
SOL PRESS
BATTLE DIVAS
The Unyielding Twin Blossom Princess
STORY
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Althos' king
Alnoa
I-It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness.
Distania's princess
Luna


Althos' Diva
Cecilia
Oh my, would you rather I did it with my mouth, you needy little boy?
Ahhn! I had no idea you liked boobs this much!


Really, now? You may be a Diva, but you're all mine now. Don't believe me? Let me show you!
Hehehehe, I'll explore every nook and cranny of your body tonight.
Ah! No...
Freiya's Diva
Sharon

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A certain Goddess' overflowing encouragement.
A single, lonely petal dances through the air.

Singing a bittersweet song,
it slowly touches the ground.

The turbulent, earnest crimson petal
burns everyone in its path.

And so, she prays.

So that she can keep embracing them in her
warm, crimson light.

She prays for a merciful sun's grace, to protect
her from all wounds,
to accept her all-consuming, unyielding, pure
love.

But she is brushed by a sorrowful wind,
giving birth to eternal darkness deep within
her soul.

Prologue

“Alnoa! Enemy attack inbound!”

Upon hearing Brusch’s scream, Al began giving orders to his troops. “Cecilia, deploy a magic shield! Feena, target the cavalry once the enemy attack has been deflected! Sharon, break through any opening you find!” His voice carried across the battlefield with the help of a wind spell.

“Understood!” they shouted in unison.

Having dealt with that issue, Al quietly began evaluating their situation. Being a king was not an easy job for Al, especially as of late. He’d spent more nights awake than he would have liked to admit. At the very least, he didn’t want his soldiers to feel the weight of his position. Considering that many of them had just been liberated, he didn’t want to put more strain on them than they’d endured as slaves. Therefore, his current battalion consisted of a couple dozen soldiers and the Divas.

“I was happy about the lack of abominations, but to see that they’ve sent in their veteran troops, not to mention that monstrous siege engine… What the hell is the Empire planning!?”

Althos may have been a weak country in a strategically poor location just a short time ago, but it now housed four Divas. Each one was capable of handling well over a thousand soldiers on her own, so the Empire’s attacks boggled Al’s mind. Even if they sent five thousand soldiers and a trebuchet, leaving so much as a dent in Althos’ defenses would prove difficult.

Are they trying to use these battles as practice for fighting Althos and the Divas?

“I’m happy we’ve gotten stronger, though…” Al murmured to himself, so quietly that his words didn’t even reach his bodyguard, Kanon. But his tranquil thoughts were interrupted by the fierce sounds of battle.

Wham! Boom! Clang!

“You think these pebbles can hurt me, do you!?”

Sharon deflected one boulder after another as the enemy's trebuchet flung them her way. While it was an easy feat for a Diva, her accuracy in returning their crude gifts spoke volumes about her strength. The cavalry and infantry watched without so much as a peep.

"Wrahhhh!" Sharon took that chance to break through the cavalry.

"Sharon, stop! You're going too far in!"

Despite knowing the futility of his actions, Al prepared to ride out after Sharon, but—

"Ah! Look out!"

Someone flew by him, moving faster than the wind. It was Kanon. A boulder from the trebuchet was hurtling his way, and he didn't have time to react. Kanon stared directly at the incoming boulder and jumped toward it with tremendous force.

"Hyahhh!"

By the time her battle cry was over, she had already sheathed her blade. She had pulverized the boulder in the blink of an eye. Unfortunately, she hadn't considered that the rubble she created would stay its course.

"Ah!"

A fist-sized rock hit Al on the head with a dull *thud*.

"Al!"

Al barely caught her shout before his consciousness slipped away.

Chapter One: The Audience

Ah, this dream again…

Al immediately recognized his recurring dream: a fleeting memory from a time long since passed. It always began with the same scene: an astounding ball held at the castle. Magical lights flickered on the snow-white marble of the reception hall, where countless refined guests were feasting and making merry.

