King’s revival, the Valkyrie split her consciousness and strength into seven parts and distributed them between seven girls. That’s how us Divas were born. They say one of the chosen maidens was even a three-year-old child.”

Feena indifferently picked up the story from where Sharon left off.

“Exactly. So, what do you think, where is the Demon King sealed?”

Al crossed his arms and gave his best teacher impression as he lectured the Divas.

“Wait... You don’t mean that...”

Feena gasped.

“Exactly. Right here!”

Al let out an exaggerated sigh and pointed down.

“Under this castle!?”

Well, it’s not like I’ve seen it myself, but they don’t have to know that.

“And I’ve been chosen as the Demon King’s vessel.”

He dealt one final blow at the puzzled girls.

“That’s right! My dear little brother possesses the attributes of the Demon King of legend!”

In contrast to the depressed Al, Cecilia triumphantly puffed out her chest.

“Which probably means that he has the Demon King’s powers, too.”

Sharon, deep in thought with her hand on her chin, seemed to have accepted the explanation.

“Yes. I’ve been chosen to inherit his power. I can’t use much of it, since he’s still sealed, but he can’t take over my body either.”

“Wait a minute!”

Sharon looked up at Cecilia.

“Cecilia is a normal Diva. She has no involvement in this matter.”

“So... You’re the Demon King’s vessel, and your sister is a Diva...?”

Feena raised her eyebrows.

It was the truth, as improbable as it seemed.

“Oh, that’s not exactly right. We’re from different mothers,” Cecilia said, as she played with her golden locks.

“Cecilia is from the previous Queen, while I’m from my dad’s second marriage.”

“Exactly. Which also means we can get married!”

“No, we can’t.”

Al let out a heavy sigh at his sister's sparkling eyes. Her increasingly intense come-ons had started to wear more and more on him.

I hope she was just trying to make a joke to lighten the mood. I really, really hope so.

"Don't worry! God says that there's nothing stronger in this world than the power of love!"

Even if he did, who would interpret that statement this way!? I somehow doubt that God intended to promote incest.

By this point, Al's head was held firmly in his hands.

"So then, what's up with that crazy technique of yours?"

Sharon led the digressed conversation back on track.

"I don't know."

Al raised his hands and shrugged. He hadn't experienced anything like this before.

Out of the three Divas, Al was closest to his sister. But Cecilia loved him more than any sister should. If the world was doomed and Al's death was the only way to save it, Cecilia would happily sacrifice the world. She would never raise a sword against him like Sharon had.

Not counting that one time...

Cecilia had been clingy with Al ever since she was a little girl, asking him questions like if he loves her, and if he would marry her when they grow up.

I would often tell her that she was making a scary face when she asked those questions. She'd just look at me curiously and let go. Oh, now that I think about it, that's around the time when she started permanently smiling.

"Hey, are you listening!?"

"Ah!"

The crimson Diva snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Maybe the Demon King inside Al is reacting to the Valkyrie's power that resides deep inside you, Sharon. Or maybe..."

Cecilia answered her question with a brimming smile on her face. And then she snuggled up against Al.

“Maybe the souls of the seven beautiful servants still reside within the Divas, and they’re unable to hurt their beloved King. Ah, that’d be so romantic! Right, Al!?”

“We usually fight using our weapons and magic... the artifacts and power of the Valkyrie. The Demon King might be reacting to the remnants of the Valkyrie that sealed him.”

Completely ignoring Cecilia, Feena confidently offered her own proposal.

“So that’s why my sword couldn’t hit you!”

Sharon seemed convinced by this explanation as well.

“Now I know why my charm spell didn’t work.”

Feena murmured to herself.

“Ah, and that’s why when you touch me, I... um...”

Sharon blushed a little and glanced at Al.

“Oh, could that have been a Heavenly Surge?”

“What’s a Heavenly Surge?”

Sharon looked dumbfounded at Cecilia, who was calmly sipping her tea. It was Feena who responded to her question.

“‘Born is the power to control the world when the Demon and the Saint come together.’ Is Freiya so far in the boonies that you don’t even have the scriptures?”

“Ah! I’ve heard about that! I haven’t read it myself, but it’s written in a book from about a thousand years ago.”

Al followed up Feena’s provocation before Sharon could respond.

Wait, why does she look mad!?

“...Don’t worry, Al. I’ll tell you all about it later, when we’re alone,” Feena responded, in a polite tone.

“Hey, aren’t you a bit biased towards Al?”

Sharon glared at the fidgeting Feena.

Al absentmindedly shrugged.

Things are getting awkward again...

“So, what exactly is this *Heavenly Surge* , anyway?”

He desperately tried to get the discussion back on track before they could wreck the room again.

“Basically, it’s when holy and evil energies mix, which then gives birth to power capable of going toe-to-toe with the Gods themselves. I bet that your power flowed into Sharon, which resulted in her extreme reaction.”

Cecilia recited the details from memory, with her finger on her lips.

Al had resistance towards Sharon’s attacks. Since Sharon received the Valkyries’ divine protection, her attacks were unable to reach the Demon King, restrained by the same Valkyries’ seal. But the same could not be said in reverse. The Divas had no resistance to the Demon King’s powers.

“Wait. Are you telling me I can’t hurt him!?”

It was exactly as she thought. Attempting to attack Al was for her like trying to defeat a chess grandmaster with only a king on the board.

Cecilia glanced at Sharon as if she just realized something.

“I also heard that when your powers mix inside a Diva, the Valkyrie’s power protects them from harm. But a byproduct of this is that they experience something akin to sexual arousal.”

“What!? How did you... Ah, I mean...!”

Sharon was obviously flustered.

“Oh, did you get turned on by his Heavenly Surge?”

“Naughty Sharon... The Diva of Obscenity.”

Sharon shot up from the sofa at Feena’s provocation.

“Wh-What did you just say!? One more word, and I’ll cut your tongue out and feed it to the horses!”

Sharon was shaking with a bright-red face. It was hard to tell if it was from anger or embarrassment.

“Horses are herbivores. You don’t even know that? What an idiot.”

“That’s it, you’re done for!”

Did I just hear something snap?

Sharon, who’d had enough of Feena’s insults, brought her hand to her chest.

Wait, she’s hiding something else there!? What manner of sorcery is this!?

Beside the awe-stricken Al, Feena was getting ready for battle as well.

“Time to put you down.”

An eerie silence settled in the room as the two of them stared each other down. It felt like the calm before the storm. A storm that had been building in strength over the last hour thanks to a countless number of spats. The time of its landfall was imminent.

“Oh, I know! Let’s give them a live demonstration!”

With that, the storm was downgraded from hurricane strength to a mere passing thunderstorm.

I’ll just have to weather the storm for now. Though I’d prefer if we could all get along in the future.

Just as the situation was about to explode, Cecilia gracefully hopped between them and grabbed Al’s hands.

“Al, if you’d please.”

“Cecilia, what are you...”

“Hehe...”

She gently placed his hands against his chest.

“Wait, Cecilia!”

Cecilia wouldn’t let this opportunity slide, even if her life depended on it. She ignored her brother’s protest and squeezed his hands even tighter on her chest.

“Hyahh! Ahhh!”

Her immodest cries echoed through the room.

“Wh-What are you doing!?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m just demonstrating a Heavenly Surge.”

Cecilia managed to calm her heavy breathing enough to squeeze out a reply.

“Does it only work if I’m grabbing your boobs!?”

Cecilia’s grasp on Al’s hand held firm, no matter how much he struggled against her.

Cecilia’s breasts were soft to the touch and elastic.

What are you doing in front of my future brides!?

Cecilia’s smile turned devious upon her seeing the desperate look in Al’s eyes.

“Enough! Let go of my hands already!”

“I’m not done yet. I need to confirm if it works!”

“Let me go!”

“No! I’m not letting you get away from me!”

“Cecilia!!”

“Hehe!”

“Miss Cecilia is scary...”

Feena murmured that under her breath, but Cecilia still heard it.

“Scary...?”

Cecilia winced at Feena’s statement and let go of Al’s hands. She was shaking like a leaf.

What in the world happened?

Her flushed cheeks immediately lost all their color.

“Huh!? What’s going on!?”

Al fell into a panic upon seeing his sister’s reaction. Unbeknownst to him, all the times he had told her she looked scary shook her to the core. It was a childhood trauma that never left her.

“I’m scary...?”

“Cecilia?”

“Al, I am not scary, am I?”

“Cecilia, what’s wrong!?”

“Don’t play dumb!”

Al noticed a sharp gaze on his back. Sharon, who had been boisterous just moments earlier, was staring at him in dead silence.

Al didn’t have to see her to know what kind of face she was making. Scared for his life, he decided to turn around and explain himself, but Sharon cut him off at the pass.

“How low can you get, fondling your own sister like that!?”

“Even as your wife, I’m not sure if I can support this...”

The two quarrelling Divas were brought together by a mutual disgust for the act they had just witnessed.

What was that all about?

Maybe the method used was wrong, or maybe Cecilia simply meant the whole thing as a joke. Either way, no Heavenly Surge occurred, and the siblings learned nothing new from the experience.

“Oh, sorry. I was just excited to try it out!”

Cecilia had finally calmed down. The other girls, though, were still glaring coldly at Al.

Why is it always my fault!? Do they not know the meaning of the word ‘accident’? Or is it the fate of men to always take the blame, every time an indecent mishap happens!?

“Don’t you dream of laying your filthy hands on me ever again!”

That was Sharon’s takeaway from the situation.

I know how you feel, believe me. But hearing that from such a cute girl still hurts, you know!

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t, even if you asked me.”

“Grr... Good! That’s all I want.”

Cecilia took a sip of tea. She might’ve seemed calm on the outside, but on the inside, she wanted nothing more than to flee into her room and curl into a ball.

Sharon, on the other hand, was an open book. Her fake smile failed to hide her anger.

“Oh, Lilicia! Would you please prepare a room for Miss Sharon as well?”

Lilicia quietly opened the parlor door and answered Cecilia.

“Certainly. The room has already been prepared.”

Since when was she standing there!?

“Thank you. Sharon, Lesfina, allow me to guide you to your rooms. I’ll show you through the castle on the way there.”

Cecilia left the parlor with Lilicia closely following behind her.

“Thanks for letting me stay here and all that, Your Majesty.”

So shallow!

With a mocking smile, Sharon gracefully stood up and followed Cecilia as well.

“.....”

Feena gave a quick bow with her usual expressionless face and left the room.

The young king was left in silence, now free of the naked animosity he had been facing for the last hour.

“Finally...”

Having successfully ridden out the storm, Al let out a sigh of relief, leaned back in his seat, and rested his legs on the table.

Life is full of surprises, huh?

In the end, it was decided that both of them would stay here for the next month.

What should I do now? I wasn't prepared for this.

"What an absurd turn of events."

He recalled the battle Althos and Freiya had fought a few days earlier.

Against all odds, they were victorious. No one expected an army led by a young, inexperienced king to triumph over Freiya's military might. Seeing their fall, the neighboring countries changed their strategy. They were still certain of an eventual victory, but they feared the possibility of a long, drawn-out war. Any victory would have left them weakened, making them easy prey for their neighbors.

Which would mean it's better to take over our country without a fight.

And so, two of Althos' neighbors sent in their trump cards, the Divas, maidens capable of felling thousands of soldiers on their own. Both countries had reached the same conclusion, but their approaches differed. One sought to take control of the King and, in turn, his kingdom. The other sought to take the crown more aggressively by killing the King. Freiya refused to give the initiative to Subdera, so Sharon was sent in a month early.

How obnoxious. I almost would've preferred an all-out war.

Al let out a heavy sigh and gulped down the last of the tea left on the table.

The next day, while rumors of the King's arranged marriage plans spread across the country like wildfire, Al was quietly doing paperwork in his room. He had been neck-deep in work ever since the arrival of the two marriage candidates. It was complicated business hosting two princesses.

Al had to send out confirmation of their arrival to their respective countries as soon as possible, while making sure to keep as many of the details as he could to himself. He did not want to find out what Freiya and Subdera would do should they ever learn of what had transpired the day before. He could only imagine the outrage he would face.

The other challenge was taking care of their needs during their stay.

“Al, do you have a moment?”

The door to his office opened without a knock. Though one could hardly call it an office. It had a bed for napping and a collection of Al’s favorite books for leisure, making it more akin to a bedroom.

“What is it, Sharon?”

“I was just thinking, what if I gave up on murdering you and tried to become your wife for real?”

His unexpected visitor was none other than Sharon. She wore the same dress as yesterday, but she looked much more attractive now. For the first time in Al’s eyes, she looked like a real, beautiful princess.

Wait, are you sure you want to admit that you came here to assassinate me? Though I guess that much was already obvious.

Al was silent as she approached him. He was very suspicious of this change in attitude. Something was telling him that this wasn’t going to end well.

At some point, Sharon had started calling him “Al” instead of “Your Majesty.” He decided it was best not to ask why.

She probably changed because “Al” is just easier to say.

“...Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“This isn’t a ploy to attack me, is it?”

“..... No, it’s not.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that, but would you mind telling me what it is you’re hiding behind your back?”

“That’s a secret. Teehee!”

Al wanted nothing more than to be able to trust Sharon, but unfortunately for her, her secret was peeking out from behind her fiery hair.

Assassins this bad at deception are exceptionally rare.

“Okay, drop the act. I can see your sword behind your head.”

“Really?”

Sharon looked at Al, perplexed.

“Yes, really! Are you stupid? Do you think I’m that dumb!?”

“Tch. And here I thought this would fool him.”

“I heard that!”

Al let out a sigh.

We only met yesterday, and she already thinks that I’m an idiot?

“Didn’t you give that sword to Lilicia?”

“Hey, I’m a princess. I just told the maids that keeping my sword from me would lead to an international incident!”

“Oh, for the love of...”

Sharon gripped the hilt of her sword with devious smile on her face.

“That’s enough talk!”

“Is it!?”

They were trapped in a small room without any space to dodge.

“You’re really gonna try this again?” Al added quietly.

Yesterday’s events vividly flashed through his mind. The outcome was obvious, but having a sword swung at him was still scary. He tightly closed his eyes.

“Dieee!”

Sharon swung her sword at Al’s head, but, just as expected, it rebounded before it could reach him. The table took the hit in place of his face. It was sliced clean in half, along with the stack of documents resting on top of it.

“No! I just finished those!”

“Who cares? You won’t need them where you’re going!”

She looked at him with a smug face, as if she didn't even process what just happened.

"I'm pretty sure you'd still need those documents even if I died."

"Don't worry. I'll make your death as painless as possible!"

Crap... There's no talking to this girl when she's this excited.

In the face of this reckless assault, Al could only think of one option. The moment Sharon swung her sword, Al lunged forward.

"Listen to me!"

Longswords are useless in close-quarter combat. I just have to push forward!

"There!"

"Gahh!"

Al pressed forward. Sharon shrieked and backed off like a frightened animal. Feeling cornered, she collapsed to her knees, tears forming in the corner of her red eyes.

"What's the problem?"

She flinched at Al's words. With her hands covering her breasts, she scowled at him.

"What do you think you're doing!?"

"I should be the one asking that!"

What's with this reaction!? I was just aiming at her chest—wait, no. I mean I was just trying to restrain her arms. I never expected her to react like this.

"D-Didn't you promise to never touch me?"

"This was self-defense!"

Oh, right! She's afraid of the Heavenly Surge. That makes sense, but it still hurts to see her like this. Am I really that scary?

"B-Back off! I'll scream!"

Sharon desperately scurried back like a scared puppy.

I wonder what she thinks of me now.

“H-Hey...”

“I told you to back off!”

“You’re the one who charged at me!”

“Sh-Shut up!”

As charmless and unreasonable as ever.

Al had a sudden, devious spark of inspiration.

Wait, this is pretty fun. It’s time for some payback. Maybe I can even stop her from trying to kill me.

“Hey, back off!”

“Apologize.”

“For what?”

“For ruining my work.”

One step.

“Why should I!?”

Two steps.

“Okay, okay! I’ll apologize!”

Three steps.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry that I destroyed your documents! Well? Are you happy?”

Sharon looked up at him with wet eyes. She was on the verge of crying.

“Still not enough.”

Al whispered.

“Swear me that you won’t try to assassinate me anymore.”

Al, unwavering, continued his advance.

“B-But that’s my mission.”

Four steps.

“Okay, okay! Stop! Please stop! I’m begging you!”

Five steps.

“Why won’t you stop!?”

Six steps.

“Ahh!”

She bumped into Al’s bed. She had nowhere left to run.

Al reflected on his actions while looking down on the whimpering girl.

Maybe I went too far.

Sharon’s powerful crimson eyes had lost their light and were now filled with tears.

“You coward! How dare you play such dirty tricks!?”

Ugh, this girl...

“Are you still resisting?”

I guess talking down to others is part of her nature. But I think this is enough. She’s a princess, after all.

“I’ll never lose!”

Sharon rolled onto the bed and reached to open the nearby door.

“I’ll put this battle on hold for now, but next time, next time I’ll get you!”

“Hey, that’s—”

Al intended to say ‘that’s the door to the storage room, a room filled to the brim with documents,’ but Sharon was in too much of a rush to listen. She flung the door open with a loud creak.

“Wait, don’t!”

“Ahh!”

“Watch out! Whoa!”

The force of the door opening sent large stacks of documents tumbling down. Al gasped and rushed in to protect Sharon. Documents collapsed all around

them with a loud thud.

“Ouch...”

Dust from the old documents filled the room. Al and Sharon remained silent for a moment, having narrowly avoided disaster.

I don’t want to think about what would’ve happened if Freiya found out that their princess got injured in my office by a pile of old, dusty documents dropping on her. I hope she’s al...right... Wait, are those her panties!?

Let’s review the unfortunate chain of events that led to the current situation.

1) Sharon, while kneeling on the bed, flung open the storeroom door.

2) Still on the bed, Sharon fell on her rear.

3) Al rushed onto the bed and stretched over Sharon to protect her.

And now, this scenario was about to reach its obvious end.

“Get off of me, you perv! Stop pushing your crotch into my face! You freak!”

Sharon hurled a barrage of insults towards Al with a burning-red face.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to!”

Is she like this because of a Heavenly Surge?

Sharon pulled in her legs, blocking her panties from view.

“Now I’m forever sullied.”

Sharon mumbled to herself in a weak, shaking voice.

“What?”

“Nothing!”

She looked away.

“Just get off me, already!”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry.”

She let out a relieved sigh once Al climbed off her.

Did she just say she was sullied?

Just as things were settling down, a sound rang out through the room. The rambunctious couple jolted up and directed their attention towards the source—the room's entrance.

Oh crap! Of course someone would hear all that noise!

"Really? Doing... the sechs on the second day?"

"No! We absolutely are not!"

Al was hoping that his savior had just walked into his room, but what he got instead was a demon. A demon in the form of Lesfina, his other marriage candidate.

"Wha... What does she mean by 'the sechs'?"

"Nothing! Don't worry about it!"

"Well, you see, when a man and a woman really..."

"Feena! Don't say it! Please!"

"Huh?"

Feena was curious as to why Al stopped her.

Sharon couldn't fully understand what Feena was referencing, but she eventually realized it was something quite obscene.

"I am NOT like that with this pig!"

Sharon had calmed down a little. Feena took the opportunity to look Al in the eye and say what she came to say.

"Al. I made my decision."

"What decision?"

Al met her gaze and stood up from the bed like nothing had ever happened.

"I want become a good wife. I want make you mine—a puppet for my use only. So even if you cheat on me, even if you sleep with your sister... I'll do my best to look the other way."

She had a really good thing going there until the whole "puppet" part.

"I'll try my best at doing... what you two were just doing together."

“You’re still misunderstanding. She was trying to kill me!”

Al’s denial fell on deaf ears.

“However...”

Feena cast her gaze over towards her rival, disgust worn plain on her usually-expressionless face.

“What?”



Al was seeing Feena serious for the first time. It was a sight that sent shivers down his spine.

“You!”

Sensing Feena’s anger, Sharon braced herself.

“I’ll never forgive you! I’ll protect Al, no matter what!”

Feena firmly stepped in front of Sharon.

She’s so cool! That’s the kind of line that would make any woman swoon if they were spoken by a guy.

“Stop getting in my way.”

“I can’t do that. I won’t let you hurt my husband.”

Sharon shot a glance towards Al, hoping he’d back her up. Al didn’t want any part of this, however.

Feena once again directed her cold, sharp gaze at Sharon.

“By the way...”

“What?”

“What’s your goal?”

Sharon raised her eyebrows at the unexpected question. It was a slight gesture Feena didn’t miss.

“I’m here to kill that man!”

“No. I want to know what you hope to achieve by killing him.”

She keeps saying that she’s here to kill me like it’s nothing!

“Tch.”

“I knew it. You can’t be trusted. You came here to—”

Sharon launched towards Feena before she could finish her sentence.

Clash!

A sharp metallic clank reverberated through the room.

“Hey, is that your...”

“...I won’t be letting you get the upper hand today.”

Feena held her wand above her head, blocking Sharon’s strike.

“Oh? You’re pretty good! Okay, bring it on! Let’s see whose relic is stronger!”

Feena blocked Sharon’s strike with one hand, and she didn’t even flinch doing it.

“So that’s Subdera’s relic?”

Al could only watch on in awe. Her wand was made of a mysterious material, possibly obsidian.

These relics were regarded as the symbol of Divas, and were said to have been created by the Valkyrie herself. Another theory was that these relics were the favorite weapons of the seven maidens. Each Diva had their own relic, including Cecilia, whose relic was a khakkhara, a kind of staff also known as a crosier.

“You’ve been pretty talkative today, haven’t you?”

“.....”

“Your cold and silent farce is now gone! Don’t worry. I’ll cut you down! That way, you can stay silent forever!”

Sharon tightened her grip on her blade’s hilt.

Wham!

With that, a true tragedy occurred.

“Nooo! My books! My documents!”

Sharon’s deflected sword had sliced clean through his bookshelf. Al’s cry filled the tense room.

“My precious books...”

Sharon and Feena were undisturbed by Al’s sobbing. They didn’t take their eyes off of each other for a second.

“Hey, get out of the way!”

Sharon grasped her sword in an attempt to scare him off, but Al couldn’t think straight. All he could see were the destroyed documents in front of him.

“Hey you!”

Al turned to Sharon and reached out for her.

“Watch where you’re swinging that thing!”

“Ahh!”

“I’m sorry!”

Sharon panicked and shouted out an apology in order to stop him.

“If you two want to go at it, then do it outside!”

Al let out all of his pent-up stress on the two Divas.

“Okay. I’ll be a good wife and listen to my husband, but...”

Feena stopped.

A good wife wouldn’t wreck her husband’s room!

“No... My documents!”

He wanted to break down and cry after seeing how much of his work had been destroyed. Feena lightly tapped his shoulder in an effort to comfort him.

“Don’t worry. At least your secret stash isn’t in this room.”

“Yeah, at least... Wait, how do you know about that!?”

“That’s a secret.”

Al wondered for a moment if maybe Feena was the more dangerous of the two.

“Ugh. You pervert!”

Sharon glared at Al from across the room and covered her chest with her arms.

Wait, how did I end up being the one under attack?

“I see everyone’s having fun. But according to Cecilia, in this country, illicit sexual relations with foreign princesses is a crime punishable by death.”

Al looked over at the voice of his savior and found Lilicia gently smiling at him.

She’s joking, right? I really hope so...

“Lilicia, what are you—”

“An urgent notice came in from the reconnaissance.”

Lilicia cut Al off and stated her business, but then she stopped.

“Um...”

“It’s an urgent letter, Your Majesty!”

The letter in question was stuck between her breasts.

Is she pushing her breasts out a little?

Al quietly grabbed the letter. Lilicia let out an aroused moan in response.

Why did she have to do it this way? This is ridiculously embarrassing.

“Is that one of your fetishes, darling?”

“No, it’s not!”

“You’d force your maid to do something that kinky? You freak!”

“Why do you just assume I asked for this!?”

Al tried to ignore their potshots and instead focus on the letter in his hands.

Let’s see...

“Lilicia! Tell my sister that I’ll need her later.”

Al’s expression changed in an instant. He promptly issued that order and left the room.

“Certainly. I’ll also tell Jamka to prepare the troops and have them follow you at once.”

“Lilicia, did something happen?”

Lilicia ignored Sharon's question and saw Al off with a smile.

"Al..."

Feena quietly watched through the window as Al left the castle. A spring breeze blew past her face and guided her vision upwards. Althos was basking in the gentle rays of the sun. In that moment, the kingdom appeared as a proud nation, not the minor power it was said to be.

Al read the letter again from atop his galloping horse. He never expected things to come to this. A group of former citizens living in the northern plains of Althos were under attack.

They must be the ones who fled the country when I was crowned.

It wasn't surprising for people to abandon their country during troubled times. The Witch King had built this country himself, which made his death was especially troubling. His passing reduced Althos to the status of a minor power. If they were to lose a war and become a vassal state, they would've been as good as slaves.

Al closed his eyes and murmured to himself.

"They may have thrown their country away, but they're still Athos's citizens to me!"

He opened his eyes to vast, boundless plain. The soft sun shone brightly, enveloping the plains before him in light and filling him with hope.

Al dreamt of a world bereft of hunger, void of thievery and crime, where everyone could live happily, even in the hottest of summers and the bitterest of winters. And the first step towards achieving this dream was freeing all the slaves. Across the land, they toiled day and night just for an ounce of food. They were abused and disposed of at their owners' whims.

I will change this rotten world.

After a long ride through the green fields, signs of civilization come into view.

"I'm finally here. Wait. No..."

Smoke billowed on the horizon. He had heard that there were just a few hundred people living here, but it really didn't seem like it. Although it was still

developing, it was a pleasant town with streets lined with brick buildings. Under any other circumstances, Al would've been impressed.

"What the..."

The reality of the situation hit hard, rendering him speechless. He was late, and the budding town was engulfed in flames. The desperate cries of fleeing townsfolk filled the air and merged into a single wail, as if the village itself was weeping. Their lives were hanging by a thread.

"Damn it..."

Armored soldiers marched through the burning town. The letter made Al expect bandits or mercenaries pillaging the village, but he was naive. The soldiers wore matching uniforms and moved with purpose, clearly carrying out orders. This was an army he was dealing with.

"Wait, what are those!?"

A group of bizarre creatures mixed in with the enemy forces caught Al's attention. They were roughly human-sized, but their limbs were long and twig-like, and their heads were embedded inside their chests. They looked like they had walked straight out of a horror story, but they also carried with them an air of longing and loneliness. Al had never seen anything like them.

He shook his head, trying to brush aside their overwhelming loneliness.

This is bad. I came here to get rid of some thieves. I wasn't ready to fight monsters. But I can't just leave these men and women to their deaths. I don't know if this will work, but...

Al galloped forth and reached into his knapsack. He pulled out a leather pouch filled with oil and threw it onto the ground between the mysterious army and the fleeing townspeople.

"Fire!"

The patch of oil was lit ablaze with that simple chant. Red flowers bloomed on the verdant plains.

"Whoa!"

Al's battle-hardened horse didn't flinch, but the marauders' horses were sent into a frenzy upon seeing the burst of flames. Al pulled on his horse's reins and turned towards his former citizens.

"Help is on the way! Run to the south!"

The townsfolk headed south as instructed. Seeing this, Al unsheathed his shortsword and turned his attention back to the enemy. But before he could even turn around...

Wham!

Al hit the ground hard. He found himself lying flat on his back, staring up at one of the headless creatures.

"Gahh!"

The pain only came after realizing how he must've been knocked off his horse by that monster's long, lanky arms.

Al cowered on the ground in pain. A plump armored man, likely the group's commander, shouted triumphantly.

"Excellent! Capture him! If he resists, feel free to break an arm or two!"