He was completely numb to the grandeur of the event, however. It meant nothing to him, as it was simply a bride-hunt his father recklessly organized soon after the loss of Al's mother and brother. But regardless of his sorrowful attitude and apathetic outlook, it was perfectly clear to the young Al that his father and sister were deathly worried about him and were trying everything they could to cheer him up.

"Oh my, Al. This tastes divine," Cecilia said, offering him a spoonful of shimmering soup. Her usual carefree smile felt stiff, making it obvious that it was nothing but a mask.

"Thank you, Cecilia." Al mimicked her forced smile. Despite his utter lack of appetite, he tried his best to force it down his throat. The expertly crafted, high-class meal tasted like cardboard to him, yet he gulped it down with a content expression to calm Cecilia's mind.

"F-Finally." Her expression looked grim for a moment, but it shifted to one of relief upon seeing him eat. Just as Al was about to go for another spoonful to further appease his sister— "Princess Luna of Distania has arrived!"

The crowd cheered. Al slowly put his spoon down and turned his head toward the staircase. His jaw dropped.

Her long brown hair swayed as she descended the steps. Her spotless, porcelain skin shimmered under the magical lights. Her gentle, pitch-black eyes radiated with power. She looked like a moon goddess straight out of a fairy tale.

"Oh my, how adorable. Almost like a doll."

Al wasn't sure if Cecilia avoided her usual mean-spirited comments because

she noticed his fascination, or because she herself was captured by her beauty.

Luna. This was the girl Al's father was pushing to become Al's bride. Al certainly found her adorable, but at that point, he wasn't very interested. However, she seemed to have taken interest in the young Al. She gazed right at him as she walked, until…

Crash!

She stepped on her dress and tumbled down the stairs, landing headfirst on the floor.

What do I do now?

That question plagued not only Al's mind, but the other guests' as well. Everyone had clearly witnessed her magnificent fall, yet no one moved an inch. The awkward silence lingered for a good ten seconds.

"I-It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I'm DistaniaAHH—! I bit my tongue! I'm Luna."

Luna had stood on her own, walked up to Al like nothing had happened, and proceeded to completely fumble her introduction. Regardless, she bowed to him with a smile. As her introduction concluded, the hall began buzzing again.

Save for a couple of stifled chuckles, no one made a comment on her entrance. Al also decided to stay quiet about her rather showy entrance and averted his gaze from her reddened forehead. But now, Al was faced with another dilemma: what could they possibly talk about? He still hadn't fully regained his composure.

"My, do allow me to show you around the garden. The three of us—Oh, Father. Is there an issue? Why are you grabbing my arm!? Wait, Al and I will—Al!" Cecilia had jumped to his aid, only to be dragged off by their father.

Unfortunately, her efforts had completely backfired.

"A-Anyway, to the garden we go!"

For some reason, Luna's cute—albeit forced—smile managed to calm Al's nerves. She took his hand… and stood there in complete confusion. The reason for that was simple: How would a princess from a foreign land who had just

arrived in Althos know her way to the garden?

“Ehehe. I’m sorry, I always act before I think.”

Always? Really? Well, considering your grand entrance, that doesn’t surprise me at all… He was ready to turn and say this to her face, ruining both their relationship and their chances of getting married in one fell swoop, but…

“I’m such a scatterbrain. Is there something stuck to my face?”

He completely lost himself in her carefree smile. A sense of guilt suddenly washed over him while Luna looked at him in confusion, unaware of his inner turmoil.

“No, there’s not. Come, the garden is this way.” Al turned around and led Luna toward the garden, hand in hand. He was incredibly nervous, but under different circumstances, he would’ve been happy to meet her. Yes, under different circumstances…

“Um… Have I displeased you somehow, Your Highness? Ah, it must’ve been my fall! Please forget about that! Nobody said anything, so I totally thought they didn’t see it!”

“What, do you think we’re all blind? Everyone saw you fall down the stairs!”

“Noooo! Lalala, I can’t hear you!” Luna covered her ears and shook her head in denial. Apparently, she blamed herself for Al’s sullen mood.

“Your introduction was entertaining, at least…” Feeling responsible for her trauma, he tried to cheer her up.

“Really? I’m glad you liked it!”

I never said that.

Her troubled expression bloomed into a gorgeous smile, perfectly complementing her adorable face.

“I hope things go smoothly from here on out!”

“Why?” Al asked, despite knowing. He followed up with, “Say, Luna. How do you feel about, you know, getting married? There’s nothing fun about me, and I must look as sad as an empty sack of potatoes…”

“I think you’re a really kind person!” Luna responded immediately, looking at Al as if she were an adoring fan. The only issue was that her response had nothing to do with the original question, leaving him very confused. She put her hand over her mouth and started giggling.

“I mean, you praised me! Despite how clumsy I am, you praised me without rolling your eyes the first time we met! I’ve never been praised by someone I just met before!”

“You can show your adorable smile all you want, but… Ah, actually, Father and my sister praised you even more! They’re much kinder than I am!” Al didn’t have any recollection of Cecilia praising her, but he wanted to form some sort of an excuse. Luna was surprised for a second, but her smile quickly returned.

“Really? That makes me happy. It seems like your sister won’t bully me even after we get married!” Luna said nonchalantly.

Despite how he may have looked, Al really did appreciate her feelings. It wasn’t as though he could say no to his father, considering he was being forced into a political marriage, but he was pleasantly surprised by his partner. She may have been a bit of a klutz, but she was kind and adorable. He would’ve been hard-pressed to speak badly of her, and that was exactly why he decided to reject her.

“No, we don’t have to get married. Honestly, I just lost my mother and brother. I don’t really feel like starting a relationship right now.” This seemed like the fairest way to answer her feelings. Hearing that, Luna pressed a finger to her lips and went deep into thought.

“Ah! Now I see why His Majesty chose me!”

What does that mean!? Al was starting to get irritated. He wanted to get this over with. If he couldn’t, falling for her wouldn’t be out of the question.

“I don’t really know what you’re getting at, but—”

“I also lost my parents half a year ago.”

“Wait, you too!?” Al asked, his eyes almost popping out of his skull.

“Yes. Assassins are commonplace at home.” To Al’s surprise, Luna’s smile

remained intact. Distania was an agrarian nation, but in contrast to its fertile land—or rather, precisely because of such riches—it was plagued with infighting over the royal inheritance. Rumors held that the crown had switched heads three times in just one month.

"I love my country, but I don't care about the throne. My entire family was slaughtered except for me and my sister, so instead of spending my life in the royal palace, I'd much rather spend my time here… with you, Your Highness." Luna looked up at Al and pleaded, fidgeting in place.

"Well, I mean… As I said, I'm overwhelmed with my mother's and brother's…" Al cut off his excuse when he realized how awful it sounded.

Wait, she's much worse off than me, yet she's smiling!? And then here I am, looking like a… Al hung his head when he realized just how much weaker he was as a person.

"Ehehe. I feel like I have to supplement what I said earlier about Your Highness being kind," Luna said to the sulking prince.

"'Supplement'? With what?" Al was ready to hear how weak, puny, and fragile he was, but…

"Your Highness is a kind person who holds the memories of his late family dear to this very day."

He lifted his head at those words, and the sight of Luna's radiant smile came into view.

"Why do you insist that I'm such a great person?" Al asked in a soft voice. As he did, he realized that Luna's incredible strength was pulling him out of his shell.

"Why, doesn't thinking so make things brighter?" Hearing her nonchalant answer, Al looked into her eyes. They were looking straight ahead, without a trace of lies or deceit.

I may have fallen in love. Al decided to keep that thought to himself. He didn't have any particular reason for doing so, yet he felt like Luna would disappear if he were to say it out loud.