All the commander's soldiers rushed towards Al.

"I call forth..."

Al sluggishly picked himself up and began a chant under his breath. He allowed himself a smug smile at the soldiers surrounding him, and then...

"Wind!"

He completed the chant and released the spell. A whirlwind emerged from Al, quickly turning into a sandstorm.

"Argh! My eyes! I can't see!"

"Where was he hiding the catalyst!?"

Al did not need a catalyst such as a wand or a ring; he never did. It was possible that the Demon King's powers allowed for this, or that Al's body itself became a catalyst as a byproduct of hosting the Demon King. Al didn't know. However, his magic power was low enough to still require a chant. In practice,

this meant his power was only useful for surprise attacks. And the surprise attack worked this time. Both the soldiers and the creatures alike were stuck shielding their eyes from the sandstorm.

“Sorry, but I don’t have the time for this!”

Caring not for appearances, Al crawled away from the scene. But one soldier was separated from the rest—the commander. He spotted Al and charged towards him, spear in hand.

“You cheating bastard! Die!”

He rushed forward and thrust his spear at Al’s neck. Al narrowly dodged the attack, at the cost of a few strands of hair. With the commander now off-balance, Al bashed him in the stomach with the pommel of his sword.

“Ugh!”

It was a hard hit that the commander felt through his many layers of armor and fat. The impact sent him tumbling down off his horse.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you.”

The commander was out cold, lying on the ground. Al stood over him and held his sword above the commander’s neck.

“That’s enough! If you want him to live, drop your weapons and release the townspeople!”

Their eyesight finally returning, the soldiers looked towards Al.

I hope this guy isn’t as unpopular as he looks.

Al’s plan would’ve failed had the soldiers thought rationally about the situation, but...

“You coward!”

The soldiers reluctantly dropped their weapons.

I guess it somehow worked out.

“Phew, I’m glad everyone got away unsca—”

Al's statement went unfinished, his words replaced by a rush of blood entering his mouth.

"Gahh!"

An intense pain radiated from his right shoulder, forcing his shortsword out of his hands. A twig was sprouting from his shoulder. He turned his head, trying to find the source, and saw one of the tree-like monsters in the distance, stretching its arm across the battlefield and right through his shoulder.

"This isn't fair!"

Al somehow managed to blurt that line out before before collapsing onto his knees.

Having come to at some point, the commander stood up, brushed the dust off his clothes, and then shouted out a new order.

"Alright! Leave him to the abominations and continue with the plan. Got it?"

"W-Wait!"

Al tried to stand up again and pursue the commander, but another twig came, this time piercing one of his legs.

The commander snarled at Al and returned to his unit.

"Wait! I'll be your opponent! Leave the people out of this!"

Immobilized by the tree-like abominations, Al was powerless to interfere.

"Thanks to your little prank, most of the rabble managed to escape."
The commander furrowed his brow and stepped up to Al again, this time with a bullwhip in his hand.

"Oh, thank goodness. If they're just rabble to you anyway, then let them go and—Gahh!"

Al's impudence was met with a merciless crack of the whip across his cheeks. The pain was agonizing. It felt like his whole body was aflame.

The plump commander looked at Al's pain with delight.

"But we're still over our quota, so there shouldn't be any issues."

The commander smiled sadistically.

“The Imperial Army is happy to take any healthy man as a slave, but you... Bastards like you are too insolent to be a slave.”

The Imperial Army? Good, keep it up. Leak more information, you babbling pig!

Al hung his head in an effort to bear the pain and make his face harder to read for the commander. Looking down at the ground, Al couldn’t see the dark flames burning in the commander’s eyes.

“Guh!”

Al was sent rolling on the ground with a kick to his gut.

“I’d love to keep playing with you, but I’ve got places to be. Abominations, join up with us once you’re done with that joker!”

After giving out his orders, the commander and his cohorts left the scene.

They’ll take those civilians as slaves if I don’t hurry!

Al had an ace up his sleeve for this occasion. For the last while, he had been preparing a secret move, even as he was on the ground, writhing in pain. He waited for the abominations to close in, then...

“Now!”
He struck his palm out towards them and released his magic spell.

“Be banished in these flames! Fireball!”

Fireball was Al’s most powerful magic spell. It should’ve easily torn through the tree-like monsters, but...

“What!?”

Al recoiled. Not in pain this time, but in shock. He was sure that would’ve been enough to dispose of the monsters, but the fireball had no effect on their tree-like bodies.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Guhuhuh! Gahaha!”

One of the monsters closed in and attacked. One strike was all it took to send him flying. Broken in both spirit and body, he no longer had the strength to stand up again. He lay there as the abomination's twigs coiled around him.

Ahh, so this is how I'll die?

Al, his face still on the ground, looked up at the monster. A part of him was certain that he wouldn't die. What kind of king would die here? How could someone with a dream as splendid as his perish now? He was the Demon King's vessel. He couldn't die.

But the cruel reality of the situation was that he couldn't defeat a single one of these tree-like monsters. Just as despair was setting in, a new hope arrived. With a satisfying thud, the twigs coiled around him lost their grip and fell to the ground.

"You're much more dashing than the last time we met!"
"Sharon?"

The crimson-haired Diva leaped in between Al and the monster.

"Why?"

Al was too baffled to show gratitude.

"Why? Not to help you, that's for sure! It would have been a problem if someone else killed you instead. That's all!"

Does it really matter who kills me?

Al figured it'd be better if he kept his thoughts to himself for the time being.

"I'm here too."

The quiet, blue-haired Diva fired off a massive fireball, detonating right between Sharon and the monster.

"Hey! Are you trying to fry me, too!?"

"My bad."

"Should I split you apart instead of this tree monster!?"
"Now, now, that's enough. You two will have plenty of time to fight once we're done here."

A familiar voice stopped them.

“...Cecilia too?”

“Oh, Al. Didn’t I tell you not to go too far?”

His sister’s kind voice and gentle, healing touch was almost enough to lull Al to sleep.

“I’ll obliterate you!”

“How dare you. I’ll turn you into charcoal!”

But he was quickly pulled back into reality by the Divas’ merciless war cries.

“No... Don’t kill it.”

Their target was the monster that was trying to kill Al just moments ago. He didn’t have a reason for trying to save it, but his intuition was telling him that they shouldn’t kill it.

“Huh. Well, if that’s what you want, then I’ll let it live this time.”

“I’m a good wife, so... I’ll listen to my husband’s request. I’ll just freeze it.”

The two of them understood the seriousness of Al’s request. Together, they prepared their next strike.

“Here we go!”

Sharon set off, charging towards the monster at tremendous speed with a smile on her face.

“Haahh!”

She mightily swung her sword downwards, aiming at the creature’s center.

“Wait, that’s too much power!”

Al expected Sharon’s attack to split the thing in half, but it withstood the impact and was flung backwards instead.

Holy crap. That thing’s sturdiness is impressive, in a way.

“Ice ball.”

Feena sent an ball of ice towards the tumbling monster, freezing it in an instant.

They honestly make a pretty good team.

“Did you really think I’d kill it after you specifically asked me not to?”

Sharon frowned at Al. She explained that she only hit the monster with the flat of the blade. Even an inhuman abomination wouldn’t stand a chance against one of the Divas, maidens capable of taking on hundreds of soldiers at once.

“So, Cecilia, what happened with the captured civilians?”

Cecilia answered Al’s question with a sad smile. He had failed to save everyone. This wasn’t Cecilia’s or the princess’ faults; it was his own, and he knew it. It was naive of him to think he could handle everything alone.

Sharon stepped in front of Al and scowled at him.

“Why? Why would you risk your life to save people who abandoned you and your country?”

It was easy to mistake Sharon as being confrontational, but Al recognized how serious she was being.

“You didn’t expect the vessel of the Demon King to go and try to save his ex-citizens... to save people in need?”

Al sat up with Cecilia’s help and looked Sharon deep in the eyes. After taking a deep breath, he continued talking.

“I want to rid of this world of war.”

“What?”

She’s more perplexed than I expected.

“I won’t kill anyone. Even if my enemy is not a human.”

Killing leads to sadness, sadness leads to rage, rage leads to more killing. It’s a vicious cycle. Al insisted on putting an end to it and ordered his army to never take a life, no matter how many scoffed at his ideals.

Sharon could laugh at him, Feena could call him stupid, and they could both go home; Al didn't care. He would share his dream with anyone, and should they refuse to follow him, then so be it.

"A benevolent Demon King, huh? Sounds kinda cool..."

Sharon murmured this under her breath and avoided eye contact, hoping he wouldn't hear her.

"Anyway, what was that freak that was pinning you down? I was going pretty seriously on it, but it didn't seem to care too much."

Sharon pointed towards the frozen monster. She felt that if it was just a simple tree, it would've been blown to shreds by her.

"I don't know. The imperial soldiers called it an abomination."

"The imperial army? An abomination?"

Sharon raised her eyebrows at the first statement and tilted her head at the second.

Feena chimed in with the answer to her questions.

"I heard that the Northern Empire was using barbaric soldiers they called 'abominations' to help expand their territory. They were said to be very strong."

"Wait, so that's an imperial soldier?"

Sharon pointed her sword at the frozen creature.

"Huh...?"

Am I just seeing things, or did the tree monster shake a little when Feena said its name?

"I wasn't just seeing things. That thing's still not done!"

Not yet fully healed, Al staggered to his feet and readied his weapon as fast as he could.

"You want another go!?"

Sharon grabbed her sword and prepared for round two with the tree monster.

“It’s okay, Al. I’ll protect you.”

Feena stood in between Al and the creature. Cecilia wordlessly stood up next to Al, grabbing her trusty khakkhara. The four of them watched as cracks spread through the frozen monster’s body. What poured out wasn’t blood, but a blinding flash of light. By the time they had regained their vision, the tree had withered and sprouted a large crystal.

“What in the world?”

The crystal shattered, giving birth to small and incredibly frail child.

There was a slave mark on his arm.

“Hey, are you alright!?”

Al limped over and cradled the boy in his arms.

He’s light, even for a kid.

Surprised by the child’s light weight, Al fell on his backside. He called out for help, not caring for appearances.

“He’s still breathing! Cecilia!”

Cecilia laid the little boy down and immediately started chanting a miracle. Feena couldn’t take her eyes off of his arm.

“That’s the mark of the Gaust Empire. He’s a slave of the Empire.”

Hearing Feena’s explanation, Al was even more confused than before.

Are their soldiers not enough? Do they really need to bring these monsters on their manhunts?

“I’m glad you don’t kill anyone.”

“Whoa!”

Feena’s sudden whisper took Al by surprise. He thought she was still a few meters away from him.

“I’m using a spell that masks my presence and form.”

“Is this really worth using such high-level magic!? Anyway, what do you want?”

“I just want you to know that it’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Al wasn’t entirely sure what Feena was talking about.

“Tch.”

He stared in the direction of the departed troops and rued his helplessness. He almost clenched his fists hard enough to break skin and draw blood.

“But are you sure, Al?”

“About what?”

His dark thoughts put him in a dark mood. Feena was taken aback by Al’s agitated response for a moment before continuing.

“The empire will find out about us now.”

“Oh. Right...”

The Gaust Empire. Situated north of Althos, it was a vast realm home to the largest army on the continent. Its previous emperor, Meldis the Ashen Emperor, did not expand much and squandered the country’s resources.

Their current emperor ascended to the throne at roughly the same time as Alnoa’s ascension. His first action was to invade their weakest neighbor and annex them completely. Gaust executed their royal family and entire noble caste, and the rumors said they enslaved the entire populace.

“True. They might see us as a threat if they knew that we currently host 3 Divas.”

Despite saying that, Al had not the slightest hint of hesitation in his eyes. He knew that Althos didn’t stand a chance if Gaust invaded now. But he also knew that they were unable to strike immediately. It was not easy for an army to reach Althos. The Gaust Empire had only three avenues of invasion.

One was through the forest bordering Althos and Freiya, but passing through it with a large invasion force would require burning it to the ground first. Freiya would surely step in to prevent that from happening. Even the Gaust Empire wouldn’t be able to wage war against two countries at once.

Another route would be through Labona, a free city situated between Althos and the Empire. It was a city governed by merchants who preferred neutrality to taking sides. The Empire would have to offer quite the deal to make them budge.

The last possible route would be through Esanthel, Althos' northwest neighbor, governed by the Diva of Vira, the rasa of envy. But the Empire's relations with Esanthel were poor and the Esanthel army was said to be resilient.

Negotiating alliances or conquering the controllers of these routes would take a lot of time.

"Anyway, we don't have to worry about them for now. Let's focus on the problem at hand."

Al put aside his exhaustion and looked at the barely breathing slave.

"An imperial slave... What could they be planning?"

Al turned towards Feena, but she was gone again.

"Feena?"

He finally spotted her collecting the crystal shards.

"I want to look into these."
She continued collecting them in silence.

"What is this?"

Sharon uncharacteristically joined Feena and helped her collect the shards, perhaps due to her having experienced the monster's power first-hand.

"I can't say until I look into them, but... It takes slaves, as human experiments... Uses their magical power... Amplifies it..."

Feena's disjointed thoughts shed some light on the reason for the Empire treating their slaves the way they did.

"Hmmm, there are three Divas in Althos? And they defeated an abomination without breaking a sweat?"

In plain room paved in stone and containing only a desk and a chair, a young man with fierce eyes listened to his subordinate's report.

This was Gil. He'd fought in the arenas as a slave to find a place in the Imperial Army. He'd climbed through the ranks to become Commander in Chief. And now, he navigated the political landscape to become de-facto ruler of the Empire, or so the rumors said.

A girl garbed in a servant's outfit, said to be his sister, shadowed Gil wherever he went.

"Gil, how should we strike back against Althos? Should I dispatch an army?"

"Just leave them be. This is not the time to deal with them."

Gil turned to a soldier in the room.

"We need to make haste with our current plans."

"Yes sir!"

The soldier respectfully bowed and promptly left.

"Gil..."

After confirming that they were alone, the girl quietly hugged Gil from behind.

"Don't worry, Eleanor. I have something planned for Althos. And I have something else I'd like to ask you. Something that only you can do. Will you do this for me?"

Gil gently looked at her and rested his hands on hers. His sharp gaze relaxed a little.

"Yes, Gil!"

A light blush appeared on Eleanor's fair cheeks. She allowed herself a few more moments of Gil's comforting warmth and then left the room, leaving him to himself.

"The King of Althos, huh? I see, I see..."

He murmured in the empty room to himself. He wore a complex expression, one that could have been either happy or sad.

Chapter 2: The Visitor

The moment Al returned to the castle he headed for his father's study, found every book he could on Heavenly Surges and abominations, and then spent the whole night studying them in his office.

"Phew!"

But he couldn't find a lead. He stretched out, his joints cracking after being in the same position for hours.

"Ugh... I'm beat."

He looked around, sleepily rubbing his eyes. The nights in Althos were unexpectedly cold, even in the springtime. The lively fire burning away in the room's fireplace was all that was keeping Al safe from the chill. Just as Al was about to doze off watching the dancing flames, a gentle knock on the door snapped him back awake.

"King Al, are you awake? Oh, were you working overnight?"

Lilicia entered the room.

"I slept a little... About 30 minutes in my bed by the fire."

Al answered absentmindedly, hoping that Lilicia could pick up the gist of the situation on her own.

"By the way, did you get me the additional documents I asked for?"

Lilicia's expression shifted immediately into work mode. Al couldn't take his eyes off of her as she got closer and closer. Her cleavage was clearly emphasized and her plump thighs peeked out from under her skirt. He was just now realizing how revealing their maid uniform could be when worn in the right way.

Why?

Seeing Al dumbfounded, Lilicia smiled.

“I thought I’d give your eyes something pleasant to rest on for a change. I also came to inform you that your breakfast is ready, but I assume you’d rather get some sleep?”

I really appreciate the thought, Lilicia, but...

Ignoring Al’s bewilderment, Lilicia cheerfully slipped into his bed.

Why?

Al shot Lilicia a confused look, but she paid it no mind. Instead, she sent back a seductive smile.

“Lilicia, I’m not a kid anymore. I’m not afraid of thunderstorms; I can sleep alone. Also, your clothes will reek of smoke if you sleep there!”

“Huh? What’s wrong? Come, I’ll sing you a lullaby, like back in the old days! Just this once, okay?”

“I don’t need to be lulled to sleep!”

Why is she making that sound so suggestive?

Lilicia pouted like a little kid. Her mannerisms helped get Al’s mind back on track. He was in a really delicate position. On one hand, the king sleeping with his maid in his royal chambers would be a highly scandalous offense that could result in a beheading if they were discovered. On the other hand, Lilicia had looked after him since he was little. She was like a second mother to him. Al didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

My sister has been pulling these kinds of unfunny jokes a lot lately, too.

Thinking about the dilemma, he pushed his forehead with his finger.

“What’s the problem? You’ll get wrinkles if you keep scrunching up your brow like that. Don’t worry, I’m your loyal maid. Your wish is my command, King Al.”

Lilicia lifted up the blanket and tapped the bed, inviting Al in with her.

“Lilicia, I’m not a kid anymore. Even as a joke, sleeping together would be taking things too far.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. Whatever happens between us, stays between us.”

Lilicia placed her index finger on her lips and smiled.

“No, I can’t do it!”

He resisted Lilicia’s sweet invitation a shake of his head.

“Oh... Well, you should at least have some breakfast! Everyone’s waiting in the dining room.”

As if her playtime had come to an end, Lilicia energetically jumped out of bed and quietly stood beside the door.

Man. It’s impossible to tell what’s a joke and what’s not with her. Maybe she doesn’t see me as an adult since she’s been taking care of me since I was a kid?

Lilicia gave a quiet sigh of disappointment.

“King Al. Even if you couldn’t find what you were looking for last night, I’m sure you’ll learn it soon.”

What does she mean by that?

“Yeah, thank you.”

He answered without giving it much thought and followed her to the dining room.

“Miss Lilicia!”

Along the way, another maid rushed up to Lilicia and whispered something into her ear.

“Your Majesty, my sincerest apologies for disturbing you before breakfast, but it seems we have a guest who would like to see you.”

“And? What do they want?”

Lilicia was about to answer, but their conversation was interrupted with impeccable timing. The two Divas approached from behind Lilicia.

“Hey, Al. Remember when you promised you’d tell us everything there is to know about this country?” Sharon asked with a smile.

“No, I don’t, actually.”

Al’s objection was short-lived. He soon gave up and let out a defeated sigh.

“Okay, I’ll tell you two everything you want to know, but on one condition. You have to sit and behave through the whole discussion. I hope you’re ready to learn my darkest secrets!”

“...It’s okay. Keeping her husband’s secrets is the duty of a good wife.”

“That’s right! And information on my enemy will come in handy when I try to kill them!”

Why do you two only agree with each other when it comes to stuff like this!?

With the arrangements done, Al headed towards the back gate of the castle.

“So, you said we have a guest?”

Lilicia fielded Al’s whispered question with a concerned expression.

“Yes. What would you like to do?”

“What’re you two whispering for? You don’t want us to hear?” Sharon asked, completely oblivious to their conversation. “Or would it be bad if someone heard? Wow, I didn’t think you could be so caring, Al!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you!”

Al shot Sharon’s sarcastic comment right back at her.

“King Al is a really caring person. Moreover, our current guest is a slave trader. Most people working here are liberated slaves, so it wouldn’t be a good idea to let them know that we have a slave trader in the house.”

Help came to Al from an unexpected source, as Lilicia explained the situation to the others in a clear but quiet voice.

She was quiet, but she really should’ve whispered it.

Her efforts were insufficient; the nearby staff clearly overheard her. They immediately stopped what they were doing and frowned. Hearing that explanation stopped even Sharon in her tracks, and Feena looked at Al in astonishment.

Their reaction was only natural. A slave trader was one who bought and sold other human beings. Arms dealers were sometimes referred to as death dealers, but that title was much more fitting for slave traders. There were likely

slaves there who had been separated from their families and treated like livestock by a slave trader. Bought, collared and chained, then sold at an auction.

Amid that heavy atmosphere, Al's clumsy but bright voice resounded through the corridor.

"Oh, come on, guys! How many years have you been working here, now? How long are you going to let the word 'slave' control you?"

"King Alnoa, we're not bound by that word. As ex-slaves, we are facing it head-on."

A nearby staff member gave the king a dignified answer, which made everyone around him burst out in a smile.

I was wrong. I didn't need to worry about them, for the human spirit is strong. They are already living fulfilling lives as free citizens of Althos. Though maybe they're grinning a bit too much...

Al looked at them happily and flashed them an exaggerated, reassuring smile.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that!"

With their conversation in the corridor over, they headed for the castle's back gate. On the other side was a large, open space used as training grounds for their troops. Due to Al's orders, it had been largely abandoned. Only a handful of guards were allowed to remain in the area.

Parked to the side of the gate so as not to stand out were a handful of carts.

"Oh, what a magnificent welcome, Your Majesty!"

A short and skinny old man flanked by his guards appeared from behind the carts and bowed to Al. He was Bouzen, the famous slave trader from the independent merchant city Labona. Al didn't think very highly of the man. The rumor went that he once sold his own siblings to fatten his own pockets.

It was a rumor Al couldn't substantiate, but that mattered little. Even as they exchanged greetings, the old man leered at Sharon and Feena, clearly considering what kind of price he could fetch for them on the slave market. He was one of the lowest scumbags one could ever have the misfortune of

meeting. But it was hard for Al to deny his usefulness. Not many merchants would deal with an impoverished kingdom like Althos.

“They were just curious, so they tagged along. Anyway, sorry for calling you here on such short notice, Bouzen. I want to talk about something before we get down to business.”

Al forced a smile and stepped forward in order to stop Bouzen from glaring at the girls. Of course, Al couldn’t just tell him that they were Divas from neighboring countries.

“Of course. Your Majesty is a valuable customer, so I’m willing to listen.”

Bouzen directed his creepy smile to Al. He seemed to care more about business than the girls.

“A valuable customer?”

Sharon raised a concerned whisper from behind, but Al didn’t have time to answer her. Bouzen maintained his yellowed and rotted grin, making it hard to tell if he heard Sharon or not.

“So, I heard that the Empire abuses their slaves quite a bit...”

I can’t trust this man, so I’ll try my best to share as little as possible.

“Hmm? And?”

He answered with the same grin.

It’s rare to find someone with such an unpleasant smile.

“I know they’re slaves, but don’t you feel bad when your merchandise is treated like trash?”

“.....”

“So I was wondering if you would ever consider cutting ties with—”

“Should I take this as interference in Labona’s governmental affairs, Your Majesty?”

Bouzen asked with a glint in his eyes.

“N-No, I was just...”

Al stuttered, taken aback by the sudden change in Bouzen's personality.

"We're just merchants, Your Majesty. A merchant prepares their product to the client on the designated day, for the desired amount. That is our reason for being, and we take pride in it."

"Ugh..."

Bouzen, shrewd merchant as he was, continued without giving a chance to Al to react.

"If Your Majesty were to try influencing us with your military might behind you, then I'm sure that Labona's merchants, prideful as we are, would stop trading with Your Majesty's kingdom."

"....."

Al realized his naivety. Even slave traders had their own livelihoods and pride to protect. Bouzen had him fair and square.

"Honestly, as long as my clients pay for my goods, whatever happens to them after that is none of my concern."

I was a fool to ever think I could argue with this man's greed.

"Okay, let's end our discussion there and get to the business. Show me your goods."

Al felt bad for using the word goods, but he had no other choice.

"My apologies for getting so high and mighty. Your Majesty is a valuable customer who pays a good price for goods that would otherwise be disposed of."

Still maintaining his creepy smile, he signaled to the two henchmen behind his back. They went around to the back of the carts and produced the so-called goods.

"Slaves..."

The Divas knew this was about slaves, but still, seeing them in person provided quite the shock. Sharon was aghast at their appearance.

"That's horrible."

Even the usually expressionless Feena's eyes showed a hint of discomfort.

"I guess seeing slaves first-hand is a bit too much for them."

The henchman pulled the slaves out of the cart by their chains and lined them up in front of Al. With iron collars clamped around their necks and their limbs chained together, they were robbed of any semblance of human dignity.

Al was mainly interested in the slaves in the worst possible condition. They were all malnourished and covered in scrapes and scratches, but among them were a few who could barely stand on their feet anymore.

"Your Majesty always buys the most useless slaves... Unlike the Empire."

Bouzen gave a sinister laugh, implying that he figured out why Al was so curious about them. Al dodged his gaze and handed him a suspicious-looking sack full of gold coins.

"I have received some extra income lately, so excuse me if this takes a while, but I would like to purchase as many slaves as possible."

Al showed Bouzen a nearby pile of goods looted from the invading Freiyan army a few days ago.

"Hoho! Well, look at this... I better get counting."

Bouzen joyfully started estimating the loot's worth.

"Hey, Al. If you plan on treating them the same way the Empire treats their slaves, I'll never forgive you!"

Sharon did her best to quell her rage and tone down her voice in front of the slave trader.

"As your wife, I'll just sit around all day and never lift a finger for you."

Feena directed her icy gaze towards the bachelor Al.

"Did you not pay attention to what Lilicia said? These are our future citizens. Why would I turn my own people into mindless abominations?"

"But they're..."

Sharon looked at the slaves, confused. She might have a sharp tongue, but she was not stupid enough to dig her own grave.

“Don’t worry. We’ll patch them up. We have something even better than doctors for that.”

“Something better?”

The girls’ rage gradually cooled into bewilderment.

Bouzen approached the group with an eerie smile.

“Ah, you’ve got some pretty good loot, if I might say so. I can offer you this much.”

Bouzen stuck out three of his skinny, twig-like fingers.

“Three-hundred coins, huh? That’s a pretty good sum.”

Al crossed his arms as if he was considering his offer for a second, but he had already made up his mind that it was a fair trade.

“Our armor was worth way more than that!”

The fiery Diva shouted out from behind them, but she was summarily ignored.

“So, how many will that get me?”

Al had already bought one cartful of slaves—the twenty so-called useless slaves.

I’d like to get as many slaves as possible, maybe two carts’ worth. Though that might not be possible. I’ll see what I can do.

“Let’s see, if I subtract the handling charges and such, Your Majesty could get about... ten more slaves, I think.”

“What!?”

Al was taken aback by the unexpectedly low number.

“Hey, wait a second! I should be able to get more than that for this money!”

Bouzen stared coldly at the fuming Al.

“No, you see, some of the slaves are on their way for training. And this cart right here is headed for the Empire.”

Al clicked his tongue upon realizing the mistakes he had made. After Al’s botched request, Bouzen figured out why Al was asking that and raised his

prices. Bouzen looked at him with a broad grin on his face.

Shit, I'm about to lose it! I want to knock this jackass flat on his ass! He's playing with human lives!

Al closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

I can't forgive this!

He balled his hand into a fist, picked the right timing, and...

"Wha!?"

Something cold touched Al's clenched fist.

"What's this?"

The blue-haired Diva was trying to give him something.

"Use this."

Upon taking a look at her offering, Al's raging blood cooled down in a second. He was now holding a magnificent necklace inlaid with blue magic crystals—the necklace she always wore.

"I couldn't possibly. Why would you offer this? There's nothing in it for you."

He couldn't understand why she would go so far. She had never once been seen without that necklace since arriving. It should have been much more valuable to her than this, by Al's estimation.

"Hm?" Feena didn't comprehend Al's confusion. "But I read that it is the job of a good wife to support her puppet... I mean, her husband from the shadows."

"Uh, is it?"

"It is."

Feena confidently nodded. Her eyes brimmed with determination.

I guess she can't look the other way and ignore these slaves. I'll pay you back somehow, Feena.

"Okay. Thank you, Feena."

Al dangled the expensive-looking necklace in front of Bouzen without explaining what it was.