“‘Your Highness’ sounds too stiff coming from my bride, so call me Al,” he flung his head to the side and muttered under his breath.

“Okay.” Luna was surprised, but she nodded bashfully. With that, their engagement was settled.

The days that followed were like something out of a fairy tale. He didn’t forget about the tragedy that had struck him, but her presence slowly helped him overcome his grief. At times when the pain outweighed his resolve, Luna was by his side to cry with him. Al realized he was falling for her more with every passing day. Riding the roaring wave of their feelings, they came up with a plan.

On the day their engagement was to be officially announced, they slipped out of the castle to exchange their vows in their own little private world. Later in life, Al realized that doing so was akin to playing house, but back then it was a deathly serious matter. When night finally fell, they made their move. They snuck through the castle and out into the courtyard, where the beloved roses belonging to Al’s late mother stood proudly in the night.

“I love this place.”

The moonlight gently danced on Luna’s face, making her smile more radiant than ever. They were completely alone in the serene garden that lacked any artificial light, though the guards stationed in the castle would rush to their aid in seconds if they screamed. Despite that, their secret outing felt like a real adventure. They snuck onto the lawn, clear of any trees obstructing their view, and laid down, gazing up at the moon.

“Hehe. We’re out here so late at night… We have to be careful not to yawn at the ceremony tomorrow!” Luna let out a cute chuckle. She had been much less reserved around Al since their engagement. At this point, even her occasional goofs felt adorable, leaving Al to wonder if he was wearing rose-tinted glasses.

“Especially you, Luna. You don’t want to let everyone know that you have the mouth of a wolf.”

“You meanie! My mouth isn’t that big!”

They leaned closer and whispered to each other in the tranquil garden. A few

days ago, his cheeks would've lit on fire, but he was already used to being close to her. Despite that, his heart still grew tight when he felt her warm breath caress his face.

Will I ever get used to this? That doesn't matter, I have to tell her how I feel.

Al made up his mind to tell Luna the words he failed to tell his mother and brother. He had to say it to the girl who helped him climb back from the abyss.

"Luna!" To help squeeze the words out, he suddenly sat upright and turned toward her.

"Y-Yes?" She probably felt that something was happening, so she sat up too and faced Al, staring right into his eyes. He cleared his throat and started talking.

"Umm, well… Luna, I…" He stopped to clear his throat again.

"Oh, fancy finding you little lovebirds here." Someone barged into the conversation from behind them before Al could finish his thought.

"Who's there!?"

The moment he jumped up to cover Luna, he was faced with three figures wearing black mantles and masks to blend into the night. They clearly weren't guards.

"Are you here to hurt Alnoa, the prince of Althos, and me, Luna of Distania?" Luna asked in a frigid voice, to which the three disguised men started cackling.

"What a lovely surprise… Now we don't have to sneak through the whole castle to kill you," the man in the middle whispered in a dull voice. He was built like any other person walking around the city, but an air of authority surrounded him. Al figured he was the leader of the group.

"Ohohoho! Would ya look at that! We've got a wannabe bodyguard here! You look real tough, lil' boy… 'cept your legs're trembling!" One of the lackeys, a tall and slender man, said with a wicked laugh. But he wasn't wrong; Al's legs were indeed trembling.

"Run for it if you want, kiddo. We're only here for the girl," a burly man added from the side.

“Whassat, Rukke? Don’tcha wanna see that brat struggle?”

In their eyes, Al was just some kid, not a member of the royal family.

“No. I don’t like meaningless massacre.”

“Bajil, listen to him. We don’t have a bounty on that brat.”

“Tch. Whatever, Dadan.”

The tall man called Bajil looked at them and signaled to Luna to come over, to which she shook her head. The next moment, Al started running as fast as he could.

“Gyahahaha! I’m so sorry for you, Your Majesty! That brave knight of yours was just a sheep all along!”