“With this, I should have enough to purchase two carts.”

No longer furious, Al proudly gave the necklace to the slave trader.

“Ooh, lemme see!”

Bouzen took the necklace, pulled his aged lenses from his pockets, and began appraising the item.

“Huh. Unfortunately, the socket is rather old and there are scratches on the bezel. Even with this, one and a half carts is the best I can offer.”

This son of a...

Al’s anger was quickly flaring up again.

“Then throw this in too.”

But before he could do anything, an elegant hand holding a silver hair ornament appeared before him.

“Ooh!”

“It’s a silver ornament from Freiya. It’s high-grade silver, and the best craftsman in the country made it. If you play your cards right, it could buy you an entire mansion!”

According to what Sharon said, her ornament was worth about the same or even more than Feena’s necklace.

“Are you sure?”

Al was taken aback by her decision. It was surprising enough for Feena to offer her help, but Sharon had even less to gain.

In this one way, Al was like those slaves—unused to kindness. He could only gape in astonishment at Sharon.

“What’s the problem!?”

Sharon broke eye contact out of embarrassment.

“Why would you...”

Al couldn’t figure out what he wanted to say, or for that matter, hear. He was baffled.

“It’s fine. It was a present in the first place... Just take it!”

Unable to bear his gaze any longer, Sharon pushed the ornament into his hands.

“So? If that ornament isn’t enough, I’ll just sell it to another merchant and buy slaves with that money. I have a feeling that I could get a lot more out of it that way.”

Sharon took over the negotiations and pressed the merchant. Al couldn’t tell if she was bluffing or not, but it was hard to deny the conviction in her eyes.

“Uhh...”

Bouzen appeared to feel the same way. He wasn’t nearly as arrogant as he was moments ago.

“You drive a hard bargain.” Bouzen looked between Sharon and the ornament for a moment but eventually gave in. “Okay. This is more than enough.”

Sharon’s eyes lit up at Bouzen’s flustered display.

“You’re right. It is more than enough. Which means that we can subtract the equipment offered at the start, right?”

Sharon proposed a really aggressive bargain, but after switching his eyes between her and the necklace and the ornament in his hands, Bouzen gave in.

“Fine. You win.” The seasoned veteran broke. “It’s my loss this time.”

He promptly signed the paperwork, grumbling all the while. But for all his complaints, he headed home with a grin on his face. It was certain that he still turned an admirable profit.

“Thank you Feena, Sharon. You were both so helpful.”
Al bowed to the two Divas.

“Thanks. I just did what any good wife would.”

Feena stuck out her modest chest.

“It’s not like I did it for you! I just didn’t want to let those slaves be sold to the Empire and turned into abominations!”

Sharon turned her head away from Al. This would’ve normally hurt him, but he was already used to this behavior.

“Yes, I know. But, still. Thank you.”

He bowed to the girls one more time.

“Oh, I see your meeting with him went well.”

Cecilia and several of her fellow members of the clergy arrived at the gate, carrying a large supply of medicine and bandages. They happily got to work untying the liberated slaves and splitting them into groups based on their injuries and illnesses. Of course, Al helped as well. Sharon and Feena also hesitantly pitched in.

“Ah, so she’s the ‘something better than doctors’ you mentioned?”

Sharon glanced towards them, seeking confirmation.

“Yes. Cecilia is a priestess and Diva who specializes in holy magic.”

Exhausted from his meeting with the creepy slave trader, Al murmured absentmindedly as he watched his sister assist the liberated slaves.

“Though she’s only with the church because of me.”

Al’s exhaustion led him to divulge more information than he should have, something Sharon and Feena immediately picked up on.

“Because of you?”

“A puppet has to tell everything to his wife.”

Really? Do I have to?

He didn’t know if it was a good idea to tell them the truth, but since they helped him out with Bouzen, he decided to talk.

“After my father passed away, the country split into two parts with the threat of civil war looming. The ministers and military officers wanted the country’s Diva, my sister, to inherit the throne, but there were people who strongly opposed to that idea.”

Although about ninety percent of the military power was on my sister's side, mainly because of her combat prowess, so the opposing faction never really stood a chance.

"At that point, I was heavily considering leaving the country, when my sister declared in front of everyone that she would abdicate the throne and join the church."

His smile disappeared from his face as he watched his sister lovingly heal the liberated slaves. It was easy to imagine what a good queen she would have been, had her love for her brother not gotten in the way.

"Her words from back then still stick with me. She said, 'Maybe this will end up being one big mistake, but I believe in you. Even if the ministers and nobles don't understand you now, I hope that one day your dream will become their dream as well. Don't listen to what anyone else says about you. Just keep at it and remember... I'll always be by your side.' Seriously. If we weren't siblings, I would've fallen in love with her for sure."

Sharon and Feena looked at him, perplexed, though their stares could never make a dent in the pride he had for his sister.

"Anyway, she's really only a priestess in name; she doesn't actually study with them or anything. She's always at the castle doing whatever she wants. Her current pet project is a proposed law that would allow anyone to marry anyone else, whether they are peasant and royalty, brother and sister, or parent and child."

"Is that... normal?"

Sharon, who had been quietly listening until then, threw in an ambiguous question, though it was not difficult for Al to figure out what she was referring to. Priests and priestesses were expected to lead regimented lives bereft of indulgence in order to learn their holy magics—a form of magic far different from sorcery, where the focus was instead on healing.

"Probably not, but they're not very strict with my sister."

Al flashed a wry smile at the irony of his own statement.

“Well, it will take some time for them to fully recover, so they’re still weak, but there weren’t any major problems.”

Having finished healing everyone, Cecilia arrived in the middle of their happy conversation. She spoke with a light tone, but quite a bit of sweat had formed on her brow. Using a vast amount of magical power took a lot out of her.

“Thank you for your hard work, Cecilia.”

With the previous conversation still in his head, he bowed before her.

“Oh my. A king shouldn’t carelessly bow his head before a simple retainer like me,” she rebuked him like always. Al laughed at their usual exchange with a slight blush on his face.

However, sensing a pressure on his back, Al turned around.

“What, do you still have any questions?”

There was Sharon, looking pensive.

“Yes.”

Sharon leaned close and lowered her voice.

Whoa, she’s so close. And she smells really nice.

He pulled himself back a bit and urged Sharon with his eyes to get on with her business.

“Is the church aware that you’re the Demon King’s vessel? You know, because priestesses can’t lie to the church or hide things from them.”

She tried to whisper it so only Al could hear, but it didn’t work out for her.

“Oh my. You’re very well informed. Of course I’m not hiding anything from the church.”

“Wait, but then...”

“Like I said, I am not hiding anything from the church.”

Cecilia repeated herself proudly and stuck out her well-endowed chest.

The church of the continent considered the Valkyrie as just one of the many gods, and the Demon King as the absolute evil. The girls had an idea as to why

the church left Al alone, but they quietly listened to the explanation.

“I told everything to them. I told them that Al is the Demon King’s vessel and that I’m a Diva. I also told them if they were to kill Al, I would climb on top of the cathedral and commit suicide after cursing them for three and a half hours straight.”

Why three and a half hours!? That’s oddly specific.

Sharon and Feena were dumbfounded by her menacing words.

“You threatened the church?”

“That’s what it sounds like...”

Cecilia’s statement made her relationship with the church clear. In order for the church to stay relevant on the continent, they prioritized keeping a Diva on their side over killing the Demon King’s vessel. After grasping the reason behind the current situation, they switched their focus from Cecilia.

“Al, wouldn’t it have been better to leave the negotiation with the slave trader to your sister?”

“Absolutely not. It would’ve devolved into physical violence immediately.”

“Ahh...”

While Al was shaking his head in disappointment, Sharon nodded in understanding.

“Oh my. Al, do you really think that I would—oh, things are getting pretty noisy back there.”

Cecilia noticed a commotion occurring behind them. She tilted her head and listened carefully.

Something’s certainly happening back there.

“I am not becoming a slave! You can bet on that!”

“Yeah! I’d rather fight and die here than live as a slave!”

Some of the liberated slaves were getting worked up. Avoiding the confrontation, the priests just left the scene.

I see. As the slave trader said, they haven't received any training yet. They're still unbroken and ferocious. It looks like a fight could break out at any moment.



Al motioned the guards to stand down and then rushed towards the source of the commotion.

“Stand back! That’s an order!”

Al gulped down his saliva and steeled his heart. He then tossed aside his short sword, took a deep breath, and then approached the source of the disturbance with his arms raised.

“What’s the problem here? Don’t you realize that you are being set free?”

He intended to calm them down by talking in a soft, gentle manner, but it didn’t work. The crowd only got more agitated.

“Shut up! I won’t let you deceive us anymore!”

A tall, well-built girl stood apart from the crowd and stared doubtfully at Al. He didn’t know what happened to her to make her this way, but her eyes, her body language, her expression... her whole body was signaling her suspicion.

“Hey, I just—”

“I said, shut up!!”

She took a furious swing at Al.

“Whoa!”

Al barely managed to dodge her attack, but he lost his balance in the exchange and clumsily fell to the ground. He could spy Sharon and Feena from the corner of his eye, following the ruckus from afar with bewildered looks.

This is bad.

He could already see how this would play out.

“Come on, let’s beat the snot out of this guy!”

I knew it!

A few of the men immediately surrounded him and started beating and kicking him to their hearts’ content, releasing their pent-up resentment and anger on him.

“Wait, stop!”

Despite several people ganging up on him, Al didn’t feel much pain. This wasn’t just because Sharon’s relentless assaults had toughened him up (or so Al hoped). It was because their punches carried no weight. Their enraged faces made it clear that they weren’t holding back. Most likely, their impudence had led to Bouzen underfeeding them.

The muscular girl’s hits carried as much weight as a little kid’s punch. He could take their beating without a problem as long as he protected his vital parts. He could take it all. He shot a look towards his sister as he lay on the ground.

Cecilia understood his intent and simply shook her head. It was clear that Al wasn’t in any real danger, especially with the two other Divas watching over the situation on the sidelines.

“Damn it!”

Just as they expected, they quickly ran out of strength and ceased their assault. Some of them were so winded that they fell to their knees.

“Ouch... So, have you calmed down yet?”

Al sat up and grimaced a little. Their attacks may not have carried much strength, but the number of hits he took caused him to dully ache all over his body.

Al stumbled to his feet and came face-to-face with a little girl. Judging from her features and her hair, she was still growing. Probably. She was short and skinny, and her limbs were completely skin and bone. Her dark skin was filthy and her hair was unkempt.

“Come, now. Why don’t we all eat lunch together and talk things through?”

Al extended his arms kindly towards the girl.

“Don’t worry, you can trust—gahh!”

He groaned in pain and collapsed to his knees, having no idea what happened at first. The kindness on his face quickly turned to immense pain. He had just experienced the kind of sharp agony only men can experience.

“I’m a warrior from the same tribe as Juju! I’d rather die fighting than be fooled into becoming a slave!”

She gracefully and proudly proclaimed her intent to Al, who was writhing in pain on the ground. Her speech would have deeply moved him, were it not for the blinding trauma he was suffering.

“Gahh! Ahh...”

Al broke into a cold sweat. But when it rained, it poured. The fiery princess dealt a devastating blow of another variety from behind.

“Are you really letting little girls touch your junk just because you can’t get any action from a girl your own age!?”
Sharon’s cold gaze pierced through his back.

How could this happen to me... I thought I was being kind to her! And it’s not like I let her fondle me. She kicked me!

On the outside, Al cried out in pain, but on the inside, his heart howled in agony from Sharon’s surprise attack.

“Let me ask you something,” Sharon said quietly, completely ignoring Al’s inner sorrow.

“What do you want!? If you get in my way, I’ll take you down too!”

“The heck you say!?”

The girl had said something unforgivable to Sharon. Sharon scowled at the girl, intimidating not just her and the surrounding men, but the strong girl known as Juju as well. Everyone took a few steps back. Cecilia and Feena then joined Al and Sharon, causing the crowd to take several more steps back.

“I understand that you feel sorry for these people. So do I. But there must be better resources out there for building a country! Why are you so focused on these slaves?”

It was a fair argument.

He couldn’t see her face, but he was sure that Sharon was serious.

She’s right. You don’t need slaves if you want to make a country. I know that, but...

“It will take a while to explain, so...”

Al tapped his lower back, recovering from the previous attack. He tried to ward Sharon off with a vague answer, but her sharp gaze told him that she was expecting an answer then and there.

He let out a long sigh. After a moment spent collecting his thoughts, he began talking.

“I used to live with my mother and twin brother, in addition to my father and older sister. It was a cozy family. Together, we considered what we should do about my becoming the Demon King’s vessel.”

“What!?”

I guess this story was a bit out of the blue.

After her initial surprise, Sharon fixed her eyes on Al. Overpowered by her gaze, Al straightened his back and continued.

“My loving parents, my kind siblings—it really was a warm family. I think of them dearly to this day.”

His expression relaxed as he recalled the past.

“But our happy days didn’t last long. They ended soon after I turned six.”

His relaxed expression turned into a bitter smile full of guilt.

“One day when my dad and sister were out, my mom took me and my brother out for a stroll through the forest to stop a tantrum I was throwing.”

Behind his forced smile, Al was grinding his teeth. He continued the story, forcing the words out of his mouth one by one.

“During our walk, we were attacked by bandits. I only heard this later, but it seems they were actually assassins hired by some nobles aiming for the throne. Of course, I was completely unarmed. And even if I wasn’t, I would have been helpless to defend myself. I should have died that day.”

He continued his bitter monologue.

“But my mother protected me and my brother... even though she had already passed the Valkyrie’s power onto my sister.”

“Al...”

“And that’s how she died—protecting me. My brother tried to protect me too, but there was only so much he could do. Even on the verge of death, my mom didn’t cry. She hugged me and said, ‘Al, my dear son. It’s okay to cry now. But once you stop crying, steel yourself. Become a strong man. Become a man who protects the weak. You still have... ’ And then she closed her eyes.”

Al let out all the air left in his lungs with a deep sigh.

“Her last words may not have been the most profound. They were almost cliched, even. But those were the last words my mother left me. That was her last wish to me.”

After a short pause, he continued.

“So, just as my mother wished, I have to become strong. I have to be a king who saves as many people as possible, no matter the cost.”

With his story finished, Al finally stood up.

“So that’s why you help runaway citizens and slaves.”

Sharon averted her gaze from Al, but...

“Well, I heard what I wanted to hear, so I guess I ought to lend you a hand now.”

Her smiled looked much warmer than usual.

“You heard the man,” Sharon said, in a dignified but cold voice. “If you still don’t want to cooperate, then I’ll force you to change your mind. I hope you’re all prepared for that.”

Sharon pulled out her longsword to intimidate the crowd.

“So, what do you say?”

She fearlessly took a step forward, but unfortunately, her strategy backfired.

“Back off! You’re just making up a sob story to make us feel miserable!”

Juju focused her magical energy into her hands. Seeing it, the surrounding men imitated her as well. It seemed like they could use magic without a catalyst.

“Don’t!”

I have to put a stop to this right now, or else...

Al was desperately looking for any words he could use to calm the agitated crowd down.

“Wait a minute! You’re misunderstanding my intentions!”

Sharon hurriedly sheathed her sword, but it was too late. Much too late.

Will we really have to fight them? Is there no other way!?

Feena appeared next to him while he was still desperately searching for an answer.

“H-Hey!”

Feena shot Al a reassuring glance before continuing towards the crowd.

“I told you to back off!”

Feena and Juju were in a stand-off. Juju was a large, muscular girl. She looked slightly taller than Al, even. Feena would ordinarily look like a little kid next to her, but to Al, in that moment, Feena towered over Juju.

“Do you think you can save anyone with your measly magical power?”

Chill ran through Al and Sharon’s spines upon hearing Feena’s cold words.

“Feena?”

Feena took another step forward.

“What do you hope to save with that pathetic magic of yours? Yourself, who became a slave? Your heart, lost when you became a slave? Or maybe...” Feena narrowed her eyes into deadly-sharp slits. “You just wish to save your weak, fragile pride?”

Feena mercilessly shattered Juju’s last remaining pillar of support with her hollow, emotionless words.

“Argh! Shut up! Just shut up, already!”

Juju fired her spell, filled with all her pent-up fury.

“Aarrrgh!”

Her spell sparked a chain reaction, setting off the others’ attacks as well. The entire crowd aimed their magic towards Feena, but...

“That’s the best you can do?”

With a light swipe of her magic wand, Feena caused their magic to fizzle before her.

“Damn it! We can’t do anything!”

“No! I refuse to give up!”

Juju pushed her way through the crowd and charged towards Feena, putting all her remaining strength into her fist. Feena stood perfectly still, calmly tracking Juju’s assault. The exhausted girl closed in on Feena with an unfaltering determination in her eyes.

Her fist connected with Feena’s cheek and then lightly brushed past it, inflicting no harm. Juju was completely sapped of both magical and physical strength. The fight ended in her complete failure.

Or, at least, that’s how it should’ve been.

“Ouch. I lost,” Feena declared in a monotone voice, and then dramatically collapsed onto the ground.

“Whaaat!?”

Even Juju couldn’t grasp what just transpired. She alternated her gaze between her fist and Feena, collapsed on the ground.

What’s going on?

Feena then stood up, as if nothing had happened, and looked the dumbfounded Juju in the eyes, confirming that it was nothing more than an act.

“I’m sorry for testing you like that. You are a strong warrior and a strong mage. And you have a strong heart.”

“Huh? What?”

Feena slowly reached out to the completely dumbfounded girl and grabbed her hands. With Juju’s hands in hers, she looked over the crowd before her.

“You are all strong. Slaves or not, I...no, Althos is in need of strong citizens. We need a strong bond in order to build a country. A bond not unlike the one between family members. Yes, it is true that we bought you, but that wasn’t so we could keep you as slaves. We made an investment... believing that you would become one of us, that you would be able to help us achieve our dreams, that you would be able to help us to build a country. So please, I’m begging you. Set yourselves free of your chains. You are slaves no longer. You are citizens of Althos. You are a part of our family now.”

Her small voice carried through the abandoned training grounds. Much to Al’s surprise, Feena’s speech had a huge effect on the furious mob.

“Wooo!”

Some of them screamed in joy, while others cried or hugged each other. The liberated slaves were filled with happiness.

Well, all’s well that ends well, I guess.

Al placed his hand on his chest in relief.

“Wahhh, Missy! I don’t know how we can help you yet, but we’re not gonna let you or your country down!”

The deeply moved Juju wrapped her arms around Feena and hugged her tightly.

“Ah!”

The confused Diva couldn’t pull the girl off even if she wanted to. She had no choice but to accept Juju’s affection.

Al watched on, not letting the truth get in the way of the heartwarming scene before him. He didn’t care that Feena wasn’t a citizen of Althos, or that it wasn’t him who resolved the issue. The only thing that mattered was that Feena accomplished in just a matter of minutes what had taken him years before. She managed to free them of their binds. Al couldn’t help but admire her.

Feena curled the corners of her mouth into an awkward smile and waved at the crowd, then returned to Al's side.

"Nice work, I guess."

"Good job, Feena."

Sharon and Al welcomed Feena back. Feena had returned to her usual stoic self while Al had a huge grin on his face and Sharon was pouting for some reason.

"That was nothing special... I was just being a good wife, as the book said."

Feena's fair cheeks were stained light pink for a good while after the day's events.

"Prepare yourself, you damn kiddie fiddler! You sex-crazed weirdo!"

The next day, Al's office had once again turned into a battlefield. Sharon unsheathed her sword and pointed it towards Al, who was resting his cheek on his brand-new table. This time, however, she wasn't striking down at him.

"Hah! Do you think I'm stupid enough to keep repeating that same mistake? I won't swing at you just to have my sword deflected again! But like I said, today is the day. Prepare yourself!"

"That's enough."

"Hey, I'm in the middle of assassinating him! Get out of here!"

"You'll regret disturbing my alone time with him."

"Uhm, didn't we have this same conversation yesterday?"

Al was getting a strong sense of deja vu. It seemed the girls were going to fight it out no matter how much he protested. But then, just as Al was about to accept his cruel fate, an unexpected savior arrived.

"Al, are you here!? I have something to... Whoa."

A young, burly, heavily-tanned man who was slightly older than Al and clad in leather armor stood completely bewildered at the door. He then waltzed into the room right between the charging Sharon and Feena's fireball. It was a move that would've signed most other men's death warrant, but this one didn't even

flinch at the danger. In one smooth motion, he unsheathed the sword attached to his back and deflected Sharon's swing, while also erecting an ice wall to protect himself from Feena's fireball.

"Whoa, now!"

He innocently looked around the room after parrying both Divas' attacks at the same time.

"Who are you?"

Immediately realizing the young man's potential, Sharon took a few steps back and readjusted her grip on her sword.

"He's dangerous... We should take him out before he gets to Al."

Feena narrowed her eyes and prepared herself to fire off more magic at a moment's notice.

"Wait, no, he's—"

Al tried to take control of the volatile situation but, after looking back and forth between Sharon and Feena for a moment, the young man interrupted Al before he could continue.

"Al, you goddamn playboy! When did you pick up these two hotties? As if you didn't already have it good enough! All you damn kings are like this! Don't make me burn your castle down!"

"Hey, Jamka! I see you still don't have a filter on that big mouth of yours!"

Al heaved a sigh and moved to introduce the man to the two Divas, when he was interrupted again.

"Alnoaaaa!"

A nimble shadow darted out from behind Jamka and launched herself at Al's chest.

"Oomph!"

The shadow knocked the defenseless Al down to the floor.

"Ouch... That was one heck of a greeting, Brusch."

Despite Al’s pain, he hugged the girl’s head. She happily nuzzled against Al’s chest as he gently stroked her short, messy hair.

“Ehehe! I’m giving you four days worth of love, Alnoa!”

Brusch energetically lifted her tanned face from Al’s chest. Her young, childlike eyes brimmed with happiness.

“Haha, yes. Four days worth.”

She’ll certainly grow up to be a gorgeous woman.

He patted her one last time before he tried to get up, but...

“I knew you were a kiddy fiddler!”

“I can pretend to be a kid too... if that’s what you’re into.”

“Al, how many times do I have to tell you not to fondle my little sister!?”

The young king found himself caught in a three-way crossfire before he could release himself from little Brusch’s embrace. Al weighed his options. On one hand, he wanted to protest their claims, but, looking at the happy girl in his arms, he couldn’t let her take all the blame. All he could do was to let out a defeated sigh.



“Let me introduce these two. The guy standing there is my commander in chief, the minister of public finances, and a very close friend of mine. He’s my right-hand man, Jamka.”

Al carried on with the introduction, ignoring everyone’s cold gazes.

“And this girl is his sister, the current head of intellig—”

“Hi, I’m Brusch! In the future, I’m going to become Alnoa’s wife! Ehehe! Wow, I really said it!”

She innocently declared her innermost aspiration while clinging to Al.

Crap.

Dead silence filled the room, followed by an anger so thick that it was palpable.

“I can not let this stand...”

Feena stepped up to the little girl.

“I’m Al’s soon-to-be wife, Lesfina. I am the clear favorite among his fiancée candidates. Since you’re a friend of Al’s, call me Feena. Pleased to meet you.”

She was really emphasizing the friend part, wasn’t she?

“Wait a minute. What makes you the favorite!?” Sharon said. “Well, not that I mind, but... Actually, I *do* mind!”

Sharon turned towards Brusch and flashed her a stiff smile.

“I’m Al’s strongest fiancée candidate, Sharon. It’s nice to meet someone who isn’t in the picture in any way.”

Sharon then turned back towards Feena and returned her ice-cold gaze with a challenging glare. Red and blue sparks flew through the room.

“You know, you really don’t have to fight over everything just because you’re both Divas,” Al quietly grumbled.

“I pushed him to the ground the moment we met,” Feena said, taking the initiative.

“Yeah? That’s nothing! Not only did I push him down to the ground, he, um, touched me. You know, up there...”

Sharon trailed off a little, but nevertheless, her eyes were gleaming with fire.

“That was just an accident. That doesn’t count.”

“Yours was an accident too!”

“Ahaha! You’ve already recruited some concubines before our marriage? You’re so thoughtful, Alnoa!”

“Concubines!?” exclaimed both Sharon and Feena.

Their glares combined would make anyone run for the hills, but Brusch bravely stood her ground in the three-way standoff.

“Wow, Al, you beast! You’re a real lady-killer, aren’t you? I hope you die in a fire, come back to life, then die again!” Jamka added, half-jokingly.

“Oh! And, you see, Alnoa and I already did it....”

“What!?”

In trying to compete with her rivals, Brusch, with rosy cheeks, let slip one of her wild delusions.

“Um, Brusch, I’m pretty sure I’d remember—”

Al immediately tried to protest her outrageous claims, but he was cut off by the two Divas.

“Haha, nice joke. He doesn’t have the balls to do something like that!”

“Agreed. Al won’t lay a finger on us, no matter how much we try to get him to... He’d never do anything with you.”

“Hey, I’m still here, you know! Why does every fight between you girls tear my soul apart!?”

“Arghh! I bust my balls for you day after day, only for you to corrupt my little sister!? All while toying with two other girls!? Is this some kind of game to you?”
Jamka mercilessly dealt the final blow.

Guys, enough is enough!

“I’m not after Brusch, and I’m not playing around with those two! They’re the ones who—”

“Argh!”

“Die.”

Sharon sliced an old book lying around clean in half, while Feena conjured a fireball larger than her upper body. Al had no choice but to concede defeat.

“Okay. I’m sorry... Wait! Jamka! Did you only come here to make me look like an idiot?!”

“Why are you mad, now!?”

Venting his anger, Al glared at Jamka. After interrupting his work and tearing his heart apart with their wild accusations, no one there could blame Al for his sudden flare-up.

Seeing Al so frustrated, everyone decided to call a temporary truce. Jamka hopped on the sofa, ignoring the angry mood in the room.

“So, you bought another batch of slaves, huh? I know we need more population, but now we have so much bureaucratic crap to deal with! We have to chart everyone’s relationships, find places for them to live, test their vocational aptitudes... At least let me know about this stuff in advance!”

Jamka finally remembered what he came for and tried to pull the conversation back on track.

“Oh. My bad.”

But Al promptly shot down his complaints with a single phrase. Everyone in the room other than Al realized who was the real backbone of Althos.

“Well,” Jamka continued. “Our finances will be secure for a little while thanks to the loot we got from the battle with Freiya the other day, but... I don’t think we’ll be buying any more slaves for a while.”

“Why not?”

Jamka chuckled and smirked at Al, cruelly stalling for a moment before dropping the big news.

“You see, that’s because the Empire occupied Labona last night.”

“Huh?”

Al understood what Jamka said, but all he could do was to gasp in surprise. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since he met with Bouzen, the famous slave trader from Labona.

“All of ten of their governors were beheaded, and they slaughtered anyone who resisted or fled. The rest were enslaved by the Empire. Only a small skeleton crew was left to keep the city up and running.”

Jamka shrugged before continuing.

“The lucky fellows who were away from the city at the time of the attack are still safe. A handful of people also managed to slip through the Empire’s claws, but there aren’t that many of them. Only about fifty merchants or so, in total.”

That reminds me, I think Bouzen mentioned that he was taking a detour to the east, peddling along the way, before returning to Labona. I guess his luck ran out.

“I’m sorry, Alnoa. Labona fell before I could warn them...”

Brusch fidgeted and hung her head in disappointment. Despite her age, she still shouldered the responsibility of leading Althos’ intelligence agency.

“Don’t worry. It’s not your fault.”

Disregarding the Diva’s cold gaze, Alnoa gently patted her head.

“How did this happen so quickly?” Al asked. “I know they were neutral and lacked alliances, but they had quite a bit of military power. The city was swarming with mercenaries and private armies.”

“I don’t know.”

Jamka raised his hands and shrugged as he answered Al.

“The lucky few who escaped all had outlandish stories about bear monsters or flying creatures rampaging through the city. Does the Empire have magic like

that?”

Are those like that monster I fought during the manhunt incident? Oh, that’s right. Jamka stayed behind to defend the city, so he doesn’t know about them.

Al and the Divas shared a look and then explained to Jamka and Brusch about the abominations.

“I see. They used a creature like that out there?”

Intrigued, Jamka raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah. Feena is looking into the details, but I’m sure them occupying the main trade hub for slaves is related to abominations in some way.”

We really need more information.

With Al lost in thought, the room fell silent for a while.

“I’ll... I’ll look into it!”

Brusch, who was still latched on to Al’s arm, was the one who broke the silence. The tiny Head of Intelligence looked up at Al, her eyes brimming with determination.

“No, I won’t let you. There are too many things we don’t know yet. It’s too dangerous.”

Al immediately rejected the idea, but then someone unexpected intervened.

“That just makes her looking into it even more important.”

Jamka, who had a serious case of sister complex, got on her defense.

“Huh!? But still...”

Jamka confidently puffed up his chest at the flustered Al.

“Don’t worry! I’ll make sure our most capable people accompany her! Even if she fails, she’ll—Ouch!”

Brusch quickly moved behind Jamka and kicked him in the rear.

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who can’t even cover their own butt! Alnoa, don’t worry! I’ll gather all the information I can. I’ll be home before you even realize I left!”

Brusch sprinted out of the room, not giving Al a chance to stop her.

“Seriously, why doesn’t anyone listen to my orders!?”

Boisterous laughter erupted from Jamka beside him.

“Don’t worry, Al! I’ve personally trained her! I taught her everything there is to know about magic and the sword, and she has a real knack for the bow! And there’s no one in the kingdom better than her at information gathering. She’ll come back safe and sound for sure.”

Jamka’s trust in his sister was absolute.

“You’re right. I should have some faith in her.”

Jamka’s unwavering smile put Al at ease. Al was still worried, but he decided to trust Brusch as well.

“Well, I had some other things to say, but I think I’ve scolded Al enough for one day. I guess I’ll get back to work.”

“Thank you.”

Jamka stretched himself out and started to leave the room, but he stopped at the doorway.

“Huh? What’s up?” asked Al.

“Say, Al. I know their treatment in the Empire is unacceptable, but do you really think that liberating slaves can bring them true happiness?”

With his back still turned towards Al, Jamka asked an unexpected question.

“Of course. You’re happy, aren’t you?”

Not grasping the meaning behind Jamka’s words, Al gave a prompt, simple answer.

“Haha. Yeah, I guess. Sorry. Forget I ever asked.”

His usual light and cheerful voice felt empty.

The sound of galloping horses filled the pitch-black night.

“Captain Brusch, enemies on our—gahh!”

“Luu!”

Brusch didn’t have the luxury of stopping and checking on her subordinate. Shouting his name was all she could do.

“What are we even fighting against!?”

There was no one there to answer her question.

Brusch’s reconnaissance team had come under attack by an unknown assailant. The elite crew Jamka hand-picked for his precious little sister had sensed the danger. They had staged a swift and orderly retreat, leaving behind a trap to slow down their pursuers. But the enemy charged forward with reckless abandon, tearing right through the recon team’s trap and staying hot on their heels.

“How did they get through Alnoa’s pepper bomb!?”

Brusch found herself in a very dangerous situation. Her elite team of scouts was completely wiped out, leaving her isolated. She couldn’t even tell if they were captured or killed. But despite the gravity of her situation, Brusch suppressed her anxiety and galloped through the field as fast as she could. She mournfully promised her fallen team that she’d come back for them.

Jamka’s first rule of the reconnaissance team: Never falter, even if your comrades have fallen. Bring home the information safely, even if you return alone. It was a part of the team’s internal code of conduct, kept secret from even King Alnoa. Brusch kept repeating that rule to herself, trying to keep her broken heart together.

“Ahh!”

From the darkness came a fireball, crashing into her horse’s flank. Its entire abdomen was blown to pieces, killing it instantly and sending it crashing into the ground.

“What’s going on!?”

Brusch leapt off of the dead horse and safely landed.

“Wha—”

Her words were caught in her throat. An unspeakable darkness, darker than the starless sky, slowly consumed her.

“Alnoa...”

She could only mutter out that one last word. Silence then ruled on the pitch-black plains. Complete and utter silence, far removed from the typical silence of night. Not a single living thing could be heard or seen amid the impenetrable darkness.

Chapter 3: Dreams and Despair

For the first time in a while, Al woke up in his own room.

Waking up in your own room is so relaxing. I feel completely refreshed and well-rested. It feels so good, but... something is off.

“I hope I’m wrong...”

Al stared at the ceiling, lost in his thoughts. Unable to bring himself to leave the comfort of his bed, he bathed in the warm spring sunlight shining through his windows.

Show me a person who’d hop out of bed in this situation and I’ll show you a fool. I’ll just stay in bed until Lilicia comes around to light the fireplace. I’m sure that will be soon.

Wrapped in his blankets, Al looked around the room, but he couldn’t find anything that could have been the source of his earlier unease.

“I guess it’s nothing. Speaking of which, I haven’t even had the time to get a good night’s rest lately with all the ruckus going on in the castle.”

Al snuggled up in his soft blankets. He surrendered to the siren call of his bed and started to doze off again.

“It’s okay if I take the day off, right...?”

“It’s fine... I have room for seconds...”

An unexpected voice coming from another part of the room jolted Al awake.

I’m not just dreaming, right?

He could sense someone in the corner of the room. Or, more precisely, he could hear a certain someone talking in their sleep. He reluctantly sat up, still wrapped in his blankets, and looked towards the sofa in the middle of the room. It was empty, but to its side was something that caught Al’s attention.

“Seriously?”

Al sighed. He wanted to ignore his surprise guest, turn around, and go back to sleep, but he couldn't risk getting attacked and having his bed destroyed while he was happily snoozing away. Al rubbed his exhausted eyes and looked more closely at where the voice came from.

There he saw a large, suspicious-looking basket covered with a blanket. The basket was large enough to fit a person inside, and it definitely hadn't been in the room when he went to sleep.

You've got to be kidding me. Do you really expect me to play along with your assassination routine so early in the morning?

He considered getting up and quietly leaving the room, but the mysterious basket piqued his curiosity.

What is she planning for today?

Giving in to the temptation, he quietly crawled out of his bed, but started shivering as soon as he was free of his blankets.

It's so cold! I should just go back to bed and pretend I haven't seen anything.

He bore with the morning chill and sneaked towards the basket.

"Anyone there?"

The blanket twitched in reaction to Al's question. Al nervously pulled the blanket off of the basket, prepared for whatever ambush might lie in wait.

"What!? Sharon, what in the..."

Al's eyes popped wide open at the scene that welcomed him upon pulling off the blanket.

"Hmm? Morning."

Inside the basket lay Sharon. A single long pink ribbon wrapped lightly around her was all that covered her nakedness. Al could hardly believe this was part of an assassination ploy.

"Nngh... Ahh! I fell asleep! Um... Surprise!"

I bet she was pretending to be a present and then planned on ambushing me when I went to 'open' it, but she fell asleep instead. Is she really taking this

seriously?

Even her target was concerned about how full of holes her ideas were.

“Fwahhh!”

Sharon sat up, rubbed her eyes, and then stretched herself out like a cat. Considering she was clad in only a thin ribbon, her stretch gave Al quite the view, something Sharon was slow to realize due to her sleepiness.

“Hmm? Why are you staring at me so much...?”

Normally, this would be the point where Sharon made a huge ruckus and Al let out an exaggerated sigh, but this time was different.

“Ah! Nooo! Why am I wearing this!? What’s going on?”

Realizing the situation she was in, Sharon bashfully tried to hide her breasts with her arms, but she couldn’t escape Al’s unusually cold gaze.

“Don’t... Don’t just stare at me! Say something! Don’t you have anything to say to a cute girl presenting herself to you!?”

She glared at Al, her cheeks flushed pink from embarrassment.

“When did you come in?”

“Um... Just now.”

“There’s no way. Tell me when.”

Flustered by Al’s stubborn questioning, Sharon forgot her anger for a moment and carefully thought back on how she got there.

“Last night... I think.”

“So you’ve been here since last night, wearing that?”

She nodded anxiously.

As if he was waiting for that answer, Al reached out towards Sharon silently.

“Wait! I just wanted to ambush you! I had this plan and everything! I called it ‘Surprise, you’re dead!’”

Under the threat of Al’s arms closing in on her, Sharon confessed her intentions while shivering.

“Sharon, are you okay?”

Her light-purple lips trembled. Not only because of the cold, but also because Al’s touch had become a traumatic experience for her.

“Don’t come any closer! I have a knife here in the basket I was planning on stabbing you with, so stay where you are!”
The fearful Sharon glared at Al. Al had to wonder whether her revealing all her plans to him was the smartest idea. He continued reaching out and then forcefully grabbed her shoulders.

“No! Wait, what?”

Al was right in front of her, just as she planned, yet she was trembling in fear. However, her fears proved to be baseless. No Heavenly Surge activated.

“...Why?”

“What? Disappointed that nothing happened?”

“N-No...!! Why would I be!? Get real!”

“It seems like I can touch you if it’s like this.”

Al gently covered Sharon with his jacket. Heavenly Surge wasn’t activating through his indirect touch.

“I don’t need it!”
Sharon furiously tossed the warm jacket back at him. Al couldn’t bear looking at the trembling, crumpled up girl and raised his voice as a result.

“Stop screwing around! You’re freezing cold! Do you have any idea how cold the nights get during springtime in Althos!? It’s no joke! You spent the entire night wearing nothing but a ribbon? Are you out of your mind? Are you trying to catch a cold!?”

“Ah...”

Sharon was taken aback by Al’s unexpected outburst.

“I-It’s not that cold. I’m totally fine!”

Al furrowed his brow for a moment, and then wrapped his jacket around the frowning Sharon and picked her up.

“There! You’re much lighter than I expected.”

“Ah, hey!!”

“Sharon, stop wiggling! I can see, um, you know...

“Wha!? Why, you...”

Her shyness won out over her anger. Sharon put aside her conflicted feelings and stopped resisting, though she made sure to continue glaring at him the whole time.

“You’re completely pale from the cold, so you have no right to complain. You’re going in my bed right now!”

Al gently tucked her into his bed.

“I’ll go get you a warm cup of milk.”

“Ahhh. It’s so nice and warm.”

Sharon made herself cozy in Al’s bed. The shivers she had denied previously disappeared before long.

“Wait right here. Don’t move!”

Sharon, tucked in all the way to her nose, watched Al leave the room.

Silence descended on the room once the sound of Al’s footsteps faded.

“What’s wrong with him... I didn’t even ask for his help.”

Sharon puffed out her cheeks and clutched the end of her blanket in anger. She wanted nothing more than to show Al what was what by jumping out of the bed, but his residual warmth wrapped around her and bound her in place.

“Ahh... So warm.”

Her defiance was no match for the bed’s comforts. Its warm coziness brought to mind a memory she held near and dear to her heart.

“Oh... This is kind of like that one time when I was really little. I crawled into Father’s bed after having a scary dream... He was so warm and kind...”

She tried resisting the nostalgic warmth out of fear that this was some kind of trap set up by Alnoa, but she couldn’t. She grabbed onto the blankets and rolled

to the side.

"This smell is kinda nice..."

She dozed off with those moments she spent with her father lingering in her mind.

“...on... Sharon!”

“Mmnn... Daddy? Huh? Al!?”

Hearing a familiar voice, she quickly sprung up in the bed.

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t know you fell asleep.”

She looked around with a sleepy face, trying to find the source of the voice. There she saw her assassination target holding a warm, steaming drink. She immediately changed her expression to a more hostile one.

“How low can you go? You lull me into a false sense of security with your amazingly warm and cozy bed, only to do all sorts of creepy and perverted things to me in my sleep! You’re the worst!”

She appeared angry on the surface, but the blush on her cheeks indicated to Al that she was only lashing out due to the embarrassing content of her half-asleep mumblings.

“It’s true that I tucked you into my bed, but you fell asleep on your own, didn’t you?”

Al found her reaction rather cute. He handed her the cup of steaming-hot milk with a smirk. Despite being on guard, she took the cup. Milk had been her preferred drink since coming to Althos.

Sharon shot Al another quick glare but thanked him inside her head. She blew on the milk and carefully sipped it.

“Mmm, that’s good.”

Her mouth relaxed into a smile at the faintly sweet taste.

“I added a couple spoons of honey for you. That’s how you usually drink it, right?”

Al sat down at the edge of the bed and took a sip from his cup.

“Wha!? How did you know that? Are you shadowing me everywhere I go? Are you one of those stalkers you hear city-dwellers talk about?”

Instead of showing gratitude, she barraged him with insults.

“Why is that weird for me to know? We’ve eaten together every day since you arrived!”

Al took another sip from his cup after firing off his comeback. Sharon did the same while scowling bashfully at Al.

“Ahh, this is so calming.”

The warm feeling coursing through her made her quietly murmur to herself.

“Huh? Did you say something?”

Al didn’t quite catch what she said.

“Nothing. Anyway, don’t even think about doing something creepy like not washing your sheets and storing them for your lonely days now that a peerless beauty like myself has slept in them, got it?”

“The only creepy thing here is your thoughts.”

“Trying to peer into an innocent girl’s mind? You creep.”

“Oh, just shut up and drink.”

Their usual quarrel somehow felt more relaxed and kind this time.

“Just so you know, I haven’t given up on killing you,” Sharon said, and then continued under her breath, “but I don’t want you to think I’m completely heartless, so I’ll let you live for today in exchange for this wonderful milk.”

Then, while pretending that she was sulking, Sharon turned her head away and smiled a little. Just as they both were starting to enjoy the gentle atmosphere together, the door to the room flew open, triggering the alarm spell cast on it.

“Al, why aren’t you in your usual bed? And I finally got my hands on a bewitching costume!”

Feena burst into the room.

I guess she was expecting me to be in my office. Anyway, how did she manage to open that door so easily!? I had the best magician in the country cast defensive magic on it last night! And how did Sharon get in, for that matter!? Ahh, the more I think about this, the more questions I have! Though now is not the time to worry about this crap... What's up with that outfit!?

"Hahh... Don't I look cute? I borrowed this uniform from Lilicia. I once read that men can't resist maid uniforms, so now I can... have you... all to..."

Feena began proudly describing herself in her usual monotone voice, but trailed off part way through. The red-haired girl lying in Al's bed caught her attention.

"A-A-Al, wh-wh-what are you..."

Al was sitting next to the mostly nude Sharon tucked into his bed, and they were happily sharing a hot drink together.

"Ah, Feena, this is just a misunderstanding. I can explain!"

"No, wait, Feena! We didn't do what you're thinking!"

Both of them were shaking. Looking at them, one would immediately think that something had happened between them last night.

"Al... You kiddie fiddler! Sister mingler! Philanderer!"

She drew a magic circle large enough to destroy not only the room, but the entire castle.

"Wait, I don't have anything to do with this guy! Actually, well, I guess I do."

"You bet you do. You thief!"

"I don't want to steal him from you! I want to kill him!"

"I won't let you do that, either."

They were at each other's throats already. Al tried to figure out what he should do in this situation, but he couldn't keep his thoughts together.

"That's right, I only came to Althos to murder Al!"

Sharon found her own way out of this predicament, dubious as it was.

“Al, prepare yourself!”

Murdering Al was her only option. She swiftly pulled her sword out of who-knows-where and charged at Al.

“Why does it always come to this!?”



Sharon rushed forward, not giving Al the time to react, but Feena suddenly cut in between them.

“Don’t worry, Al. Even if you are a kiddie fiddling, sister mingling pervert, you’re still my puppet. I’ll protect you!”

Her wand held firmly in hand, Feena stood between them. The tip of the wand crackled with electricity.

“Aren’t you being a bit unfair? I’m not that bad of a guy!”

With his fingers pressed against his temples, he protested her claims, despite knowing she was unlikely to listen to him.

“Don’t worry about it!”

Sharon’s overhead swing was met by Feena’s lightning attack.

“Nice try!”

Their attacks deflected off of each other. Sharon’s sword blasted through the floor, leaving behind a huge hole, while Feena’s lighting hit a bookshelf, burning the neatly organized books to charcoal. The two continued brawling as if Al wasn’t even there.

“I wanted to take it easy today, but I guess that plan went up in flames, just like my books. Why does this keep happening?”

Al had given up on trying to stop them. He climbed into his bed and buried himself under his blankets in an attempt to escape from reality.

“Oh my. It pains me to see you two fight over my lovely little brother every single day. I hope you didn’t forget about me.”

Al’s savior, Cecilia, gracefully entered the room with a bright smile on her face.

“Stay out of this! This is just between me and her.”

“You can’t stop this, Miss Cecilia.”

Absorbed in their battle, they had completely forgotten their original goals by that point.

“Oh my. How dare you say that to me? I love Al more than anyone in the world! I think I’ll have to teach you all a lesson.”

Cecilia walked right next to Al and crossed her arms.

“Cecilia, you really don’t have to—”

Even though he knew it was futile, he tried resisting her.

“Oh, then you just want to sit on your hands and watch as your room gets destroyed?”

“Ugh, well...”

“You’re mine!”

With Al busy thinking about what could happen to his room, Cecilia seized the opportunity and made her move. She grabbed Al’s hands and placed them against her chest.

Squish.

“Ah! Noooo!”

Oh, for the love of... Fine, whatever.

Al focused his magic into his hands in desperation. Lust swelled within him, and his sister had the look of euphoria plastered on her face. Al summoned the mental fortitude to withstand the immeasurable lust conjured up by the Heavenly Surge he was undergoing.

“Ahh... Al!”

“Cecilia!”

He felt a sudden urge to embrace his sister upon hearing her sweet voice but he managed to separate himself from her just as he was about to lose his mind.

“Ahh, I wanted to keep playing.”

“Aren’t you enjoying this a bit too much, Cecilia?” Al asked, panting heavily.

“No, not at all. Let’s try going a bit further next time,” Cecilia said, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. She brushed away her disheveled hair and pouted in dissatisfaction, then looked at Al as if she had wanted their Heavenly Surge to go out of control.

It was intense enough for Al as it was; he was mentally drained. Meanwhile, Cecilia was brimming with physical and magical energy. She had taken quite a bit of magical power from him during the Heavenly Surge.

I’d rather there not be a next time. For my sake and everyone else’s.

Cecilia let out a deep breath, sounded the bell on her khakkhara, and turned towards the two Divas who were responsible for trashing the room. They were standing motionless, aghast at what they just witnessed.

“Your playtime is over, girls. I wish to spend some quality alone time with my little brother now, so may I ask you two boorish extras to leave?”

Am I imagining things, or does her voice have an awfully erotic tone to it?

“Watch your tongue! Don’t get full of yourself just because you’ve powered up using Heavenly Surge!”

Sharon bit the bait. She adjusted her grip on her sword and charged at Cecilia. Of course, she held back enough so that Cecilia wouldn’t die.

“Huh?”

Before she knew it, Sharon was lying on her back staring at the scorched ceiling.

“Huh? What just—Ahh!”

While Sharon was still baffled, Cecilia grabbed her flailing arm and launched her through the air and directly into a wall outside the room.

“She was my prey!”

Proclaiming herself as the next challenger, Feena drew a horizontal magic circle.

“Ultimate Ice Wall!”

Without any chanting, Feena erected a massive ice wall in the middle of the room, cutting Al off from Cecilia and herself.

“Oh my!”

Cecilia’s smile didn’t falter. She focused her magical energy into her hands and effortlessly shattered the huge wall. It blew apart like a termite-infested tree trunk being smashed by a sledgehammer.

“What? No way!”

Feena could hardly believe her eyes.

Even Al, who was not very adept at magic, knew that Feena’s ice wall was not shattered so easily. He could only gape in awe at the scene. Not just at Cecilia’s raw, unmitigated power, but also at her bewitching demeanor.

“Well, now. It’s time to end this little game. I’m sure you’re tired after all this exercise, so go and take a hot bath. But don’t forget to have some breakfast first!”

Feeling Al’s gaze on her, Cecilia grabbed the dumbfounded Feena by the nape and gently threw her out of the room.

“Let me show you the way out.”

“Ouch!”

Feena tumbled across the rough stone floor. Al actually felt a bit sorry for her.

“Is this the power of Heavenly Surge?”

Sharon murmured next to Feena.

“See you later.”

After gently bowing to the perplexed girls, Cecilia turned towards Al with a suggestive grin on her face and hurried towards him.

“Now that we’re finally alone—”

“Thank you, Cecilia. Now I can finally relax.”

Returning his sister’s grin, Al took her hands and elegantly led her out of the room.

“I couldn’t be more grateful, Cecilia. Honestly. Thank you.”

After she was out of the room, Al bowed in an exaggerated manner, and then promptly shut the door on them and turned the lock.

“Ah, that’s right...” Feena said.

Al and the Divas were enjoying an after-lunch dessert together—strawberry cake, at Sharon’s request.

“What? I hope you’re not about to start another argument again,” Al responded while patting his stuffed belly. It was an uncharacteristically blunt response for him.

“I learned something about the crystals.”

“Oh. What did you find out?”

Al immediately changed his attitude towards her. He tried to hurry her by looking straight into her eyes, but she decided to keep up the suspense for a bit longer and finish her cake before continuing.

“Thank you. It was good.”

She gracefully wiped her mouth with a napkin and then moved on to the main topic of the conversation.

“The crystals are cheap. You can get them anywhere. What’s interesting is what’s inside...”

Feena took out a small jar from her dress and put it on the table. Inside was a red, crystal-like lump.

Was she hiding that jar in her cleavage!?

“What’s this?”

Sharon, having finished off her second slice of cake, cheerfully got up and went in to poke the jar, but Feena quickly slapped away her hand.

“Hey! What’s your problem!?”

Feena’s slap caught Sharon off guard and killed her merry mood.

“This is probably what transforms the slaves into those monsters. You shouldn’t touch it carelessly.”

“What? So I’ll turn into a monster too if I touch it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Feena’s explanation eased Sharon’s anger. She was repulsed by the very idea of a Diva transforming into one of those monsters. Her surprise and disgust were apparent.

Al could picture it easily—Sharon the red-haired gorilla, climbing around the castle and smashing the place to pieces.

“You just imagined something incredibly rude, didn’t you?”

“Oh, uh, not at all!”

What, can the Divas read the Demon King’s thoughts or something? If so, goodbye privacy...

“So, Feena, tell us more about the crystals.”

In an attempt to fend off Sharon’s all-seeing gaze, Al desperately tried to steer the conversation back on track. But he received no answer. Instead, Feena silently stared in front of Al, straight at the last remaining piece of strawberry cake.

“Would you like this?”

Feena audibly gulped.

“You can have it later.”

This time, she gently shook her head.

“You don’t want to continue until you have it?”

Another loud gulp could be heard from her.

You’re just as bad as Sharon!

He shot a displeased look her way, but she didn’t react.

“Well, okay. You can have it if you... Huh? What’s up?”

Al started sliding the cake her way, but Feena stopped him.

“Feed me.”

“Excuse me?”

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth. Even though Al wanted to resist, past experience taught him that it was better if he just played along. He could raise a fuss all he wanted; he’d still lose in the end.

“Okay, but you have to tell us everything first.”

Instead, he decided to use the cake as a bargaining chip. Of course, he didn’t think that a simple slice of cake actually held that much value.

“Hmm, let me think about it:”

Feena took a moment to seriously consider the proposal. She looked back and forth between Al’s hand and his face, like a puppy whose owner told her to wait.

“Deal.”

Yes! I won!

His inevitable fate was only delayed, so it wasn’t a total triumph, but even a minor victory was enough to make Al happy.

“The crystal is enchanted with three magical properties—physical enhancement, illusion, and metamorphosis. I call it a magic crystal.”

Feena began her explanation at once. Al was tempted to remark on her unimaginative naming convention, but this was a serious topic, so he decided to hold his tongue.

“This is just a hypothesis, but I think that magic crystals are used to transform their user based on what they imagine to be the strongest or scariest thing out there.”

Al recalled the abominations. They had certainly looked like creatures from a picture book.

“Oh my. I’ve never seen magic like this before,” Cecilia added.

“Neither have I. I’ll need to study it more to fully understand it,” Feena said.

The two Divas, experts on healing and destruction magic respectively, tilted their heads in surprise.

“I see. Feena, continue your research. Brusch should be back in a day or two. We might be able to learn something from her, too.”

Sensing that they wouldn’t get any further that day, Al ended the discussion there.

I wonder why Jamka hasn’t come to me with his usual barrage of complaints yet.

Feena casually put the jar containing the catalyst for transforming into a monster back into her dress.

“Oh my. Isn’t that dangerous? Is a simple jar enough to hold that?” Cecilia asked, interrupting Al’s thoughts.

“Don’t worry. I cast a protective spell on the jar.”

Feena puffed her chest a little. She was quite confident in her spell.

“Wait a second! If you cast protection magic on it, then why did you slap my hands earlier!?” Sharon snapped at Feena.

“I wouldn’t have wanted you to shatter the jar with your gorilla strength.”

“Watch your mouth!”
As per usual, Sharon immediately lost her temper and was about to start another fight. She shot a quick glance at Al and smirked.

“I’ve got you now!”

“Ah!”

In one smooth motion, Sharon snatched the slice of cake in front of Al and stuffed it into her mouth.

“Hahahah! Dis ish what you get fo skwewin wif me!”

“Noo! My precious cake! I want my lovey-dovey spoon feeding moment with Al!”

Feena was despondent, but she refused to give in, even in the face of Sharon chowing down the cake she wanted so badly.

“It’s time to exterminate the Freiyan Red Gorilla species once and for all.”

Wait, are there any animals like that in Freiya? I’m pretty sure there aren’t...

Feena focused her magical energy, creating a visible aura around her.

“Oh, bring it on! Let’s settle this!”

Sharon wiped the cream off her face and then reached for the sword behind her back.

“This looks bad. Forget the room; she could destroy the whole castle with that much magic!”

“Oh my. That wouldn’t be good.”

“Why aren’t you taking this seriously, Cecilia!?”

In the midst of this life-threatening situation, Cecilia casually signaled to Lilicia with her eyes.

“Excuse me for the delay. I have brought more cake.”

A second serving of cake arrived, bringing with it a period of dead silence. The Divas’ bloodlust slowly dissipated.

“May I ask that you three keep it down a little? I’m delighted to see you enjoying your lunchtime, but you’re disturbing the others,” Lilicia said.

“Me too? I didn’t do anything!”

“Of course. The two ladies are your bride candidates, so you share in the responsibility.”

Lilicia shot down Al without a moment’s delay. The three of them quietly returned to their seats and started eating their cake.

At least I don’t have to feed Feena anymore, right?

“Oh, Miss Sharon. A letter for you has arrived from Freiya.”

After ensuring everyone settled down, Lilicia handed Sharon a letter. The spotless parchment was sealed with a red stamp. It was obvious at a glance that it was a high-class letter.

“Oh. Thank you.”

Am I imagining things, or did she look kind of sad for a moment?

Sharon returned to her usual expression, leaned back in her chair, and read the letter.

"That you for lunch; it was splendid. Sorry, but I must return to my room."

Her face drained of color, Sharon read the letter again, then promptly stood up.

"Oh my. You haven't finished your dessert, Sharon. That's not like you."

"Are you full, maybe?"

Sharon left the room without responding to their comments.

Al didn't think much of it. He had no idea about the brewing storm the letter foretold.

"Ah, the day is finally over."

Al plopped down on his bed and stretched out. He'd spent the whole day working after his eventful lunch.

"I feel like I finally made some progress today."