Luna stared at the cackling Bajil with stern eyes, but it didn’t accomplish anything.

“What a lame bluff. Well, we got rid of the nearby guards, but it’d be a pain if that brat called for reinforcements, so let’s get this—Gahhh!”

Bajil couldn’t finish his sentence. Al had only faked his escape, and while they were preoccupied with ridiculing him, he circled around them and rammed into the defenseless man’s back.

“Luna! Run!”

As Bajil collapsed on the ground, Al ran up to Luna and took her hand, but…

“Ah!”

He lost his footing and tumbled to the ground along with Luna.

“Don’t play the hero now, kiddy.”

A knife was sticking out of his leg.

“Dadan, we really should get rid of that brat, don’tcha think?”

Dadan nodded reluctantly.

“Nghhh… Luna, I’ll hold them off, so run when I give the signal!”

“But then you—”

“We don’t have time! Run!”

All he wanted to do was console the frightened, shaking girl, but they don’t have the time for that.

“I don’t want to just sit and watch as others give their lives for me!”

Al fought off his wobbliness and pulled the knife out of his leg.

“Aghhh!” Groaning in pain, he somehow overcame his desire to stay down and weep, and stood strong between the attackers and Luna.

“I’m begging you. Run and call for reinforcements! Go!”

Taking those words as the signal, Luna dashed off.

“Wait!” Bajil ran after her, but…

“You’re not going anywhere!”

He threw the knife at Rukke as a distraction and clung onto Bajil’s leg, then gathered all his strength into his jaw and bit down. Despite all his heroism, he was still just a ten-year-old boy fighting a full grown adult.

“Ouch! That hurts, you bastard!”

After a brief moment of pain, Bajil’s face was overtaken by rage, and he launched Al into the distance with his other leg. After taking the kick to his gut and having all the air forced out of his lungs, Al landed on the ground without so much as a whimper. Even after he threw up everything he ate that day, the pain wouldn’t subside. Yet deep down, he was happy. He’d managed to buy some time for Luna.

“You’re sorely mistaken if you think a little kid can stop us.”

But even that flash of happiness was quickly extinguished. He was too naïve. He raised his head, only to be faced with the darkest recesses of despair.

“L-Let me go!”

Luna was trapped in Dadan’s arms.

“Hah! How do you feel now, little hero of justice? Huh!?”

Al kept his eyes on Dadan, holding Luna, but he could see Bajil rotate the knife

in his hands to the side. The dazzling moonlight twinkled on the blade, giving it the appearance of a venomous snake in search of prey.

"I'll murder you and your entire family if you lay so much as a finger on Luna!" Blinded by rage, he taunted Dadan with words unfit for a prince. Of course, he didn't think it'd do anything, but he couldn't watch Luna get murdered in silence. His blood boiled as his anger overtook his whole being, slowly transforming into hatred.

"I won't let you…"

The assassins felt a chill run up their spines as they watched his anger grow, but they quickly regained their composure.

I'll witness the death of another loved one… The girl I love will die before my eyes… because of how powerless I am…

"Haha, don't worry. Your princess will be right behind you, so just calm down… and die!" Almost as if he could read Al's thoughts, Bajil aimed the knife at him and swung down.

Time slowed for Al. He could see Luna shouting and the blade slowly making its way toward him. It filled him with bloodlust.

"Do you desire power?" a voice whispered from deep within his mind.

I need power. I need to be unbeatable… I need power!

The moment he thought so, a mysterious presence filled his body. That something was not simply creepy or gross; it went far beyond that. He couldn't even scream in the face of such unknown horror.

"Hm. You shall prove useful in a couple years… Very well. I shall bestow you with indomitable power!" He sensed the presence bow its head and smile sadistically, though at that point, Al didn't make anything of it. He simply wanted enough power to defeat their assassins, enough power to save Luna.

I don't know who or what you are, but lend me your strength!

An incredible power began welling up inside his body. His mind could only focus on one thing. Power. POWER!