But something felt lacking for Al. He shifted around in bed, unsatisfied. Feena and Cecilia were occupied studying the magic crystal, and he hadn't seen Sharon at all since she returned to her quarters. She'd said that she had to think about some things by herself. Al had the decency not to pry any further, but it still bothered him, so he had asked Lilicia to watch over Sharon, under the pretext that he had important work to do and couldn't be interrupted by another assassination attempt.

Thanks to that, he'd actually had a productive afternoon for a change. But then Sharon didn't even show up for dinner, leaving him shocked. Al had started believing that Sharon could pop up out of nowhere a moment's notice, and so he spent the rest of the day on edge. Every little sound gave him a start. By the end, his nerves were worn down more than he had realized.

"My life was so much more peaceful until a few days ago."
He missed being able to take things easy and relax every now and then, but a part of him found his old life kind of boring in comparison.

Things have become incredibly chaotic. I don't have any time to relax or think to myself anymore. But on the other hand, I've been sleeping a lot more soundly ever since the Divas got here.

"Well, at least it's fun," Al murmured to himself, anxious about the fun times eventually coming to an end.

"That's just the way it is, though."

Al let out a deep sigh and then climbed out of bed with a disgruntled look on his face.

"I need to clear my head."

He opened the windows and mindlessly stared outside to help calm his mind.

"The trees are getting in the way of the stars..."

Because of Althos' tiny workforce, the castle groundskeeping had gone neglected for years, and the overgrown trees blocked Al's view of the night sky. He hadn't been planning on stargazing when he got out of bed, but now that his view was blocked, that was all he wanted to do. That was just the kind of guy Al was.

He leaned out of the window and shifted the branches around to clear the view. But as he was reaching out, something shot by his head and hit the wall behind him.

"Who's there!?"

Al leapt aside and peeked out the window to spot his attacker, using the wall as cover. Another projectile flew past him, narrowly missing his face. It was a silver arrow. Al's assailant clearly wanted him dead.

"I've been waiting for your daily assassination attempt. This time you're trying to snipe me, huh?"

Al's thoughts immediately went to a certain crimson-eyed girl. Her attempts had been rather sloppy, but it seemed like that she was serious this time. Al carefully closed the window while staying out of sight, suspecting that Sharon wouldn't want to incur Cecilia's wrath by breaking the window.

Al suspected wrong. The assassin burst through the window, hell-bent on ending Al's life. Their identity was concealed by a black cloak and a cloth wrapped around their face.

"Oh, come on. Is this why you didn't come to dinner? I hope you're ready to explain yourself to Cecilia and—"

Al stopped mid-sentence upon getting a closer look at his assailant.

Wait, was Sharon always taller than me? And I'm certain she wasn't this burly, either.

Woosh!

Taking advantage of Al's confusion, the assassin produced a large knife that had been strapped to their chest and swung at Al's throat.

"Whoa! Watch out!"

Al was just barely able to detect the knife's trajectory in the dark room and dodged backwards. That convinced him; there was no way this was Sharon attacking him.

"If you're not Sharon, then you must be a real assassin!"
Al clicked his tongue and lowered his posture, readying himself for battle. He maintained a distance of about five meters, keeping the assassin out of striking range. A thick tension filled the room as they both considered their next moves.

The only weapon here is a decorative sword on the wall, and it's too far away. I wouldn't make it there.

The sword was only a few steps away, but the assassin was too close for Al to make a move.

Just then, someone knocked on his door.

"Al, are you awake?"

It was Sharon, calling on Al with perfect timing. But her voice was flat, bereft of its usual self-assured tone. Al put aside his unease and screamed at the top of his lungs without taking his eyes off his attacker.

"Sharon, we're under attack! Run!"

Al immediately realized his mistake. Knowing Sharon's personality, it would have been wiser to keep quiet about the attack. But now...

"Hey, Feena! I'm the assassin here! Hey, why won't this open!?"

Sharon was never one to heed danger. She kicked the newly-repaired door down with a bang and stormed towards the assassin before stopping in surprise.

"Wait, that isn't Feena!?"

"Does that huge person dressed entirely in black look like Feena to you!?"

Al's assailant was much too tall and burly to be Feena. Al planned on never telling Sharon that he'd suspected it was her at first.

"So that's a real assassin!?"

Al nodded. He wondered why Sharon chose this exact time to visit him, but he didn't have the luxury of asking. But for whatever reason, this was the first time since her arrival that she didn't have her trusty longsword with her.

That wasn't about to stop her from springing into action, however.

"Al, I'll be borrowing this!"

She quickly reached for the sword on the wall. Her adeptness at handling life-and-death situations was evident by her quick judgment. With two threats in the room now, the assassin was put on the defensive and unable to react.

"It's not the best, but it's better than nothing."

She rested the blade on her shoulder and glared at the attacker like a wild animal. Sharon was ready for battle.

"Prepare yourself!"

She strengthened her grip and leapt towards the assassin, but was met with a knife flying her way before she could reach him. The attacker had read Sharon's moves.

"This is nothing!"

With a swing of her sword, she knocked the knife away, but the assassin had more where that came from.

“Shit!”

Another knife followed closely behind the first, with the exact same speed and trajectory. It was flying straight towards the defenseless Sharon, still in mid-air and recovering from the previous swing.

“Gah!”

Clank!

The knife struck her square in the face. But a dull sound rang out, as if the knife had struck a hard object.

“Sharon!”

For a brief moment, time froze for Al. He shouted at Sharon, now lying on the ground.

“I’m fwine!”

Her voice trembled. She stood up and forced a smile.

“Yer chweap twicks won’t work on mwe!”

One would certainly hope not, for a Diva!

She turned towards Al, showing off the knife she had caught in her mouth before spitting it onto the floor and turning back towards the assassin.

“You’re not half bad. I guess I’ll have to get serious too. If you don’t want to come at me, then I’ll bring the fun to you!”

“Ice Ball... Destroy him!”

Sharon stepped forward, but an unexpected voice interrupted her before she could make her move.

From the corridor, Feena shot a lump of ice the size of a fist through the wall, right at the assassin. It was an uncharacteristic level of recklessness that surprised even Al.

“Tch...”

The assassin calmly dodged to the side. It was a move Feena had anticipated, however. She sent another ice ball crashing through the wall towards her target, only for it to be dodged again.

At least the commute between my bed and the hallway has been reduced...

“Not bad... Time to get serious.”

Feena appeared behind the destroyed wall and focused her power.

“Stop! Do you want to destroy the entire castle!?” Al shouted at her.

“Oh. No, I don’t.”

“You weren’t even thinking, were you?”

“Of course I was. About tomorrow’s lunch, for example...”

Bashful, Feena broke eye contact with Al.

“That’s something Sharon would say! Either way, focus on the fight!”

“Stop playing around and help me out! And for the record, I’m not thinking about food 24/7!”

Sharon was still facing off against the assassin in the corner of the room. Al wanted to retort that they weren’t playing around, but he understood that Sharon must have been frustrated at not being able to go all-out, fighting in this narrow space.

“You’re starting to seriously piss me off!”

Sharon swung the decorative sword, aiming at the assassin’s flank. The assassin just barely moved out of the way in time.

Sharon kept on attacking, and the assassin relentlessly countered at every opportunity. With the way he was keeping up, it was clear that he was a veteran.

In the midst of that fierce battle, Sharon took a few steps back and spoke to Al without taking her eyes off her target.

“Also, Al, we need to talk later. Wanna grab a snack after this? I skipped dinner, so I’m pretty hungry.”

Is this really the time for this? There’s a trained assassin currently trying to murder us! What is with these Divas?

As they were talking, Feena shot another ice ball, this one sinking into the floor at the assassin's feet.

"Wait, didn't Lilicia bring you your dinner?"

Al even recalled asking Lilicia to bring her more than usual.

"Oh, um... I mean...! I didn't finish my dessert at lunch, so I'm craving some more. So, um, if you're free, then would you mind joining me after this?"

Sharon was emphatic about spending time with Al.

How strange... Is she planning another clumsy assassination attempt? Out of the frying pan, into the fire, huh?

Feena joined the conversation, taking a break from firing ice balls.

"I want some tea, so I'll join you."

"You were drinking tea when I went down to the dining hall earlier! You must be leaking tea out of your ears by now!"

"Sharon, you'll get fat if you eat too much at night."

Unfazed by the mortal peril they were in, the two Divas got into yet another spat.

"Just focus on the assassin already! I'll give you as much tea, food, and whatever else you want later, but let's get this done with first! Please!"

Al could hear the assassin chuckle a little from under his hood.

"Oh, you better believe I'm taking you up on that offer!"

"Same."

With their conversation over, Sharon charged forward with such force that the floor caved in a little underneath her. And in perfect synchronicity, Feena let loose her next attack.

The assassin was completely cornered. He attempted to parry Sharon's attack, but she plowed right through, breaking his knife in half in the process. The assassin tried to escape backwards, but Sharon matched his movement perfectly and landed a slashing attack on his shoulder.

“Tch! So close.”

Having narrowly missed dealing the fatal blow, Sharon clicked her tongue in frustration. Still, it had become clear that the Divas had the overwhelming advantage.

“Ugh. This isn’t gonna work,” said the assassin. He had finally grasped that he was at a serious disadvantage. He threw the shattered knife at them as a distraction, dodged Feena’s next attack, and then made a break for the window.

“No you don’t!”

Al tackled the attacker from the side before he could escape, knocking them both down to the ground.

“You’re trying to flee after barging in here and wrecking my room? I mean, I guess most of that was done by the girls... but still! I won’t let you escape without a good walloping!”

Al straddled the assassin and raised his fist, but the assassin’s mask was caught on his sleeve.

“Wha!?”

The assassin’s face stopped Al in his tracks. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Is this some kind of sick joke... Jamka?” Al asked, his voice trembling. Al should have had the upper hand, but his strength had left him upon seeing the face of his attacker.

“It’s not a joke. I... I can’t accept your dream.”

Jamka’s cold words struck Al hard.

“What? Why?”

“Why, you ask!? Do you have any idea what happened to the slaves you freed from Freiya!? They have no place to live! They’re dying of starvation on the streets! They forced into crime just to eat, only to end up executed by our guards!”

“But, I was just...”

Al knew nothing of the hardships that the slaves he'd liberated went through on a regular basis. He thought, being freed from their chains, that they would all lead happy lives. But the fact was, neither he nor Althos was strong enough to save the souls he fought so hard to free.

"You were just what? You and your kingdom lack the power to make your dream come true."

Jamka bitterly spat out every word. He blamed himself just as much as he blamed Al.

"Even if you could make your dream reality, then what? What comes next? You want to treat everyone equally? Royalty, nobility, citizenry, and freed slaves all placed on equal footing?"

Jamka had ceased his physical struggle against Al, but his words hurt more than any attack could.

"Yes... I will treat them all equally!"

Steeling his battered heart and passionately returning Jamka's gaze, Al fought back with renewed vigor in his voice. He had no basis for his claim, but agreeing with Jamka would've meant tossing his dream away, which he could not let happen at any cost. Jamka couldn't stand looking at Al's bright eyes filled with determination.

"Then does that mean that you would marry a liberated slave? Would you marry my sister, Brusch?"

"What!?"

Al was taken aback by Jamka's sudden question.

"I mean, I like Brusch, really, but marriage...?"

Despite having two marriage candidates, Al didn't see himself getting married in the foreseeable future.

"You could never bring yourself to do so, could you?"

Jamka interpreted Al's hesitation as him balking at the idea of marrying a slave.

“No! It’s not about whether I could bring myself to. I just think of her as a friend, just like you!”

Jamka’s glare wavered for a second, but he quickly regained his composure.

“You’re just watering down your rejection, giving her the ‘let’s just be friends’ line!”

Jamka shoved Al off of him and stood up.

“Ah!”

Al crashed into Sharon behind him and fell to the floor with her. Jamka took the opportunity to once again dash for the window, but he stopped for a second before making his escape.

“Al, let me warn you. If you’re still spouting your nonsense next time we cross paths, then...”

Jamka disappeared into the darkness before finishing his sentence. Al could only catch a glimpse of his friend’s back before he left.

“Al, should we chase him?” Feena asked. Her words failed to reach Al, however.

“Why, Jamka... Why?”

Al bashed his fist repeatedly against the floor, torn apart by his conflicted feelings.

The next day, Al was working in his office as usual. To most bystanders, he would appear as the same diligent king as always.

“He’s pushing himself.”

“He very much is.”

“Oh my. This isn’t good.”

Feena, Lilicia, and Cecilia stood behind the slightly open door, peeking in. Sharon stood further back in the corridor with her arms crossed, lost in thought.

“I guess I’ll just cheer him up with these.”

Blushing slightly, Cecilia began to untie the string binding her blouse together.

“Stop. I once read that repeating the same routine is bad. I’ll take care of him.”

Feena rolled up her skirt and took a step forward, but Cecilia grabbed her by the neck right before she could open the door.

“Oh my, Feena. I just want to let you know that stealing the job of a government official is a serious offense in Althos, one that is punishable by death.”

“It’s okay, my dear sister. I’ll get him up and running in no time. At least, a certain part of him.”

“What was that!? I didn’t expect such vulgarity from you. And correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t recall ever becoming your sister-in-law!”

Ignoring Cecilia’s grip on her neck, Feena stared directly into Cecilia’s eyes.

“Oh, would you like to try me?” Cecilia said, taunting Feena.

“I won’t lose to you.”

Their smiles were just as cold as their glares.

“Excuse me, but you will give yourselves away if you argue right outside his door,” Lilicia said.

“But then what then what do we do about Al?”
A red shadow approached Cecilia from the corner of her eye as she was considering her options.

“Sharon, I hope you don’t intend to steal my job like Feena.”

Sharon turned around and looked at Cecilia with sadness in her eyes.

“Sorry, but I’m not in the mood today.”

“Using that face is cheating... Alright, go ahead,” Feena said, answering in Cecilia’s place. Feena realized Sharon had something serious to say to Al.

“Thanks.”

After a taking a deep breath, Sharon shot the other girls a lonely smile and then barged through the door, leaving her gloomy mood behind her.

“Hey, Al, are you free?”

Sharon stood in the doorway with a radiant smile on her face. However, Al dismissed her with a single glance and silently got back to work. The sight of Sharon barging in on him used to send Al scurrying for cover, but this time he didn’t even flinch.

“At least give me an answer!”

Sharon menacingly approached Al’s desk, but he still refused to take his eyes off of his work. That failed to deter Sharon, however.

“Um... I want to talk about something, so, well... wanna go out on a date today?”

“No, not particularly.”

Al shot Sharon down without even giving her a glance.

“Come on, why not? We didn’t have a chance to have more cake last night like you promised!”

Al tensed up as he listened to Sharon’s nagging.

The other girls glared at Sharon from behind the door. They wouldn’t have ever dared to bring up the previous night’s incident, but Sharon wasn’t like them. She pressed on, undaunted.

“So technically, you broke your promise last night! But I’ll forgive you if you take me to the city. Don’t worry, I promise I won’t try to murder you today!”

Sharon said that last part with a chuckle, but upon seeing no reaction again, she got serious.

“Al, do you really think that holing up in your room will change anything? Do you think Jamka’s mind is going to change on its own? If you're really at a loss for what to do, then just shut up and come with me!”

Al and the girls were awestruck by Sharon’s impassioned speech. She managed to strike a chord in Al’s heart.

“Okay, fine. I need a change of pace, anyway.”

Defeated, Al sighed and smiled bitterly, then got up from his desk.

“Yeah, that’s the spirit! I won’t try anything funny today, so you better show me a good time!”

Sharon took a step forward, grabbed Al’s collar, and started dragging him towards the door.

“Let’s go!”

“Hey, wait! I’m still in my pajamas! Let me at least change!”

Sharon disregarded his complaints and pulled him along like a how mother pulls her child when they’re throwing a tantrum. Like that, they set out for the city.

“Hey, where are you taking me!?”

Sharon delightedly dragged Al to the castle gates.

She’s making me look like a fool here.

Here he was, walking along with his potential fiancée on a date, except it wasn’t with held hands or linked arms like in his dreams, but with Sharon forcibly pulling him along by the wrist.

“There!”

Sharon finally linked arms, taking Al by surprise. He gave her a spiteful glare, which she returned with a cheeky smile. She was much more relaxed than usual, even accounting for her promise of not trying to murder Al for the day.

Thankfully, she had let him change before leaving the castle. Al wore his usual city-going clothes, while Sharon had borrowed a cute dress from Lilicia. The two of them looked like a perfectly ordinary couple as they walked around with their arms linked.

Wait... This is the first time I have ever walked around the city with a girl other than Cecilia, isn’t it?

Al grew flustered upon coming to that realization. An awkward silence fell over them as they walked through the castle gate. That silence held firm until they reached the main street, whereupon Sharon forced a cough and attempted to strike up a conversation.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes, I’m fine.”

“Oh, okay.”

And so their conversation concluded.

This is so awkward.

They could hurl insults at each other all day long, but when it came to ordinary conversation, they were at a complete loss. Al racked his brain to find some way to put an end to the uncomfortable silence. But the streets were nearly empty, and the roadside flowers weren’t even in bloom. There was nothing.

Why can’t I find anything to talk about!?

Sharon walked a step behind Al. She was desperately searching for a topic of conversation. She saw how Al gazed at the sky and noticed the cloudless weather, and she knew what that meant. Al cleared his throat and was about to deploy his master plan when Sharon interrupted him.

“Wooow! Look at all these shops!”

Sharon’s delighted yell broke up their silence at long last. Undisturbed by the preceding awkwardness, Sharon looked around the central square in admiration. She was genuinely enjoying herself as she took in the sights of the city. Few other countries could match the variety of shops, and the smiles here were unequalled. The upbeat central square of Althos was one of Al’s biggest points of pride.

“There are so many! We might not even be able to visit them all today!”

“Wait, are you planning on visiting every one!?”

Sharon’s excitement was contagious. Al found himself genuinely having fun.

“Ah!”

Al was struck with the sudden realization that, despite being crestfallen just a few moments ago over Jamka’s departure, he had somehow forgotten all about it as he was swept up in Sharon’s enthusiasm.

Huh. Am I really that simple?

“So, where do you want to start?”

I wonder if she’s forcing herself to be cheerful in order to make me feel better.

“Hm? Is there something on my face?”

He caught himself staring at her, but he shook his head in denial and forced a wry smile.

No, there’s no way she’s that observant and smart.

“You just thought something incredibly rude, didn’t you!?”

Sharon leaned in and squinted at him.

Al desperately searched for a way out but could only come up with one possible solution.

“Let’s grab something to eat!”

Surely the way to Sharon’s heart would be her stomach, Al thought.

“You see, I missed lunch, so eating out sounds perfect! Or are you full?”

“...Okay. Let’s go.”

Embarrassed by her own gluttony, Sharon’s cheeks flushed crimson. Al had hit the nail on the head with his proposal.

“Okay, then let’s find us a good skewer place! I’m dying for some!”

Al marched off ahead of Sharon. She gasped, rushing to catch up.

“Hm? Oh, I doubt you’ll have to worry about getting lost in this crowd. It’s fine if you lag behind a bit.”

“Huh!? What do you mean by that? I’m just making sure that *you* don’t get lost!”

Sharon turned away, pouting.

“I mean, this is my own country’s capital, so...”

Actually, nevermind. Let’s avoid the pointless arguments for today.

Sharon's nose suddenly caught the scent of the delicious skewers, turning her mood around in an instant. She grabbed Al and pulled him to the source.

"Al, Al, look! What are they selling there? And there!?"

With a skewer in one hand and Al's clothes pinched in another, Sharon was once again enthusiastically pulling Al around.

"So much for a relaxing day on the town!"

Al complained, but did so with a smile. Sharon dragged him to a wide variety of eateries. They did little other than walking and eating, but he was still having a blast. They had skewers, sponge cake, sandwiches, and even some extra spicy soup. It was now the tail end of their eating frenzy. They walked around the town, enjoying some dumplings.

"Wow, I'm full. That was good!" Sharon said with a satisfied smile. She had just finished her last dumpling, which had been at least twice as large as normal.

It's been a while since I had the chance to stroll around the city. And I don't think I've ever eaten this much before.

Al couldn't help but loosen up a bit upon seeing Sharon's smile. With no particular goal, they continued wandering through the city while digesting all the food they had eaten.

"Ah, that was so good!"

Al found it strange how insignificant his own problems seemed when he looked at Sharon's delighted smile.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Ah, nothing. I've just never seen you smile like that before."

With him being in such a relaxed mood, Al was fully honest with Sharon.

"Huh!? I smile a lot! I'm a cheerful girl! Seriously..."

Caught off guard, Sharon looked away with bright red cheeks. A silence fell over the two after that. Part of Al wanted to escape that awkwardness, while another part wished they could walk around together like this forever.

“So, what should we do next?”

Al switched topics and turned to Sharon.

“...Sharon?”

But she was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did she go?”

Al scanned the crowd, looking for any trace of her.

“There she is!”

She was standing at one of the nearby stalls.

“Really? More food? Look, I’m stuffed. I can’t eat anymore.”

As he strolled up to Sharon, he noticed something was off

“Hey, Sharon, this isn’t...”

His instincts were right; something was seriously wrong here. The stall she was standing next to... *did not sell food* . It was a crowded street stall selling flashy earrings, rings, necklaces, bracelets, and more. In other words, it was an ordinary jewelry shop.

“Sharon, I think you should know... This stuff isn’t food...”

Al said in a wavering voice.

“Of course I know! What, do you think I’m only interested in food!?”

Clearly surprised, Al stared at Sharon in amazement.

Wait, she really does have interests other than food?

“You just thought something rude about me again, didn’t you?”

Sharon sneered at Al.

“Oh, uh, no, of course not... Oh, I know! I’ll get you something from here! Pick anything you like!”

Al perused through the merchandise, then paused when he found a familiar hair ornament. Sharon noticed it at the same time.

“Hey, is that...”

It looked a lot like the ornament Sharon had given Al during his negotiation with the slave trader.

“It’s like the one you had, right? Wasn’t it important to you?”

I recall her mentioning that she got it from someone as a gift.

“Not really. It was just a gift. This one just caught my eye for a second, is all. Though this one looks a lot cheaper than the one I had.”

Al could sense the shop owner’s glare on them. They didn’t seem to like Sharon calling their product a cheap knock-off.

“Let’s go, Sharon.”

He grabbed her wrist and left before the owner could come up to them and complain.

“Wait, why!? I’m still—”

He ignored Sharon’s protest and promptly left with her in tow.

After passing the skewer stall and turning right at the sandwich place, they were finally free of the crowd.

“I guess we’re good here. Sharon, you need to be more careful about what you say around other people.”
“Sorry.”

The person beside him was not the rude and combative Sharon he knew, but a blushing and apologetic girl.

“Hey, what’s the problem? Did you eat something funny? We ate the same things, though...”

For a second, he thought he might have accidentally activated a Heavenly Surge, but it didn’t feel like it to him. He’d made sure to grab her wrist over her clothes. But even if one did activate, this is not the effect it should’ve had on Sharon. Her bashful and honest response puzzled Al.

“You can let go of me now.”

Sharon was focused on his hand.

“Ah! Sorry!”

Crap. She'll probably snap at me again.

"Thanks."

Al was once again taken aback by Sharon's response, spoken with a lonely expression on her face.

"Oh, uh... Yeah."

His heart skipped a beat at Sharon's unusual reaction. With the murmuring crowd in the distance, the two of them faced each other with downcast eyes, unsure of how to proceed.

"Hehehe," Sharon chuckled, breaking the silence. "It's weird. Up until today, I wanted to kill you. But when you grabbed my wrist back there, I..."

"It is weird! I never heard of an assassin who gets flustered when their target grabs their wrist."

"Maybe I should just kill you after all, then," she said jokingly. "I'm happy you're feeling better, Al."

Sharon smiled. It was the kind of beautiful, caring, and perfectly natural smile that Al had never seen on her before.

"Seriously... How did I end up with an assassin who worries about me so much?" Al said in a low murmur. For the first time, Sharon's presence was reassuring. Burdened by his conflicted feelings, Al stared blankly up at the sky above him. A sudden idea came to him.

"Oh, I know just the thing!"

Looking at the beautiful late-afternoon sky, he recalled a place he'd frequented with his mom and brother back when he was little.

"Sharon, I want to show you something! Come with me!"

He reached out to grab Sharon's hand, but then suddenly stopped when he realized what he was doing.

"Oh, sorry! Um... Just follow me!"

He found it difficult to look her into the eyes, so he turned around and started walking towards their destination.

“Huh?”

Al felt a tug on his sleeve.

He looked and saw Sharon holding on and bashfully averting her gaze. She was being the kind of timid girl you’d never expect to see swinging a longsword around.

“D-Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think that I’d get lost. I just...”

Sharon’s gentle tug on his sleeve put Al at ease.

“Let’s go!”

He quickly set off to hide his embarrassment with Sharon in tow. He felt that he’d remember this scene for the rest of his life.

“Al, you aren’t leading me to some abandoned place for anything bad, are you?”

Sharon gave him a look of disdain. Her suspicion was understandable. With twilight descending on the city, Al was pulling her through now-empty streets lined with shops closing for the evening.

“This is it!”

“This is the place you wanted to show me?”

A set of stone stairs winding up the side of the city wall lay before them.

“No, we have to climb these stairs first.”

Al began climbing the stairs at once. After a moment of hesitation, Sharon followed suit.

“Where are you taking me?”

Still suspicious, Sharon trailed behind Al, who was practically leaping up the stairs.

“We’re nearly there!”

Al’s face lit up once they reached the top.

“We’re here!”

Al gestured out towards the cityscape before them, offering Sharon the most scenic view in the entire capital.

“Wooow! It’s gorgeous!”

The starry night sky above was illuminated by the gentle glow of the flickering city lights below. The sight brought warmth to Al and Sharon’s hearts in the chilly Althos night.

“You know, there’s something I’ve been thinking about. Under every one of those flickering lights are people living their lives. They laugh, cry, and fight, spending their days just like we do.”

Al’s eyes sparkled with wonder.

“The number of lights right now doesn’t compare to the number of stars in the sky. But one day, these lights will outnumber the stars. I hope to fill my kingdom with more warm lights than one can count, all twinkling happily, regardless of their social status. Whether they’re ex-slaves or royalty, I want each one to shine just as brightly as the others. That is my dream.”

Al’s voice cracked a little as he embarrassedly recounted his dream. He had only ever told this to his sister before and no one else. He didn’t know why he felt the need to share his dream with Sharon, but he knew he wouldn’t regret doing so.

“Liberating all the slaves... I think that’s a wonderful dream,” Sharon murmured, mesmerized by the city below her.

Maybe I told her because I was hoping for that answer?

His heart skipped a beat. He never thought that he’d find another person who’d share his dream.

Ever since his mother and brother died, everyone rejected his dream of true equality. Even if someone did accept it, they’d run away once they discovered Al was the Demon King’s vessel. There had even been times when he was accused of being the Demon King’s puppet. Not even his dear friend Jamka could share his sentiment. But Sharon was different. She not only accepted his dream, but found it admirable.

Will she help me make my dream come true?

“Sharon, I...”

His words were stuck in his throat upon seeing Sharon’s sorrowful eyes. Her bittersweet smile and frail appearance as she looked down at the warm cityscape was a far cry from the cheerful girl Al spent the day with.

“It’s wonderful. It’s even more beautiful than Freiya.”

After hearing that change of topic, Al had to ask a question he didn’t want to hear the answer to.

“Do you want to go home?”

He intended to make it sound like simple small talk.

“No, I don’t want to go home!”

But it didn’t work. Sharon lashed out at Al.

“Freiya is not my country... It’s not my home.”

She bit her lip in frustration.

“I, um... I wasn’t born into the Freiyan royal family. I’m a girl from a small tribe their army destroyed. They crushed my tribe and took me as a slave.”

Her face was as white as porcelain, and her eyes were devoid of life.

“The king of Freiya adopted me only because I was compatible with the Valkyrie’s relic, but they treat me like a parasite leeching off of their country!”

Sharon shook her head as she recalled her painful past.

Al didn’t know what to say, so he just kept listening in a daze.

“I’m nothing more than a puppet. A puppet they call a Diva. A puppet that is forced to obediently carry out its master’s commands. So I came to this city pretending to carry out his orders!”

She buried her face in Al’s chest.

“I hate that place. I hate being a puppet. So even if it means using the Demon King’s power, I want to fulfill my dreams and abolish slavery in this world. I want finally live my own life...”

Realization slowly crept up on Al. He knew then why her attacks seemed slower and duller than you'd expect from a Diva, why it had felt like her attacks held no intent behind them, why she only attacked him once a day, and why she had to come up with such wild schemes for his assassination—though he still felt that her methods underlined some questionable aspects of her personality. Everything she had done in Althos since her arrival was indicative of her past. Her assassination attempts were never meant to succeed. She wished to keep failing in order to delay her return to Freiya as much as possible.

If I'm right, then I'm sure I could become friends with her.

"If that's the case, then..." *you can stay here for as long as you want.* Al couldn't finish his sentence out loud after seeing the lonely look on Sharon's face.

"But for now I have no choice but to remain his puppet. If they order me to return home, then I must oblige."

"Huh? Did they...?"

Al's heart skipped a beat.

What did she just say?

Unfamiliar emotions swirled around Al's heart. His mind was on the verge of breaking down as he listened to Sharon's dizzying revelation.

Sharon turned to Al, her usual determined smile nowhere to be seen. With blank eyes, she delivered the finishing blow.

"Al, I'm going back to Freiya."

Al tried to respond, but his throat was an arid wasteland. He forced himself to gulp, but there was nothing in his mouth to swallow. And the bad news from Sharon was far from over.

"I received a letter from Freiya yesterday. My stepfather said that I should give up on assassinating you and return home at once."

That must have been the letter Lilicia gave to Sharon during lunch yesterday.

"Um... When will you leave?"

Al tried to act calm and collected, but his constant fidgeting gave away his agitation.



“In two days.”

“Two days!?” Al shouted in surprise. “That soon, huh? Wow... Well, you’re free to stay at the castle and enjoy yourself until then, even if your mission here is over.”

He was thoroughly conflicted, and he didn’t have any time to cool down and get his thoughts in order. He should’ve been delighted to rid himself of the menace that has been plaguing him, but he still offered her to have fun as long as she was there.

Sharon hesitated for a moment, but eventually gave in.

“Thanks, I’d really like th—I mean, I guess I’ll hang around until then if you really want,” Sharon said. She then got serious again. “Al, this is supposed to be a state secret, but should tell you something. The Empire seems to be after Althos.”

Al wasn’t surprised by that information. It was clear that, after taking over the Free City of Labona, their next target would be the frail and declining Althos.

“My stepfather wrote that they expect the Empire to attack Althos soon. He doesn’t want me caught up in the war, so he’s pulling me out.”

Al recalled the slaves who had been forcefully transformed into abominations, making him even more agitated.

“But Al, I...”

“He’ll leave my death to the Empire and will clean up while they’re still recovering from the conflict, huh? That’s a pretty good plan.”

“Huh?”

“He sends his own stepdaughter to toy around with us, and then pulls out the moment something doesn’t go to plan. I never thought that the king of Freiya would be such a coward.”

“Al... That’s a little uncalled for...” Sharon said, taking Al’s remarks personally.

“Nothing will change if I put it nicely. I’m just saying it how it is.”

Al was getting more worked up the more he talked. He vented his frustration on the confused girl before him.

“I mean, what do you want me to do!? You come to my country and try to kill me every single day, then you use Jamka as an excuse to drag me around the city, and now you just say goodbye like it’s nothing!? How am I supposed to respond!?”

Al realized that he was being irrational, but he was letting his frustration get the better of him. Before he knew it, Sharon’s fiery eyes were filling up with tears.

“Al, I’m sorry...”

Sharon turned and ran before Al could react.

“Great... I really screwed up.”

His shoulders drooped as he watched Sharon leave. He realized all too late from her sorrowful look and teary eyes that he wasn’t the only one hurt by this development.

“Damn it!”

Enraged, he kicked the wall hard enough to make him grimace in pain.

“Screw this day.”

It was the middle of the night before he realized it. The city below him seemed much lonelier than before as the flickering lights turned off one by one.

Chapter 4: The Would-be-Bridal Divas

“Ah, it’s already morning?”

Al stared blankly at the ceiling, warm sunlight streaming through his newly-repaired window and confirming the start of a new day. Waking up, if it could even be called that, was rough. After yesterday’s events, he had walked back to the castle alone, grabbed some breakfast, and buried himself under his blankets. But even though he’d gone to bed early, he couldn’t get any sleep. His mind just kept spinning in circles. He worried about financing the new citizens’ housing, Jamka’s parting words, and countless other things. But the main thing that kept him awake all night were his final moments with Sharon.

“Whatever, she just wants to kill me. I’m glad she’s finally leaving! I mean, what’s up with her anyway!? She barges into my castle uninvited, a month before she was supposed to get here, then leaves at a drop of a hat! She’s totally crazy!”

Al repeated the same things over and over again, until he finally lapsed into silence. He’d stare at the ceiling for a while before breaking back into expletives. This perpetual cycle of curses and blank stares repeated until the sun was finally up beyond the horizon.

“Hahh... let’s go for a walk.”

Giving up on sleep, he struggled out of bed. The dignity a king should have was gone from his face; instead, he looked as weary as a bartender after three straight shifts. He quickly fixed his wrinkled clothes and left the slumbering castle.

“I guess I’ll go this way today.”

Al started walking on the paved road that led through the residential area and in the opposite direction from yesterday’s troubles. The chilly morning air cleared his head, taking his mind off his worries. Coming out for a morning stroll had been a success. All he wanted to do now was keep on walking through the

flat, residential streets, not thinking about a thing. He knew that if he started thinking, he'd be straight back to square one.

"Hm? What's that smoke?"

In the middle of his absent-minded walk he spotted smoke rising out of a chimney. The house it was attached to stood out from the surrounding buildings.

"Oh, a bakery. I didn't know there was one here."

The city was developing too fast for Al to keep up.

"Perfect, I can get some breakfast and conduct an inspection at the same time."

The inspection was an excuse. He was simply enticed by the sweet scent of the freshly made bread. After checking his pockets for money, he entered the bakery.

"Welcome!"

The owner's cheerful tone and the sweet, roasty aroma created a welcoming atmosphere. And yet, he realized something wasn't quite right. Empty spaces stood out along the narrow bakery's shelves. What's more, Al and the baker were the only people in the store.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you not open yet?"

He asked the owner, ready to give up on his breakfast.

"Feel free to get whatever's already prepared. I'll get the new batch out if you can wait five mi—"

The burly owner's words got stuck in his throat when he realized that his first customer of the day was none other than the King of Althos.

Well, I'd be surprised too if the king waltzed into my shop first thing in the morning.

He warmly waved towards the owner, trying to convey that he was just there as a typical customer. There was no need for formalities. Nevertheless, the

owner remained dumbfounded as Al started looking through the variety of breads on offer.

“I’ll take these.”

After a few minutes of browsing he picked out three warm, golden-brown buns and took them to the counter.

“Um... Would you like anything else?”

The owner’s previously cheerful attitude was gone. He now seemed restless, or possibly even frightened, depending on one’s point of view.

“No thanks.”

Al curiously tilted his head, wondering if he looked that voracious.

Three buns are a reasonable breakfast. Though it certainly wouldn’t be enough if I had Sharon with me.

He shook his head as yesterday’s events once again clouded his mind.

“So, how much?” he asked bluntly, agitated at having remembered the one thing he was trying to forget about.

“Eep!”

Al didn’t think his tone had been harsh enough to warrant that kind of reaction. The owner was acting like he was about to be robbed.

“U-Um... Feel free to take them for free,” he stuttered, cowering in fear.

“I could never do that. I may be king, but that doesn’t excuse me from paying!”

“Eep! O-Okay!”

The baker trembled in panic upon hearing Al’s determined answer.

“Don’t worry, I don’t bite. I’ll just leave the money here, okay?”

Al left more than enough silver coins on the counter, then walked out of the shop feeling dejected by the owner's frightened reaction to him.

“...This is weird.”

Al had carried on minding his own business, strolling through the streets as he indulged in his breakfast. But almost everyone he passed by had a similar reaction to the baker. He tried striking up a conversation with some of them, but they'd always avert their gaze and shuffle along.

"What's going on!?"

He finished his last piece of bread and was starting to consider pinning someone down to get to the heart of the matter. An unexpected voice startled him before he could do it, however.

"Al!"

"Whoa! Oh it's you, Feena. Why are you here? And why are you whispering into my ear!?"

"Because it's romantic."

"That's a weird way to express your affection!"

Unable to find a proper response, he bashfully scratched his ear.

"Al, we're going back to the castle."

Her method of greeting him had been questionable, but her purpose—picking him up—was clear.

"Ah, right. I'll go back soon."

He wanted to know why she'd come to get him, but he was more interested in finding out just why everyone in town was avoiding him.

"No. We're going back now."

Feena shook her head and forcefully grabbed Al's arms.

"Ahh! Your hand is so stiff... I might get pregnant!"

He furrowed his brow, wondering what kind of misconceptions could be floating in Feena's head. Maybe she'd found out about yesterday's events. However, he'd been able to pick up on her slight changes in expression lately. One look at her dead-serious gaze was enough to tell him he was off the mark. He didn't have to wait long to find out what the fuss was about.

“Al... There have been rumors going round that you’re the Demon King’s vessel. We need to head back. You stick out like a sore thumb here.”

“What!?”

Al had kept his exclamation of surprise relatively quiet, but it was enough to make all the distant onlookers scatter. This proved that Feena was telling the truth.

He mulled over the situation for a little before agreeing to Feena’s proposal.

“I see. Let’s go back to the castle for now.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Al tailed Feena closely.

Damn it. When it rains, it pours, huh?

Bad luck was befalling him at every turn. His head was spinning by the time he finally returned to the castle.

“What the hell is going on!?”

Upon reaching his office, he immediately vented his anger on his brand new desk.

“Oh my. Calm down, Al.”

Cecilia and Lilicia were waiting for the pair’s return. Cecilia wore a weary expression, while Lilicia tried to stay as calm as possible. Of course, Sharon and Jamka were nowhere to be seen.

“According to various sources, a couple of travelers began spreading this rumor a few days ago.”

Lilicia explained their findings. While foreign intelligence gathering was Brusch’s speciality, Lilicia was second-to-none when it came to national affairs. Idle chats with the citizens were important sources of information.

“Who in the world—”

The picture of a certain crimson-haired girl floated before his eyes.

“No, she would never...”

He quietly, but firmly, declined his previous thought. Sharon wouldn't have resorted to such underhanded tactics. Lilicia, who may or may not have been aware of Al's conflicted feelings, continued her explanation in a monotone voice.

"We haven't been able to confirm this yet, but according to witness reports, one of the travellers had a thick northern accent."

"The northern Empire, huh? So, where are they now?"

That piece of information soothed his feelings.

"They moved out of their lodging last night and left the country."

"They got the word out and ran, huh?"

He crossed his arms and thought for a second.

"Jamka! Send reinforcements to Brusch at once!"

He reflexively called someone who was no longer with them.

"Tch."

He felt weak and pathetic. In the last few days, one of his best friends had betrayed him, his (possible) future bride had grown to hate him, and now the Empire had leaked one of his most closely guarded secrets to the entire country.

"So um... y'know! Jamka must've had his own reasons, and now the people are just confused!"

Cecilia uncharacteristically fumbled her words in her attempt to soothe Al.

"I agree. Jamka is just... shrewder than you, Al. We still have time to... figure out his reasons."
Feena selected her words carefully. Both of the girls were desperate to stop Al shouldering the blame for this.

"You're right. I got a bit worked up. Sorry, Cecilia. And thank you, Feena."

"Now now, don't worry about it. It's fine."

Cecilia flashed a bashful smile at him.

“It’s okay. It's a wife's job to correct her foolish... I mean, her dear husband's mistakes.”

“If you want me to become known as a foolish king, then you shouldn’t have helped me at all.”

“Ah!”

“Didn’t you realize that before?”

“No, um... of course I knew that! This is part of my plan!”

Her awkward mishap brought a smile to Al’s face. It wasn’t every day he got to see Feena flustered. This finally helped him calm down a bit.

“All right. We’ll set up a search party at once. Lilicia! Get as much information as you can get about the direction these ‘travelers’ headed in. You have one hour. We’re sending the search party out as soon as we’ve got a hold on their location.”

“Certainly. I’ll get to it at once.”

Lilicia proudly left the room.

“Cecilia, Feena... I have something to talk to you about.”

The two girls curiously tilted their heads at Al’s clouded expression.

That’s right. I can’t turn to anyone else with this.

He looked them in the eyes, gulped down the golf ball that was stuck in his throat, and prepared to tell his tale of failure.

“My, my. So if I have this right, you had a bit of a fight with Sharon, and now she’s going home?”

Al confessed yesterday’s events to Cecilia and Feena.

“Don’t worry. Sharon is a simpleton... I’m sure she already forgot.”

“Err, well sure, she can be kind of slow, but calling her a simpleton is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Well, if the pest... I mean, Sharon is leaving then we’ll have to throw a grand farewell party!”

“Cecilia, that’s rude!”

Feena reacted nonchalantly, while Cecilia was thrilled upon hearing the news. He already regretted telling them the story.

“Now now, I was twenty percent joking when I called her a pest.”

“Then what about the other eighty percent!?”

He couldn’t discern how serious she was from her usual bright expression and steely blue eyes.

“A farewell party would be a good chance to make up with her. And since she’ll be leaving soon... I’ll do what a good wife should and look the other way if you decide to have a temporary affair.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yes.”

Feena nodded. She’d come a long way since the first time they met, what with how she’d sent that worm to a fiery grave. Originally, Al had thought that her interpersonal skills were on par with or a bit below his, but now he was reflecting on his initial judgement.

“It’s fine, I can make you forget that you’ve ever seen her with one of my potions after the party is over.”

But Feena’s next rude comment tore down her image in Al’s head.

“I take it back!” he retorted, pushing his fingers against his temple in frustration.

“Anyway, let’s throw a big farewell party so we can avoid sparking an international conflict with Freiya over this.”

Due to his inability to come up with a better plan and the impending trouble that could result from this incident, he finally gave in to the girls’ proposal.

Rumors about the king’s secret swept through the country, with Jamka and Brusch still nowhere to be found. Yet despite the despairing situation they found themselves in, Cecilia and Feena managed to pull off a magnificent farewell party. It all kicked off a few hours before the carriage to Freiya was due to arrive.

“We don’t have that much time, so let’s begin!”

Al announced the beginning of the party in the dining hall with a forced cheerful tone, but the guests couldn’t have been less excited. A hostile atmosphere fell on the room. Everyone, save a handful of guests, looked at him with doubt. By now the whole country had heard the rumors.

“Now everybody, let’s raise our glasses for an everlasting friendship with Freiya’s Diva, Sharon! Cheers!”

Cecilia made an attempt at dispelling the awkward atmosphere.

“Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

Feena raised her glass and quietly cheered. Al let out a discreet sigh as he looked at Sharon on his right. Feena tried to ignore the awkward atmosphere between the two and turned to Cecilia.

I wonder what they’re talking about.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t give in to his curiosity. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

“Wow, this looks so delicious!”

He tried to grab Sharon’s attention and carefully peeked to his side, but his obvious attempt fell on deaf ears. Sharon continued to eat silently.

“What’s up with that bored face?”
After a few seconds, which felt like an eternity, Sharon stopped eating and asked a question. Still shaken by yesterday’s events, she awkwardly avoided looking him in the eyes.

“Nothing.”
His long-awaited exchange ended with just that. He cursed his inability to come up with more to say.

“Seriously? You should be thrilled that your would-be assassin is finally leaving.”

“There’s nothing to be happy about.”

“Huh!?”

His honest response caught Sharon off-guard.

“Just think about it! Jamka tried to kill me, and we’re on the brink of war with the Empire. What could I be happy about?”

“I see, of course... I’m not even...” she murmured with a sad, lonely tone.

“And... it’s depressing to think about how quiet it’s going to be around here...”

He whispered his true feelings.

“Phew! That was great!”

Finishing her second plate, she flashed a delighted smile.

I guess she didn’t hear me. Looks like she’s back to her usual self anyway.

“What’s up with that lifeless face? Or is this just your standard expression?”

Al was conflicted about the current status quo. It seemed like nothing had changed between the two, though her remarks were ruder than usual.

“You’re ruthless to the very end, huh?”

He decided to try answering back at her like he usually would.

“I’m not ruthless! You look like a dead fish.”

She looked at him with a smug expression.

“I have to admit, I’ll miss your weird face a little bit when I get home. Thank you for honoring me with your deadpan eyes one last time.”

“Hey, I’m right here, you know? Geez, I’d like to see what goes through your head sometimes!”

“I’ll slash you up if you try to pry into a maiden’s dearest secrets!”

“Of course you would. That’s all you do!”

“Huh, what was that?”

She brushed her hair away, once again flashing that smug smile, then focused on the new dish in front of her. However, Al didn’t have the time to feel

relieved at them making up. He still had one last important thing to take care of.

“Um...”

After a few minutes he finally steeled his heart. Sharon stopped eating and turned towards him. He hoped that she would find his fumbled words endearing.

“Ahem. Well... You know, I’d like to apologize for what I did. I went too far. It’s only been a few days, but you h-helbed, I mean, helped me out a lot, so... Thank you.”

He’d thought about his apology all day yesterday, but he couldn’t even get through half of it. Hell, he wasn’t even sure if she got the message. He even fumbled his words. Despite all that, he could tell she’d understood how he felt. He sighed as he took a small, gorgeous box out of his pocket. Sharon was instantly captivated by it.

“Huh? I-Is this for me?”

Her eyes popped wide open. It was obvious that she was caught off-guard, but she recovered quickly.

“Ah, well, I’ll consider thinking about treasuring it.”

“Make up your mind already!”
She accepted it with a brimming smile.

“Oh, um, I’m... I mean, d-do you think it’ll snow today?”

She tried to draw the attention away from herself, but she couldn’t hide the grin spreading across her face.

“It’s not a big deal. You can throw it away if you don’t like it.”

Sharon’s beaming smile left Al flustered. He awkwardly turned away and chomped down on his lunch. But in his haste he didn’t chew properly and ended up choking violently.

“What are you doing!? Geez, come here!”

Despite her exaggerated exasperation, her warm smile didn't waver as she started hitting Al's back. It was painful, but he didn't have the luxury of raising a complaint.

"Th-Thanks."

It took him a moment to recover from just how lame he'd been.

"I-I'll open it!"

Sharon's smile turned tense, clasping the box in her trembling hands.

"Sure, go ahead. It's all yours."

Calm down, Sharon... Don't set your expectations so high! You're making me nervous!

Al awkwardly peeped at her from the corner of his eye.

She carefully opened the box.

"Wooow!"

The neatly wrapped box was hiding a silver hair ornament. It was simple in design: three feathers that connected into a small gem at their base. This gem was made from a special ore, one said to have a tiny amount of magic enclosed within it. It was often claimed they were lucky charms that could make the owner's wishes come true.

"Oh, wow..."

Sharon closely examined the ornament with an undeniable joy.

"Just so you know, it's not that cheap knock-off from the stall the other day!"

Al said it proudly with his back turned. He wasn't lying; he had spent three hours the previous day going through the goods of the country's best craftsman before he finally settled on it. Of course, that merchant was aware of the rumors surrounding Al, but Al's determination broke him in the end.

"Perhaps it's not as high quality as Freiyan silver, but it's coated with protective magic, so it won't get damaged if you drop it or something."

He chose this piece while considering Sharon's strong, firm personality.

“Huh, that’s a surprisingly thoughtful present, coming from you.”

“Yeah, I was torn between this and a beef roast.”

“That would have been just as great!”

Sharon joked back as she put the ornament into her hair.

“How does it look?” she asked, blushing slightly and fidgeting in her seat.

Al stared at her, impressed at his ability to pick out a good present, along with just how much it suited her. When he realized what he was doing he suddenly went bright red and barely managed to stammer out a simple compliment.

“It, err... looks good on you.”

“Hehehe. Thank you!”

This was the first time since Sharon had arrived that Al had seen her as a normal girl. They spent the next few hours engaged in their normal conversations, throwing playful insults back and forth. Though the thought that this could be the last time he saw Sharon saddened him, he knew from experience that he couldn’t get everything he wanted in life. Then, at last, it was time to say goodbye.

Guards came to signal that the Freiyan carriage had arrived. A number of soldiers clad in bright red armor arrived with the carriage.

“Time for me to go, then.”

She wore the same red dress she had arrived in, but the smile on her face made her seem all the more gentle. The silver ornament Al had given her glistened in her crimson hair. Her eyes seemed to be cloudy, but Al couldn’t tell if it was just the way they were reflecting the sunlight. He himself was doing all he could to keep his emotions in check.

“It was fun having you here, despite how short it was. Especially our date... Make sure you come back and hang out again! Just leave the assassination attempts out of it.”

“Okay...”

Sharon clenched a hand against her chest, hoping that, as unlikely as she thought it was, she'd be able to see Al again. She clamped her eyes shut and nodded in response, etching his parting words into her heart.

“Bye...”

Sharon was unable to find the correct words, the correct gestures to say goodbye. Her hand sort of fluttered in front of her chest as she tried to wave, and then she climbed into the carriage.

“Ah...”

Goodbye felt too sad, and *see you later* didn’t feel right. Al found himself unable to think of anything else to say and ended up watching her leave in silence.

“King Al!”

Not long after the carriage vanished into the distance, Lilicia called out to him.

“What is it?”

He tried his best to look as indifferent as possible, despite the storm raging in his heart. Sensing Al’s inner struggle, Lilicia hesitantly spoke up.

“We’ve caught the perpetrator who spread the rumors throughout the city.”

“What, really!?”

Naturally Al could not remain composed. He didn’t imagine that a spy from the emperor would be captured so quickly.

“None of this has been corroborated yet, but...”

Lilicia quickly summarized the information they’d obtained.

“Brusch has been captured by Labona!?”

Jamka’s thoughts toward the slaves aside, this explained why he’d tried to assassinate Al.

“Oh my. So it’s possible that they were using Brusch as a hostage to force Jamka to do what he did.”

Al nodded at Cecilia’s relieved expression, but his own face remained stiff.

He wanted to send out a rescue team immediately.

“I think it’s a trap.”

Feena listened quietly to Lilicia’s report and drew her own conclusion.

“I agree. The fact that we were able to catch a spy so easily, and that he was so cooperative, is an obvious giveaway. They want to lure me to Labona.”

Al spat out the words, offended by the Empire’s gall.

“But we have to go,” Feena added shortly after.

Al silently nodded. If they didn’t act swiftly and with great care, then they’d be putting the lives of both Brusch and Jamka in danger.

“Lilicia, tell Dante to assemble the troops at once. Leave only as many soldiers as absolutely necessary to guard the castle and prepare to depart for Labona. We’ll head there to save Brusch, and... and maybe Jamka too.”

Al’s face twisted as he called for his vice commander and ordered an attack on Labona.

I have to give it to them; they forced my hand. We could deal with Jamka and the rumors, but now they’re paralyzing our country and setting a trap we just can’t avoid.

“They’re overestimating us here.”

He groaned. Their plan seemed way too elaborate for a small country, even with three Divas.

“Either way, we just have to do what we can.”

He spared a regretful glance for Sharon’s long-gone carriage before turning back to face Cecilia and Feena.

“Cecilia, Feena. I have something to ask you.”

“Well, well. You know I’d do anything for you!”

“A good wife follows her husband anywhere he goes.”

They reassured him with their gentle smiles (though Feena’s was barely visible).

“Um... King Al.”

Hearing an unexpected voice, he turned around and found Lilicia behind him.

“Lilicia, what are you doing here? I told you to go and get Dante...”

His words trailed off. He felt like something was off about her, though she looked no different than normal. Before he could voice his concerns, he found himself fascinated, even attracted by her smile.

“King Al. What would you say if I told you there was a way to get out of this predicament?”

Her usual meek and obedient tone was replaced with a more aggressive, challenging one.

“Let’s hear it.”

After a few moments of silence, he agreed to listen.

I would even make a pact with the devil to protect this country.

“Understood. Then...”

She began speaking with an expression that made her look like she’d waited a thousand lifetimes to share this secret. Al didn’t even have the time to mope about Sharon’s departure as he listened to Lilicia’s story. It reminded him of how she used to read fairytales to him long ago.

“This is...”

Al frowned. The long-forgotten stone pathway to the basement was damp, dark, and caked in mold. The humid air that hit them was like a warning sign, desperately trying to keep every living thing out. They took a lantern to illuminate the long and narrow pathway, which seemed to go on endlessly.

We could use the power of the slumbering Demon King.

Lilicia’s shocking proposal hadn’t left Al’s mind. She led him into a passageway, one that only the royalty of Althos should have known about. Both Cecilia and Feena had of course wanted to join them, but Lilicia firmly declined their request, leaving only her and Al to walk the hellish path.

“King Al, are you familiar with the legend of the Demon King?”

She suddenly turned to Al with a question.

“Of course. After his defeat, he was sealed here, and our royal family was tasked with keeping an eye on him.”

“Hehe. Close, but not exactly.”

Al had answered proudly, puffing his chest out. But Lilicia now looked at him like he was a fool.

“Then tell me, what’s the truth!?”
He was getting more and more irritated.

“Hmm... You want to know the truth?”

Lilicia smiled slyly, not rising to Al’s irritation.

“Who are you!?”

Al grabbed his sword from his waist and threatened Lilicia.

“Aha! Don’t make such a scary face! You can’t even scratch me with that stick!”

Her devious laughter reverberated through the long corridors. The sly smile she had perfected just to belittle others was about to drive Al crazy, but right before he lost his cool...

“We’re here~♪”

“This is...”

Al’s rage was blown away by the shock of what stood before him: a door big enough for a giant, made of a material he’d never seen before. It was adorned by two massive scythes, far larger than even Death himself would use, crossing over each other. Or at least, that’s what Al assumed it should look like, for only one scythe was currently on the door.

He began to wonder where the other scythe could be, but promptly decided to save that thought for later.

His intuition was screaming at him. Beyond that door laid the Demon King. It should have been sealed tight, but Al could feel an ominous magical energy leaking through. His senses were being driven out of order. He couldn’t tell if he

was hot or cold, but sweat was pouring from his forehead. The only thing he was sure of was that he was shaking before that imposing door.

“King Al, come, this way! Come on, you’re so slow!”

Lilicia nonchalantly walked up to the door, sparing no concern for Al’s current state. Her cheerful voice struck a stark contrast with his state of mind.

“Come here and produce the sign of the vessel!”

She invited him closer to the door.

“The sign of the vessel?”

A red light went off in Al’s head. Now was not the time to worry about that, or even think about worrying about it.

“Lilicia. Just who in the world are you!?”

Her devious laughter once again echoed around them.

“I’m Lilicia, a succubus and a loyal servant of the Demon King. I’ve been cooperating with the country’s leaders for hundreds of years in order to find a suitable vessel for the Demon King.”

And just like that, she revealed her true identity.

“Huh!? You’re a... succubus!?”

He’d always found it weird how her appearance hadn’t changed significantly in the time he’d known her. She’d been the head maid at least since the Witch King’s reign. Perhaps his unique situation had stopped him from ever wondering too much about it.

“I have worked alongside the rulers of this country for generations to try and revive the Demon King. But when the vessel was finally born, your father halted the project.”

She rambled on without even trying to hide her anger.

“Even I couldn’t compare to his powers, so I had to work as a maid and look after the family. But that ends today!”

She flashed a relieved smile.

“So, King Al. Would you be so kind as to borrow the power of the Demon King and quickly chase away the Empire? Then you can entrust your body to him and allow him to take over the continent... no, take over this entire world!”
Lilicia revealed her true intentions without even batting an eyelid.

Althos was working on reviving the Demon King until my father’s reign!?

Lilicia grinned at Al, who had his fingers pressed against his temples, the confusion proving all too much for him.

“For some reason the Demon King can only use half of his power now. But that’s still half the power he had against the Valkyrie. Now that the Valkyrie’s power is split into seven parts, the Divas stand no chance against him.”

Her strategy was to lure him in with immeasurable power.

“That also means he only puts half the pressure on the host. I believe you would have a good command over his powers.”

I’d have the Demon King’s power coursing through my veins...

He was tempted by her bewitching smile and alluring words.

“So, come here and unlock the seal!”

The strength to protect everyone is right in front of me...

He slowly staggered towards Lilicia, as if he was possessed.

“Come, my King!”

Luring him to the depths of hell, she urged him to accept the cursed power.

But suddenly, he stepped back from the door.

“Huh? What’s wrong? Why did you stop!?”

“Lilicia. Do you think the girls who served the Demon King were happy when he was defeated?”

Ignoring Lilicia’s outburst of anger, Al calmly asked a question.

“What!? You start acting all serious just to ask something so insignificant!? Of course they weren’t happy! They respected him, adored him! Anyway, there’s no time for this now, come here!”

The years Lilicia had spent as Al's maid made her feel obliged to answer his question. But she quickly realized her current position and puffed her cheeks.

"Yeah, exactly. That's terrible."

He walked even further away from the door and turned to Lilicia.

"So, I made my decision. I will win against the Empire using my own power."

He declared it with a firm, dignified tone.

"Do you even realize what you're doing!? That's impossible!"
"You don't know until you try. I wouldn't want to see the despair in my friends' eyes when they learned I allowed the Demon King into my body."

Al's determination allowed him to smile calmly. The image of a certain someone, the person you'd most likely expect, was currently floating in his mind.

"Thank you for your generous offer, Lilicia. However, I'll do things on my own. I don't need the Demon King's power. I'll prove it to you."

He stopped shaking. At some point he'd stopped being afraid of the magical energy seeping through the door. He'd stopped sweating and was back in control of himself.

Have I gotten used to that ominous energy?

Lilicia let out a heavy sigh and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I guess that's it then. As a loyal servant to the Demon King I can't resort to violence against the one who would be the vessel."

Lilicia, now in a far more subdued mood, easily took the huge scythe out of its enclave in the door.

"Huh!? What magic is this!?"

The scythe started to glow before his eyes. It was only now he noticed that both the handle and blade were solid black, radiating an ominous dark-red light.

"King Al. I would you at least like you to take this scythe with you, if you please. Think of it as a charm."

“The scythe sealing the Demon King? How can that be a charm!? If anything it’s cursed!”

However, the one offering it to him was none other than Lilicia, the maid who had looked after him ever since he was born.

“Don’t worry. Taking this will not curse you.”

Reassured by her words, he timidly took the scythe from her. It felt like a typical scythe as it weighed down in his hands.

“I guess I can take it, but I don’t plan on using it.”

He murmured to himself and attached the scythe to his back.

“Thank you, my King. I can’t leave the Demon King’s side, but I will be praying for your success in your battles to come.”

Lilicia returned to her usual self and respectfully bowed to Al.

Please don’t pray to the Demon King for my safety.

“Thank you Lilicia. I’ll be going now.”

He rushed up on the stairs.

“I guess this is fine. We’ve at least cleared stage one.”

The bewitching smile returned to Lilicia’s face as she watched Al leave.



It was the morning after Al had seen Sharon off and learned the truth about Lilicia. They'd spent the entire night preparing for this, and Al had forced his two-thousand-odd troops to march without sleep, until they reached a position only several miles outside of the independent merchant city of Labona.

Labona was founded by the merchant Zaham, known as the God of Trading, and his sympathizers with help from Subdera. It had developed rapidly over the last century and was now known as a place where one could find anything and everything. Of course, they heavily invested in their defenses as well. A giant stone wall surrounded the city to ward off the bandits, and their military force rivaled that of Althos. Labona had been attacked on several occasions by its neighboring countries. Yet they'd always held their own against their attackers, and punished them by ceasing all trade with the offending nation. This unique, powerful strategy had allowed Labona to remain independent until now.

But that strategy hadn't worked when the Empire invaded. They'd taken over in a single day, leaving Labona without any chance of retaliation. As a proof of the Empire's occupation, the usually busy steel gate was closed shut, and the walls were filled with Imperial soldiers.

"My my, so it was a trap after all."
Cecilia was smiling as calmly as ever. A vanguard of about five thousand soldiers, and a few dozen abominations, were waiting for their arrival.

Al's army was only two thousand men strong, both disheartened and doubtful of Al due to the rumors. They were outnumbered and morale was low. Even though a potentially hopeless battle might erupt at any minute, Cecilia seemed to be enjoying herself. She was mindlessly humming and trying to discreetly loosen her dress.

"Cecilia. Even if we were to use Heavenly Surge, you don't need to take your dress off."

"Oh bother, you're right. What a shame."

It was almost admirable that she was able to joke around in this tense situation. Unfortunately, Al wasn't in the mood.

“And we’re not using Heavenly Surge unless we have no other choice. I’ll prove that I can win without using some weird powers!”
Strangely, none of them had asked about what happened in the basement, and he wasn’t planning on spilling the beans himself anytime soon. He didn’t want to make the situation even more complicated.

“Al...”

He was pulled back to reality by his sister’s concerned voice.

“What’s the problem Cecili—”

He turned around to see Cecilia’s face inches away from him.

“Al.”

She gently caressed her dear brother’s cheeks.

“Al, relax a bit. You’re the king and the commander of your army. If you allow your nerves to show it will affect your men too.”

She whispered into his ear. Her cold, steel blue eyes pierced into his heart.

Yeah, that’s right. Their numbers are meaningless in front of Cecilia’s power.

Al calmed himself down and steeled his resolve. He met Cecilia’s gaze with a wry smile.

“Cecilia. I want to save Jamka and Brusch as soon as possible.”

He placed a hand on her waist as he stated his aims.

“Your love for your friends is commendable, but you’re here today to lead your soldiers to victory. Your haste will only serve to panic them. Lesfina and I are here with you. So relax, and stand proudly in front of your troops!”

Her calm advice resounded through Al’s heart.

“Thank you, Cecilia. And sorry—”

She quickly interrupted Al.

“Al, this is no time for making apologies.”

His cheeks flushed.

“Thank you, Cecilia.”

A loud explosion interrupted them right after their exchange. The pounding of hooves shook the ground as the roars of soldiers cut through the air.

“Crap! It’s starting!”

He turned his head towards the source of the loud bang.

“Aww, we were just getting into it,” Cecilia said, sounding disappointed. Nevertheless, she grabbed her khakkhara and prepared for battle.

“Cecilia, Feena, I’m counting on you. Let’s do this according to the plan.”

“Okay!”

“Of course.”

They turned their horses towards the abominations, kicking them into action at the exact same time.

“Cecilia, Diva of Althos, moving out!”

“Feena, Diva of Subdera... moving out!”

The two Divas plunged their way toward the enemy forces.

“I have to get ready, too.”

Al watched them go before directing his force to the front of his army. The soldiers were clearly not in a favorable mood for battle, but now was not the time to cower. He steeled his heart and shouted with all his might.

“Brave soldiers of Althos! The time has come! Show them your strength!”

There was no doubt in his voice. He shouted lines Jamka had once prepared for him at the top of his lungs to inspire his soldiers.

But their reactions were lackluster.

“The enemy outnumbers us two to one! But we have a trump card! Do you know what that is!?”

Dead silence. No one uttered a word.

Damn, they aren’t reacting at all.

Al disregarded the cold drops of sweat running down his forehead and answered his own question.

“Our unity! Our trust in our comrades!”

Even Al’s impassioned pleas weren’t enough to move them. He knew that to win a battle, you needed to be the strongest army, and you needed food, supplies, and terrain advantage to support them. But they didn’t have any of it. Which meant they’d have to rely on superior strategy and unity among the soldiers. He was trying to rouse his men to meet those conditions, but it wasn’t working.

“Come on, you bastards! This is not the first time we have faced impossible odds!”

“There’s no way we can win against those monsters.”

He caught a faint whisper from the crowd.

“Y-Yeah! I won’t face those abominations!”

“If you want to fight so much do it yourself! Just use the Demon King’s power!”

One after the other, they started voicing their complaints. The organized troops transformed into a disorganized mob in mere seconds.

“Silence! We can break through their defenses and—”

He ran out of time. He could see an abomination closing in from the corner of his eyes.

“Al, I’m sorry. They got behind us.”

Panic was evident even in Feena’s usually flat voice. A few abominations had torn away from the group and were now heading their way. She put up a good fight, but they were too numerous for even a Diva to hold back alone. Al wanted to move the troops in to support her...

“Shit! They’re coming this way!”

But their hearts were flooded with fear.

“Remain calm! Stay in formation! If they penetrate our defenses—”

Al was interrupted by countless fireballs flying towards them from behind the abominations.

“R-Run!”

Overtaken by fear, the Althos army started to break rank and flee.

“Stop! Don’t show them your backs!”

Al didn’t think his magic was strong enough to do anything in this situation, but, unable to bring himself to give up, he raised his hand toward the incoming flames. Ominous black magic shot from his palm, engulfing and seemingly swallowing the airborne fireballs.

“Huh!? What!? That was me!?”

He stared at his left hand with wide open eyes.

Did the Demon King’s power grow within me during my time in the basement?

He couldn’t think of anything else.

I still shouldn’t use this if I can help it.

In the midst of Al’s confusion he glared over at the scythe on his back. Obviously, the scythe didn’t return his stare, but he once again reminded himself not to use it.

“Don’t you dare try and hurt my people!”

He drew his sword and swung it towards the abominations. It shattered clean in two, as if he’d just struck a boulder.

“Ugh, you’re a tough one!”

He forced a smile as the abomination opposite him raised a heavy arm. His sword had already been rendered useless, and he didn’t have the time to get out his spare. But a dark-red sheen was tempting him through a corner of his eye.

“Damn, I already have to break my vow.”

He faced the monster’s thick arm, slipped the scythe off his back and went in for the attack. The scythe cut through its arm like a warm knife going through butter. The ground rumbled as it crashed down next to his horse like a tree being felled.

“Urghhh!”

Amidst the monster's anguished cries, Al spun the scythe around, cut its leg, and finished his attack off with a kick. The abomination fell to the ground.

"Damn, turns out this was a lucky charm after all!"

He stared at the scythe in awe. His face was covered with cold sweat, not because he barely managed to cheat death, but because of the sheer destructive power of his weapon.

"Ahhh! More spells incoming!"

As he sat there, astonished by his newfound strength, the soldiers behind him screamed of an incoming attack. He shook off the power lust he was feeling and turned around just in time to see his soldiers fleeing in panic from the hell about to rain down on them. More fireballs, far too many to count, were flying through the sky toward them.

"To the right! Run to the right!"

He tried to lead his soldiers to safety, but they were too panicked to listen.

"Tch. Everyone, get down! Now!"

He once again thrust his left hand forward, but was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Ice ball."

A massive ice ball came flying from outside his field of vision, erasing, repelling, and engulfing the fireballs in its path.

"Al, are you okay?"

Feena rode up to Al, keeping the abominations away from them with a variety of spells. He couldn't see Cecilia anywhere, so it seemed like she had stuck to the plan.

"Y-Yeah. Thank you, Feena."

Al was clearly relieved, but Feena's expression remained tense.

"Don't let your guard down. We're not done yet."

She turned her horse towards another abomination and promptly cast another spell.

“Lightning.”

A bolt of electricity crackled down from the sky, and one of the three abominations running towards them collapsed.

“Urgahhh!”

It let out a horrible scream.

“Don’t worry, it’s not dead... I think.”

While hitting her next prey with another lightning strike, she proudly looked at Al. Yet this abomination refused to stay down, shrugging off the spell and resuming its charge toward the two.

“Ugh, just how tough are these things!?”

Al spun his incredibly sharp scythe around and bashed the abomination with its handle. His attack stopped the monster in its tracks.

“Ice block!”

Feena followed up with a spell, freezing the abomination’s feet to the ground and rendering it immobile.

“This ice is really durable. It shouldn’t break anytime soon.”

She spoke with pride. But just preventing one monster didn’t stop the horde.

What should we do?

He was desperately trying to come up with ways to stop the enemy troops, but anything they could do would require an immense amount of preparation.

“If we could line the enemy up and prepare the spell...”

Al’s eyes suddenly lit up, and he drew close to Feena.

“Feena, do you remember the ice wall you erected in my room?”

“I would never forget a single moment I spent with you. And yes, that’s one of my favorite spells.”

“Great. Then could you erect a wall behind me? Make it as long as you can.”

Feena gave him a thumbs up.

“I’d make the longest wall in history for you!”

“Then please make an ice wall between my troops and the enemy soldiers!”

“Got it.”

She must have realized Al’s intent, as she started preparing the spell without questioning him.

“Ice wall.”

Al’s orders might have been for her to create a wall on the battlefield, but Feena’s ice blockade ran to the very ends of the plains. With this, his soldiers were safe, but the two of them were stuck in the middle of the enemy lines.

“Is this enough?”

She asked with a warm smile.

“I’m sorry about this, Feena. I understand if you have to flee when things get dangerous. But please, just stick with me for long enough to allow my soldiers to escape!”

“Al. I’m your wife. I’ll be by your side until I turn you into my puppet. I won’t leave you. That’s what being married means.”

He was taken aback by the affectionate declaration. He’d already gotten used to being called a puppet, but was still wondering why she was so head over heels for him. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time to get lost in his thoughts or to return Feena’s affection.

“I’m sor— No, thank you, Feena.”

He said it with a grateful smile.

“Ehe~♪”

The corners of her mouth curled up into a slight but kind smile. Then she turned towards the enemy troops and drew countless magic circles, completely covering their vicinity.

“I’m Feena, the wife of this puppet. It’s time to get serious!”

To Al, it looked like chained, demonic beasts were awaiting her command to pour out from the magic circles.

“Charge!”

The beasts leapt free from their chains and rushed toward their enemies. Creatures of fire, ice, and electricity burnt, froze, and shocked the abominations that stood in their way.

“This should do it for now.”

“Thank you, Feena. Now, it’s the puppet’s turn to do some work.”

He hopped off of his horse and nimbly retrieved his satchel from it.

“These are a prototype of our latest invention, a tube filled with black powder. It’s called a firecracker.”

He proudly held one such firecracker in front of Feena.

“A firecracker?”

She tilted her head curiously. The bamboo pipe was the size of a drinking cup. A long, wooden pole stretched through the middle of it and there was a small string attached to its side. His satchel was filled to brim with these firecrackers.

“It would be easier if I just showed you. Please, cover me.”

He stuck one firecracker after the other into the ground. As requested of her, Feena was warding him from the incoming spells and arrows.

“Good, we’re done. Feena, help me light the fuses.”

While calling out to her, he started lighting the strings of the dozen or so firecrackers one by one.

“Okay.”

After deflecting one last lightning ball, she got to lighting the firecrackers as well.

Pew-pew!

The firecrackers popped as they danced through the air towards the enemy.

“Ah!”

Feena stopped, surprised by the sounds.

“Don’t worry, we’re fine here! Just keep firing them!”

“I read that the ideal wife believes in and abides by her husband’s words.”

She looked at Al, muttered that under her breath, then returned to work. After a few seconds in the air, the firecrackers dropped down to the ground behind the abominations, right on the enemy soldiers.

Bam-bam! Pop-pop!

Small explosions reverberated through the battlefield.

“Wha—!? What’s going on!?”
Soldiers in the Imperial Headquarters, a place they’d thought to be safe, started to panic as they heard explosions close by.

“Wind!”

Al cast a basic wind spell.

“Watch and tremble under the power told of in the rumors you spread!”

A moment later, a gentle breeze passed across the battlefield.

“Hey, can you hear me?”

The surprised shrieks of the soldiers could be heard from a distance. After confirming that they could hear him, he decided to put on a bit of an act.

“Listen to me, Imperial dogs! I am Alnoa, but you can call me the Demon King! I’ll show you what it means to experience true terror through the use of my dark magic!”

It was like a puppet show. If someone tried to pull this on a random day in the middle of the city square, they’d be laughed at, or they’d be taken to the church. But even if the Imperial backline was lulled into a sense of safety, this was still a battlefield. After getting bombarded by previously unseen weaponry, they were now hearing voices from the Demon King. It was more than enough to plunge their troops into chaos.

“No way! The Demon King’s back!?”

“Why is a Diva cooperating with the Demon King!?”

Just as he planned, the Imperial soldiers began to panic.

“Calm down! Don’t be fooled! Those are just firecrackers, they don’t have any destructive power! The general provided us with abominations to fight by our side! We have nothing to fear! Not even the Demon King himself!”

The mayhem was blown away in an instant by a familiar voice, one which came from beside the man who appeared to be in charge.

“Jamka...”

Al would recognize that voice anywhere. His best friend, whom he had fought alongside countless times, was now standing on the other side of the battlefield, clad in the enemy’s armor.

“Destroy the firecrackers with magic! Target the King of Althos directly with your arrows! Stop him from pulling any more of these stupid tricks on us!”

Al’s wind magic caused him to hear things he never wanted to.

“Jamka... Huh!?”

Next to Jamka, Al could spy the commander holding a fist-sized blue crystal. He seemed to be issuing orders while swinging it to the left and right.

Is that—

He didn’t have time to finish his thought, as a storm of iron arrows blacked out the sky, heading their way.

“Feena, get down!”

He stood in front of Feena to protect her and started mincing away at the arrows raining down on them with his scythe.

“Damn, there are too many!”

There were at least twice the number of arrows as before.

A fragmented arrow was heading straight towards Feena, who was defenseless as she amassed energy for her next spell.

“Feena! Look ou— Arghh!”

He tried to cover her with his left hand, and the arrow pierced right through it.

“Al!”

Crimson flames burst from Feena, burning the rest of the arrows to dust.

“Don’t worry. This is just a scra— Hah!? It’s already healed!?”

Al pulled the arrow out of his hand, gritting his teeth from the pain. But his open wound closed up before his eyes, with the spattered blood left as the only remainder of his injury.

Is this the power of the Demon King? What’s happened to my body!?

“Heavy infantry, charge!”

His thoughts were interrupted. The Empire wouldn’t let them have a moment of rest. The heavily armored Imperial soldiers promptly organized into formation in front of Al. With Jamka’s help, they could read his every move.

If that crystal is really what I think it is—namely, that it’s controlling the abominations—then I think I see a way out. I’ll break the crystal and take the enemy general hostage!

Al’s lips curved into a cynical smile, fully aware of how reckless his strategy was. The enemy soldiers held huge shields, making it look like an iron wall was charging toward him.

“Get out of my way!”

Al dramatically stepped in front of the soldiers and swung down his scythe, aiming to hook it around one of the shields and tear it away.

“Huh!?”

To his surprise, the scythe cut through it like paper.

“What’s up with this thing!? This is absurd!”

Taken aback by his own attack, he lost his balance. The soldiers couldn’t let this chance slip.

“Spearmen!”

They had anticipated him breaking through their defenses, and so the lancers were right behind the heavy infantry to support them. A flurry of stabs flew towards Al from the small opening he’d created.

“Thanks, I didn’t expect such a warm welcome!”

He spun the scythe around and chopped the spearheads off with ease.

“Gahh!”

But a single spear managed to slip by, striking him in the shoulder.

“Gah... I won’t be stopped by this!”

He grabbed onto the spear, hit its owner with the handle of the scythe, and forcefully pulled the tip out of himself.

“Look out!”

A massive ice ball came flying at the same time as those words. It knocked away a soldier who was trying to attack Al from behind.

Thanks.

He shot a quick glance at Feena while spinning his scythe. He refused to hit humans with anything but the handle of it, but they all collapsed regardless, like their very life force had been drained from them.

We can pull this off!

Al felt hopeful as he continued to push his way forward. But suddenly the armor-clad soldiers parted. His vision was filled with dozens more new spearmen.

“Waarghh!!”

They growled and thrust their spears towards him.

“Stop reading my mind!”

He cursed Jamka and warded off the incoming attacks with his scythe.

“Gahh!”

He was fatally outnumbered. He couldn’t keep up with the flurry of spears coming his way. One spear after another pierced through him.

“Al!”

Feena cast a lightning attack, knocking Al and the surrounding soldiers back with its concussive force. The spell shattered the spears riddling Al's body.

“Gahhh! Even if my injuries heal instantly, it still hurts like hell!”

He jumped up in agonizing pain, tore the remaining spearheads out of his body, and spit the blood out of his mouth.

“Chaaarge!”

A moment later, the heavy infantry charged at him. Al felt like he’d been hit by a carriage as he flew through the air.

“Guhh!”

He once again managed to avoid fatal injury by chanting a protection spell in the nick of time, but found himself tumbling all the way to the base of the ice wall.

“Al! Are you okay?”

Feena mowed down the surrounding abominations with a powerful lightning bolt and rushed over to Al. She was on the brink of collapsing from fatigue.

“I’m fine, but are you okay, Feena!?”

After his injuries fully healed, he sat up. His entire body was covered with his own blood. Of course, neither of them were truly fine, but Feena said...

“I can still go on.”

Seeing that bravery made Al understand he couldn’t show any weakness. He pumped himself up and leapt to his feet.

“You’re losing too much blood. You won’t last long like this.”

“I’m fine. And their numbers are—”

“What’s that sound!?”

The ground shook beneath their feet as a fierce battle cry reached their ears. Curiously, it came from the other side of the ice wall.

“What’s— No way!”

The Imperial soldiers are slaughtering my people on the other side!?

He clenched his teeth and grabbed his scythe. But then the giant ice wall started collapsing right before his eyes.

“Wh-What’s going on!?”

Suddenly, a hole big enough for two people to fit through opened before the bewildered Al. He could see a silhouette behind the remaining cloud of ice particles.

“What are you doing here!?”

A violent lightning strike zapped an abomination behind Al’s back.

“You saved our lives, so we’re going to put them to good use!”

Juju, who’d become a citizen just the other day, stood behind the gaping hole fully clad in armor, with a sharp sword in her hand.

I’m sure I didn’t bring them along!

Citizens of Althos flooded through the breach as Al struggled to get a hold of what was going on.

“It’s time to repay Lesfina for our freedom! Let’s go, you bastards!”

“YEAAAH!”

“Wh-What?”

Al was still lost for words as Juju and the rest of the reinforcements charged toward the Imperial forces. The ground trembled beneath their fierce battle cry. A shabby man stood between Al and the enemy, wearing an awkward expression.

“Y’know, Juju was furious. She shouted at us for running away while the man who freed us was risking his life to keep us safe.”

The girl next to him chimed in.

“Althos is the only country that ever treated us like humans, even if it is ruled by the Demon King. Juju said that we'd lose everything if we abandoned it now. That we could run if we wanted to become slaves again, but if not, then we must protect our country with our own hands. We were ashamed by our cowardice and turned back.”

As a proof of their determination, the soldiers formed a protective circle around Al and Feena.

“Just to be clear, I made the outside of the ice wall weak to attacks. My magic would never be broken that easily. I just wanted to clear that up.”

She was upholding her pride as a Diva.

“You expected them to come back?”

Al curiously tilted his head.

“It was a gamble, but... I had a feeling they’d realize that you’re fighting for them.”

Tch, it’s like she knows my people better than me.

He smiled wryly.

“Commander! We’re waiting for your order!”

Their eyes were free of the confusion and terror they’d felt earlier. All of them were focused on Al, eagerly awaiting his word.

“Geez, you have a lot of nerve, coming back after running away on me.”

He wanted to put on a tough act, but his mouth curled up into a smile.

“You’re going to be making up for all that time you were sitting out!”

He stood up and shouted, to raise not only the soldiers’ spirits, but his own spirit as well.

“Prepare the counterattack! Use all the firecrackers we have! Target the enemy headquarters and the cavalry!”

“Yes sir!”

They quickly stuck the firecrackers into the ground and fired them off, moving at a far swifter pace than they had ever done in training. Hundreds of firecrackers rained down on the enemy headquarters and the cavalry surrounding it, exploding as they landed. Jamka might have revealed that firecrackers weren’t dangerous, but Al wasn’t aiming to harm anyone directly.

“You can explain what’s going on to humans, but animals are a different matter. Right, Jamka?”

The firecrackers spooked the horses, just as Al had hoped. They began rampaging around the area. Of course, the horses rode by Jamka and the enemy commander were no exception. The chaos going on back at the enemy headquarters spread quickly to the front lines.

“What’s going on back there!? Where’s the messenger already!?”
The chain of command was in disarray. Al ran his gaze over the mayhem, and realized that the enemy commander didn’t have his blue crystal at hand. He had probably dropped it as his horse went wild. Just as Al had theorized, the abominations froze in place for a second before going berserk. They attacked everything in their sight, be it friend or foe.

“Begin the counterattack! Run past their infantry and abominations! Our aim is their headquarters!”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers of Althos cried out in unison and began their charge.

“What’s going on!?”

The commander of the southern regiment of the Imperial Army, Dans Dala, seated on an extravagantly ornamented horse, couldn’t believe his eyes. Victory had been assured until a few moments prior.

“Why...”

Dala stared at his empty right hand, before catching a sparkle out of the corner of his eye. The crystal he’d been holding lay in pieces beneath his horse. It had all happened because of one simple slip-up. His horse started bounding around, out of control. Dala had fallen off in one quick moment. He couldn’t hold onto the crystal during his fall. His horse trampled the crystal, shattering it instantly. The abominations, who were previously not enemies nor allies, went berserk, and panic spread through the human soldiers. To top it all off, the Althos soldiers were now aiming at the commander with their spells. He had completely lost control over the situation.

“Commander. Let’s fall back to Labona,” Jamka proposed, bringing his horse alongside Dala. He imagined there was no way to win this battle now, save for the fact that there was still one trump card remaining. Dala rummaged through

his pockets desperately, looking for the one other thing the High Commander had given him when he was ordered to take Althos.

“Found it.”

“Commander?”

Jamka got closer to the commander, not understanding why he wasn’t moving. Jamka was skilled with both sword and sorcery, making him much more useful to the commander than the other slaves.

“Jamka, come closer. I’ll give you your last order. It’s a top secret mission. We can’t let anyone else hear it.”

Dala spoke, staring at the ground to hide his menacing smile.

“Yes, Commander?”
He felt that something was off, but disobeying orders was not an option. He came alongside the commander, so close he could touch him.

“This is your...”

Dala pulled something out of his pocket. It was a crystal with a small, twinkling crimson flame in the middle.

“Final mission!”

He slammed the crimson crystal into Jamka’s chest.

“I call upon the two ancient powers! The Saint and the Demon, bestow your strength on your foolish servant!”

Right after the commander finished his chant, Jamka began writhing in pain.

“Gahh— Why are you...”

Dala smiled, looking at Jamka wriggling on the ground.

“Gahh! What’s thi— Ahhhhh!”

“If those skin-and-bones slaves on the brink of death became that powerful, imagine how strong you will be once you turn into an abomination! You’ll be unstoppable! Now go, smear those Althos bastards into the ground!”

Dala's voice sounded so distant. Jamka writhed on the ground, barely able to see Dala riding back to Labona.

"Just a few more..."

Al bashed the handle of his scythe against an enemy soldier who'd been brave enough to fight until the end.

"I'm finished."

Feena rushed over to Al so fast she almost collided with him.

There she goes, sneaking up behind me again. Though I couldn't have done this without her, so I'll let it slide.

Feena then dashed into the middle of an enemy group, breaking her camouflage magic and making them panic. She nailed the commanding officer with a spell, sending him flying and rendering him unconscious.

The entire Imperial Army was now in disarray, their carefully planned formation in tatters.

"Now we just have to take care of the commander and take back Labona! Cecilia should already be—"

He was interrupted by a sudden burst of magical energy.

"What's that!?"

They both looked towards the source of this incredible power.

"Wha—!?"

They were rendered speechless. A giant, over ten-feet-tall wolf-like creature had appeared right where Jamka and the enemy commander had been.

"Is that an abomination!?"

"It's like the wolf from the legends... the God Devourer..."

Now that Feena mentioned it, Al could see the resemblance to Fenrir, a god who had taken the guise of a wolf and eaten other gods.

"Could that be... Jamka?"

He once talked with Jamka about his life before falling into the hands of slavers. He'd been royalty in a small country that stood under a flag emblazoned with the image of Fenrir.

"We have to fight."

Feena looked at Al, her eyes filled with determination.

"Yeah, let's do it. We'll knock that beast out and bring Jamka back with us!" He grabbed his scythe. They exchanged a glance, then charged toward the beast.

"Graaah!"

Fenrir charged toward them as well, its hefty limbs working in pairs. The claws at the end of each leg were each as large as a human arm. It raised one of its forelegs...

"Ahhh!"

Al gathered all of his strength and swug his scythe towards the monster. But it simply bounced off.

"What!? How thick is that fur!?"
The monstrous wolf shook its front leg in frustration as if trying to swat away a fly. Feena, Al, and a large chunk of the ground were blown backwards from the resulting shockwave.

"Aghh!"

"Ahh!"

They both collapsed on the ground.

"Are you okay, Fee—"

Al reached to the ground to push himself up, but he couldn't go through with his plan. To his surprise, his head landed right in between two comfortable, albeit a bit small, pillows, before sliding off to Feena's lap.

An awkward silence fell between the two, but Fenrir wasn't going to let them talk it out. The wolf opened his mouth so wide it looked like he could swallow

them whole. He seemed to be sucking in a massive amount of air, but Al didn't have time to wonder what was going to happen. He just knew he had to move.

"Feena! Look out!"

Al sprang into action, pushing Feena away before leaping to the side himself.

"Graaaah!"

Not even a moment later, Fenrir unleashed a stream of flames from his mouth.

"Guhh!"

Al was too slow. His ankle got caught up in the attack and burned to crisp under the thousand-degree flames.

"Al!"

Completely covered in soot, Feena tried to rush up to Al.

"Don't!"
But Al's sharp, restrained voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Don't screw with us! Do you think we'd just stand here waiting for home to be destroyed!?"

Juju and a few other soldiers charged at the beast, unfaltering in the face of its impossible strength.

Al pulled himself up and shouted from the top of his lungs.

"Don't! Feena, do something! Stop them!"

"But—"

"A good wife trusts her puppet, right!? So listen to me, Feena!"
He didn't have the luxury of carefully choosing his words, but fortunately Feena listened to him regardless, trapping the incoming backup into an ice cage.

"Thank you."

His ankle had started regenerating, but it looked like it was going to take a while. Al couldn't stand up in the state he was in, and his consciousness was beginning to dim.

This is bad.

“Al...”

Despite being on the verge of passing out, he could still make out a distant voice. To his surprise it was not Fenrir’s roar, but a familiar tone.

Ah, is this the part when my life flashes before my eyes?

He smiled wryly upon realizing who the voice belonged to.

“Al...”

“Haha, didn’t think that the last thing I’d see would be my assassin’s face. Guess I’m a masochist.”

Al muttered, seeing vague strands of crimson hair fluttering in the wind and the outline of a familiar hair ornament.

“Al!”

“Hey, it’s like she’s standing right in front of me. I really must be...”

Her eyes, burning with confidence, shared the color of her hair.

Those eyes... That sword...

“Ah! Wait! Sharon!?”

He ignored the pulsing pain in his head and looked up. Sharon stood before him, wearing the same dress she’d had on when she left, though now it was far dirtier. Her giant sword looked just as much at odds with her feminine frame as it always did.

She’d clearly rushed there, but her silver hair ornament stood proudly in her disarranged hair.

“You’re really here!”

Sharon pouted down at him from atop her horse.

Sharon had only found about the Empire’s attack by chance.

“We’re nearly at the border...”

Her journey since leaving Althos had consisted of repeated sighs and staring at the floor of the carriage.

“Ahh well. I failed my mission, but I finally get to go home...”
She raised her head and repeated the line she’d said so many times before in a flat, emotionless tone. And then silence wrapped around her once again. All Sharon could hear was the clacking of hooves as the horses pulled the carriage. She was heading down the same road and in the same vehicle as when she first came to Althos. But this journey felt so much sadder. And deep down, she knew the reason why.

“Life in that castle was so hectic...”

Sure, half of it was my fault, but... I’m going to miss it all.

She stared out of the window thinking of the delightful days she’d spent in Althos. She didn’t want to return to Freiya, but since she wasn’t strong enough to disobey her stepfather, she had no choice in the matter. She had to return to being their puppet.

“Al is amazing...”

She recalled his face. He might have been clumsy, but nothing would stop him from chasing his dreams. Even if people grew to hate him, even if his friends left him, he would keep pushing on.

“I hope I can go back soon...”

She knew that wish was unlikely to come true. After all, Divas didn’t only possess immeasurable strength in battle, they also rose the morale of any army just by being present. What’s more, Sharon was a former slave, though that wasn’t known to many. She was the symbol of Freiya, and her stepfather wasn’t going to let her run off to some foreign land just so she could enjoy herself. She’d been following her stepfather’s orders every step of the way, from the first fight against Al to every assassination attempt after. No matter how much she begged, he would never let her have her way.

“Huh?”

Sharon tilted her head curiously, her train of thought interrupted by the sudden swaying of the carriage as it picked up speed.

“We’re under attack, Lady Sharon! This is going to be a bumpy ride, so please hold on tight!” her vassel cried out in a panicked tone.

“He’s here!? Took him long enough!!”

In stark contrast to her vassel, Sharon looked delighted as she peered out of the window. But that would be short lived.

“Huh!? What’s the Empire doing here!?”
A battalion of Imperial soldiers fully clad in armor were closing in on them from behind.

“We’ll hold them off here, my lady! Please proceed to Freiya without us!”

“Enough.”

The Freiyan soldier spoke proudly from beneath his brilliant red helmet, but Sharon rejected his offer.

“Huh?”

He couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. The voice clearly belonged to the princess he’d pledged his loyalty to. Yet she wasn’t the girl he knew. Her voice was distraught, like she’d been dragged through the depths of hell.

“I’ve had enough... Enough of this uncertainty! I... I have to...”

Disregarding her soldiers’ confusion, she grabbed her sword and kicked open the door.

“I have to do this!”

Sharon burst out of the carriage, launching herself into the air toward the incoming soldiers. She swung her massive sword, still sheathed, into one of the men, knocking him clean off his horse.

At least I didn’t kill him, she thought to herself as she watched the soldier tumble to the ground. *Hopefully.*

“What’re you doing!?”

The Imperial soldiers quickly regained their composure, getting back into formation and drawing in toward Sharon.

“You’ve caught me at a bad time. So you better get out of my way if you know what’s good for you.”

She landed on the riderless horse, still in her dignified dress, and instantly mowed down a soldier who was about to land a strike on her.

“What the hell, wasn’t this meant to be some noble’s cart!?”

The Imperial soldiers stopped their horses and looked at her in awe of her overwhelming strength. Without a care for the fidgeting soldiers, Sharon shouted.

“Who do you think you are, toying with my feelings like this is all some kind of game? I’ll have you know that the punishment for that is death!”

“No, wait, we didn’t do anythi—!”

They were interrupted by the palpable bloodlust in her gaze.

“Eeep!”

It was all too much for the soldiers, who couldn’t stop themselves from shrieking. This frightened the horse Sharon had taken over, which began running back to the rest of its group, seeking shelter from the incoming storm.

“Waarghh!”

The Imperial horses had been trained never to stop no matter the situation, but even they froze in terror when faced with Sharon’s fierce battle cry. Both man and horse alike were convinced they’d be slain by the crimson demon charging toward them.

“Ah!”

Her hair ornament fell out of her hair. She immediately pulled the reins and caught it mid-air.

“Oh yeah, I did kinda just put this on earlier.”

Looking at her gift calmed her down for a second. The soldiers looked at her in awe. Just a moment ago they were waiting for death’s sweet release from the crushing pressure of Sharon’s bloodlust. But now they could only see a gorgeous girl with a smile of an angel in front of them.

“I have to keep this safe.”

She completely ignored her dumbfounded enemies.

“Do-Don’t screw with us! A little girl like—”

One of the soldiers managed to escape Sharon’s enticing, innocent smile.

“Silence!”

Sharon casually swung her sword without looking up. The enemy soldier was blown away by her strike, spinning three times in the air, then five more times on the ground.

“So, why are you lot even here? This is Althos’ territory.”

The remaining soldiers watched their comrade’s journey through the air and across the ground... Then they quickly switched their gaze from their buddy lying cold on the ground to Sharon.

“We’re sorry! We’ll tell you everything. Please, spare us!”

They indeed told her everything: their invasion of Labona, the rumors about Al, the army of abominations, and even the trap they’d set for the King of Althos.

“I see. So he hid all that from me until I left, did he!?”

In truth, that information had only reached Al after Sharon had departed, but she couldn’t have known.

“I have to go back!”

She had no justifiable reason to return to Althos, nor did she have one for going against her stepfather’s orders. The gears in her head spun desperately in search for an answer. You could practically see smoke coming out of the top of her head, until she finally found a solution.

“I’ve got it! Someone has to investigate the rumors about the Demon King, so I’ll do it!”

She didn’t technically have permission to do so, but she knew it was a good enough excuse.

“And if he’s actually the Demon King, then I might be able to use him to achieve my dreams...”

Sharon convinced herself, unable to be honest and say she just wanted to help him.

“Also, I’ve got some things to say to him! How dare he not come after me!” The soldiers, having lost all will to fight, now tried to sneakily retreat while Sharon was preoccupied with her own thoughts.

“Oh right. And you lot can leave your horses behind. I’ve got somewhere I need to be right now.”

They got off of their horses without even meeting her gaze, then ran for their lives on foot.

Sharon remained on the first horse she’d commandeered and set about rounding up the others, when...

“Princess?”

One of her valets called out to her.

“Tell my stepfather that I’ll be returning to Althos to uncover the king’s secret. I’ll be back in two to three days.”

She kicked the side of the horse and left without saying anything else.

“You better not die until I get there, you heartless bastard!”

As Sharon spoke those words, she felt herself smiling and her heart pounding. Was the excitement in her breast because this was the first time she’d disobeyed her stepfather? Because it was the first time she was acting of her own free will? Or was it because of the person she was going to see? Only she knew the answer to that question.

It wasn’t what one would call a happy reunion, but Sharon’s relieved smile remained firm, even if she did feel somewhat embarrassed.

“What are you lying down for!? And what the heck is that thing!? I mean, I go away for a few hours, and this is what I come back to?”

She shot a menacing gaze at Fenrir as she got off her horse. She looked away from Al in embarrassment, took off her gloves, and reached out to him.

“Come on, get up! You’re my target and (possible) future husband! It’d make me look bad if you lost to this puppy!”

“You think I care about your pride!?”

He reached up for Sharon with a wry smile. She grabbed his arm and firmly, but kindly, pulled him up.

“Seriously... You’re always putting yourself in harm’s way, aren’t you?”

Those weren’t Sharon’s usual fighting words. Sharon’s honesty hit Al hard.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do something about this.”

She raised her head, her eyes filled with determination.

Wait, you don’t mean—

Al’s thoughts were cut off by Sharon placing one hand on his cheek and using the other to guide his.

“You’re taking responsibility for this, for the record.”

She pushed his hand against her chest.

“Mmm!”

His hand was engulfed by a slightly different springiness than when this had happened with his sister.

This is weird. Heavenly Surge isn’t meant to work through clothes...

“Haah!”

But Al could feel the magic being drawn out of him and spotted his scythe gleaming wickedly in his hand.

“Is this the cause?”

Sharon brought her face closer and closer to his, until he could see nothing but her brimming smile and powerful gaze.

“Make me go wild.”

Their lips met. Sharons words resounded through his mind, like there was a direct link between the two of them, and he could feel a massive surge of magic leave him.

The glow of his scythe strengthened, and Al found at least twice the magic energy he'd just lost flooding back into his body.

Is this the true power of Heavenly Surge?

An influx of thick and dense magical energy coursed through him. He'd never felt so powerful before.

"Wha— This is... much stronger... Wow... Ahh! Nahhh!"

Sharon started to convulse and moan in his arms.



She tried to resist the magic and pleasure streaming around her body, but in the end she had to yield to it. Her back arched and she cried out as she reached the climax of pleasure and despair.

“Mmm, ngh! I-I’ve been sullied, but... I feel stronger!”

Al didn’t have the luxury of worrying about her, as he was also drowning in pleasure. He was barely able to keep himself from fainting.

“Aaahh!”

“Noooo!”

The two of them writhed as waves of magic (and pleasure) swallowed them whole.

“Grahhh!”

A moment later, both of them were engulfed in Fenrir’s merciless flames.

“Al! Sharon!”

Feena cried out in despair as the flames engulfed Althos’ last bastion of hope. She stood up and bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

“You monster. We could have—”

Wanting to at least get in one last punch, Feena began gathering magical energy. She was waiting for Fenrir to stop its attack. But then—

“Huh? How are you two—”

Feena had expected to see no more than two piles of ash when the flames faded. But that wasn’t the reality that faced her. Both of them stood there unharmed after the sea of flames let up. They even seemed to be in a better shape than before.

“Al, what’s going on? Is this the power of Heavenly Surge?”

Even Sharon, who’d experienced the events firsthand, was dumbfounded.

“How am I supposed to know!?”

Al had no idea about what had transpired either. The only thing he knew was that an aura of black and red magical energy was surrounding them.

“Ah! My sword!”

Sharon hastily unsheathed her sword, which was now shining mysteriously. Its old, rustic look was gone. It had been reforged and was now blacker than the darkest night. New, crimson words ran down the length of the blade.

“Dáinsleif...”

Her sword’s name.

“Let’s go, Magic Sword Dáinsleif!”

It felt like a name she’d always known, like she was reuniting with a friend who’d been away for a while. But that wasn’t the only change. Al had received a gift from the Heavenly Surge too. A cloak, just as dark as Sharon’s blade, was wrapped around his shoulders. The blade of his scythe was glistening scarlet, like it had already tasted enemy blood. A name floated through his mind. The Great Scythe Mistilteinn.

“Now even I can’t deny I’m the Demon King.”

He laughed cynically at his own look.

“At least no one will complain when I assassinate you now.”

Sharon didn’t hold back on her words at a time like this. Al flashed her a wry smile.

“Now, let’s finish this!”

They both burst into action without even looking each other in the eyes. They should have been exhausted, but they were fully restored in both strength and magic.

“We don’t know how long this will last! Finish this quickly!”

“Got it! I’ll kill it in one strike!”

“No, don’t kill him!”

Al still had his wry smile, and Sharon was still brimming with confidence. But naturally, Fenrir wasn’t waiting for them to finish their chat. Its instincts must

have told him that taking on the two of them at once would be dangerous, so he hopped back. Then, in the next moment, it swung down a huge paw right at Al. Everything was the same as the first attack, right down to how Al swung his scythe.

“Cut straight through, Mistilteinn!”

“Gragh!”

But this time Mistilteinn sliced straight through the beast’s thick fur, severing the leg from its base.

“Crap, I didn’t expect to cut the whole thing off! Jamka, are you okay!?”

Fenrir’s foreleg shook the ground as it fell. As Al looked at it, the image of Jamka missing his right arm floated through his mind.

“Don’t worry, we can take your arm back with us and have Cecilia do something about it!” he said, fully aware that it would be a next-to-impossible task, even for his sister.

“You need to focus!”

Sharon screamed at Al as she ran her magic blade through Fenrir.

“Got it! Let’s focus on getting Jamka back!”

“Watch out!”

Fenrir jumped back, staring at them with resentment in its eyes. Then it started to inhale.

“Is it going to breath fire again!?”

Al and Sharon took up defensive stances, as Fenrir took in another deep breath.

“Ice ball. Fireball.”

“Grahh!”

But Feena was faster than the monster. She quickly dispatched two spells. An ice ball smashed into Fenrir’s mouth, followed up by a fireball exploding before its eyes.

“I’ll cover you, Al.”

She remained expressionless and gave him a thumbs up.

“Thanks, Feena. Sharon, I’ll finish this.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself!”

Al kicked off the ground, flying toward the monster. Fenrir had reared up on its hind legs, its remaining front leg flailing around in front of it. By chance, it was headed straight for Al. But he paid it no mind and simply raised his scythe.

“This is the end for you!”

A crimson shadow slipped between Al and Fenrir.

“Slice him up, Dáinsleif!”

Sharon sliced through the leg heading toward Al like it was butter. By the time Fenrir was able to open its eyes, all it could see was Al holding Mistilteinn aloft.

“Jamka! I understand your feelings! I know you’re worried about the slaves! But believe me when I say I won’t stop until everyone under my domain is happy! I will fulfill my dream! So please, Jamka, come back to us! I’ll listen to your objections! So cut this out and return to me, you bastard!”

Al screamed out, taking careful aim and bringing his scythe straight down on Fenrir’s left shoulder.

“Graaaaggghhh!”

Mistilteinn ran straight down Fenrir’s shoulder and across its chest, leaving one deep, red line in its wake.

Fenrir’s ear splitting roar confirmed the destruction of the crystal controlling it. It collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. Then it began turning back into the man they knew. As Jamka transformed back it became apparent that, unfortunately, both of his arms were missing. Cold sweat droplets ran down their cheeks as they stared at Jamka collapsed on the ground.

I’ll have Cecilia take care of your arms later.

“Now we just have to liberate Labona!”

“Uhm, about that...”

Sharon rested Dáinsleif on her shoulders, as she lightly dropped her comment. But the problem was that Al and Feena were covered in wounds. Furthermore, the Heavenly Surge could run out at any moment.

“Hm?”

Sharon looked between Al and Feena, before tilting her head curiously.

“Isn’t someone missing?”

“Oh my. You’re back already, Sharon?”

No sooner had Sharon said that than the missing Diva rolled up in a carriage, straight out of Labona. No one questioned why Dala was crucified on the top of the carriage, stripped down to his underwear.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I only stripped their commander and crucified him on the top of my carriage to destroy the enemy’s morale! It has nothing to do with my personal interests!”
Cecilia pouted, apparently annoyed that no one was commenting on it. They knew that half of it was just a joke, but they didn’t have the energy to comment on it.

“Cecilia! I’m glad you’re safe!”

“Yes, luckily I managed to carry out the mission without any major injuries.”

Knowing that Al was easily disposed to worrying, she didn’t say anything else. She brought the carriage to a stop in front of the group, at which point a small, frizzy haired shadow jumped out from behind her. It was Brusch, who leapt right into Al’s arms.

“King Al! I was scared! I was so scared!!”

“I know. You did well, Brusch.”

Al fell on his butt as Brusch crashed into him. But he ignored the pain and pet the small girl on the head.

“Oh, Al! I did my best too! You will pet your hard-working sister’s head too, right? Right!?”

Cecilia hopped off the carriage and rushed straight over to Al, as if the enemy commander wasn't even there. Al had instructed her before the battle to use the confusion of the conflict to invade Labona on her own. Her mission was to liberate the city and save Brusch.

"I tied up the enemy forces in the city. All of the captives are safe. The enemy probably planned to turn all of them into abominations."

She kneeled down next to Al and lowered her head with a brimming smile. Al lifted his hand to reward her for her hardships with a pat on the head. But he never reached his sister's head.

"Huh?"

He was more exhausted than he realized. Unable to support himself any longer, he collapsed flat on the ground.

"Oh my. You hate the idea of petting your older sister that much?"

Cecilia pouted again, but behind her, Sharon collapsed to her knees.

"Huh? What's this? I can't move..."

"It's probably the after-effect of using Heavenly Surge. I can't move at all, either."

Al said this while staring up at the vast sky, unable to even turn his head.

"Jamka! What are you doing here!? W-Wait, why is he missing both of his arms!?"

It was only after Brusch got off Al that she noticed her brother.

I'm sorry, Brusch.

He apologized silently and averted his gaze, unable to bear watching.

"Well now, you all seem exhausted. I'll take care of Jamka's injuries myself. Everyone else can just rest for a while, then we'll think about what to do next. And don't worry, Al! I'll give you a comfy lap pillow!"

She had a cheeky smile as she proposed her brilliant idea. Al wanted to object, but he wasn't in a state to reject his sister's kindness.

"Thank you, Cecilia. I hope you don't mind if I take... a little... nap."

Unable to raise an argument, he promptly fell asleep.

“Heavenly Surge. Combining the power of the Divas and the Demon King. I expected a lot from it, but it was a huge letdown.”

“I agree. It wasn’t worth taking this detour to see it after finishing our business in Eshantel, Gil.”

Two shadows were lurking on the walls of Labona. Gil, a young man clad in silver armor, and Eleanor, a young girl who wore a dress resembling a maid uniform.

“People so inexperienced would be no match for us, dear brother.”

Her words were confident but her actions shy as she shuffled closer to Gil, staring at the ground.

“Yeah. I feel like Eshantel’s Diva alone gave us more trouble than they ever could.”

Gil kept his eyes fixed on Al.

“I hope you’ll improve your skills before we cross paths, Alnoa,” he murmured under his breath before gracefully standing up.

“We’re done here. Let’s go.”

“Yes, dear brother!”

Eleanor smiled sweetly as the two of them vanished without a trace.

Epilogue

Al slept like a log, eventually awaking in his own bed. He didn't know how long he'd been out for.

"Ouch... I really overdid it this time. I'm aching all over..."

Al turned over in bed, still half asleep. But what he saw next woke him right up.

"Huh?"

Sharon was sleeping peacefully next to him. He no longer cared about how he'd gotten back to his bed or what happened after he passed out in the field.

"I've been asleep this whole time. Nothing... untoward could have happened. I'm sure of it."

He quickly turned around so he wasn't looking directly into Sharon's sleeping face.

"Whoa!"

Except Feena was sleeping on his other side. After a brief emergency shutdown, his brain kicked back into action as he tried to understand the situation. All he could conclude was that, for some reason, he had been asleep between the two Divas.

"What's going on..."

He needed some space to calm down, so he went to sit up... only to find Cecilia stretched out on top of him, covered with a thin blanket.

"What the..."

He raised his hands to his face in confusion and despair, then felt something stirring on his lap.

"Oh my. Have you finally woken?"

"Cecilia, what's going on?"

There were countless things for Al to worry about, but understanding his current situation was the most pressing of all.

“Whatever is the matter? I’m just here to nurse you back to health,” she told him nonchalantly. She tilted her head in a refined manner, despite nothing about the situation being refined. He noticed some sanitary equipment lying next to the bed, a bucket full of water, and towels on the table. But that didn’t explain why he was surrounded by three girls.

“Oh dear. Those girls promised me they wouldn’t get into your bed. I’ll have to give them a stern scolding later.”

She said it in a joking tone, but her eyes were dead serious. Al’s concerns, however, were still unanswered. Even if the other two girls snuck in for some unknown reason, that still left one question unanswered.

“Cecilia, why were you sleeping on top of me!?”

“Well now, you were out for two straight days! We decided to take turns in looking after you.”

Her long-awaited explanation was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Lady Cecilia, how’s Al—”

Jamka froze upon seeing the current state of the room.

“Ah, Jamka! Are you okay?”

Al tried to change Jamka’s focus with a parched voice, but to no avail. Jamka’s eyes were glued to the bed. Remembering their fight, he lowered his gaze to Jamka’s right arm. His hollow sleeve was dangling next to him.

“Jamka...”

Al couldn’t bring himself to justify his actions. He just quietly hung his head.

“Ah, this? Don’t worry about it. Honestly, it’s a pretty tame punishment for a traitor,” Jamka said casually.

“Yes, I must apologize... I couldn’t heal his right arm no matter how much I tried.”

“No sweat. I’m just glad you could get the left one back!”

He happily waved his intact arm.

“Either way, what’s going on here! You’re showing off again!?”

His smile changed to a serious expression in a second.

“I have no clue. You tell me!”

“Not bad, Al, not bad. I’d like to wake up to such a feast one day myself, you damn—”

“Jamka, listen to me!”

Al wanted to explain himself, but it proved difficult without knowing how he got into this mess.

“Forget it for a second. Al, I want to tell you something.”

While Al was wracking his brain to come up with an excuse, Jamka cut him off with a serious tone. Al gulped down his desire to explain himself, and nodded.

“Honestly, I can’t fully get behind your dream. But even if I can’t get behind it, I can still help you try and realize it. And who knows, maybe I’ll find a dream of my own along the way. So, what I’m saying is, errm... would you mind taking me back?”

“Oh yes, Al. Jamka’s sworn to work day and night to help with the post-battle dealings, and he’s even promised to cast aside his flesh and blood. Please, forgive him.”

He did what now?

He sighed, doubting the authenticity of Cecilia’s words. But that was beside the point.

“Of course I’ll forgive you! The loss of your right arm is a fitting punishment for your crimes! I mean, it’s not like we have a set punishment for treason here. Anyway, just help me find out what’s happening here!”

Unfortunately, Al’s plea for help went unheard. Jamka, having been granted forgiveness, moved on to a much more pressing matter. He dramatically collapsed to his hands and knees and lamented how the man his precious sister fell in love with was now in bed with his own harem of lovely ladies.

“I know this is what my sister wants, but a damn playboy like you...?”

Al began to doubt if Jamka honestly regretted his actions. Then, just to make things worse, the aforementioned little girl leapt over Jamka and flung herself happily toward Al.

“King Al!”

Brusch stumbled through the bed and landed right in Al’s arms, rousing the sleeping Divas beside them.

“Huh? Is it breakfast time already?”

“Keep it down. Gimme just six more hours...”

“King Al! King Al! I... I...” Brusch’s eyes were cloudy, and her cheeks were flushed. “I want to be one of your bridal candidates too!”
“Huh?”

Al was completely perplexed.

“My my.”

Cecilia kept her usual smile. She had already left the bed by that point, so she wasn’t caught up in Brusch’s antics.

“Like I care!” Sharon averted her gaze.

“I won’t let you take my place as his legal wife.” Feena answered with an even more stoic expression than usual.

“Gaaah! My little sister, in the hands of *this* guy!?” Jamka started weeping on the floor.

“What the hell is going on!?” Al looked around, desperate for an answer. But given the room’s current occupants, it was clear he wasn’t going to get one. Just then, he heard a small knock on the door.

“Excuse me.”

Lilicia entered the room.

“Lilicia, what are you—”

Al had countless questions to ask her, but this wasn’t the time or place for them.

“King Al. Eshantel has been overthrown by the Empire.”

Lilicia urgently informed the bedridden young king of the damning news.

End.

—This script is a revision of the runner-up of the Overlap Light Novel Competition, The Demon King and the Bride-to-Be Divas.

BATTLE DIVAS: THE INCORRUPTIBLE BATTLE BLOSSOM PRINCESS VOL. 1
KOUKA KISHINE

Translated by David Prileszky

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