"Ahaha… Ahahahahahaha!" He cackled loudly against his own volition, filling

the whole garden with his voice.

“What now? Did this brat go mad with fear?” Al’s crazed cackling caused Bajil to waver and stop his knife in front of Al’s eyes. He wasn’t completely wrong, but the fear was theirs, not Al’s.

“Insolent whelp! Shut up and drop dead!” Bajil struck down once again, but Al caught his arm, and…

Crunch!

“Aughhhhh!” Bajil’s hand was now facing ninety degrees to the side.

“Ahaha! Big talk for someone who snaps like a twig, human!”

Is this my *voice?* A voice as deep as the ocean resounded in his ears.

“Are you… Al?” Even Luna doubted it was him, but Al answered without a delay.

“Don’t… worry… Luna! I’ll… protect… you!”

“Gahhh! My… My hand!”

Al shut the writhing man up with a kick to his stomach. He flew through the air for a couple of yards before tumbling down to the ground. Seeing that, Al smiled.

“Al… Ah! Behind you, Al!”

In the meantime, Rukke had silently circled around Al and skilfully stabbed him in the back. Or so he thought.

“Huh!?”

Al couldn’t see his face, but he knew that it must’ve been warped in agony due to the immense pain coming from his side. Rukke panicked and tapped his side, but there wasn’t anything there to tap. It had been blasted clean off by a pitch-black spell. Dadan watched his partner collapse on the ground.

“Tch, I’ll complete our mission—” Out of desperation, he was about to finish off the girl trapped in his arms, but…

“Looking for this?” Al appeared in front of him out of thin air. Dadan’s eyes flew open in terror at the sight of him—more accurately, at the sight of what he

was carrying. He was holding Dadan's entire left arm, hand still tightly gripped around the knife. Dadan didn't feel any pain, and there was no blood dripping from it. It was almost like an illusion, but unfortunately for him, it was real.

"Ah, I don't actually need this. Here, catch!" Al casually threw his arm on the ground. Seeing that, Dadan was overcome by sheer terror.

"My… Eek! Y-You monster!"

His experience as an assassin had nothing to do with his decision; his primal instinct itself was screaming for him to run. Based on that, he lobbed Luna forward in hopes of buying some time for himself. In theory, it should've worked perfectly, but he was in for a rude awakening.

"Gahhh! M-My legs…" His trusty legs, which should've propelled his escape, were no more. Instead, they were dangling from Al's hands.

"Ahaha. You didn't think you could escape so easily, did you?"

Al's sinister laugh filled the moonlit garden as he watched Dadan pathetically wriggle in his own muddy blood on the crimson lawn. He put Luna down and walked up to Dadan.

"Now then, how should you atone for terrorizing Luna?"

"Eeeeep!"

Dadan couldn't do anything except scream for his life. But then…

"Kyaaaaah! Intruders! Guards, there are intruders in the castle!" Lilicia shouted from somewhere nearby.

She must've felt the Demon King's power and rushed over. Back then, however, Al had no idea about the significance of her presence; he was just relieved that someone had finally come to his aid.

Realizing that help was on its way, Al's body gave in, and he collapsed while still wearing that sinister grin.

Ah! Is Luna okay? He immediately scanned the area for Luna, spotting her as she frantically ran away from danger. *She seems to be fine… Thank… goodness…*

After his first time experiencing the Demon King's power, Al lost

consciousness. He woke up three days later, after Luna had returned home. Naturally, Distania's king learned of what had transpired, but Alnoa's father managed to convince him to keep it a secret in exchange for a large sum of money. The engagement was called off, and Al spent the following days locked up in his room, unable to see anyone.

Even after he recovered, just hearing someone mention that country would trigger his dream, though it wouldn't happen often as of late. Maybe that was thanks to the new friends he made…



◆◆◆

“Al! Al, wake up!”

As Al awoke from his terrible nightmare, he sluggishly sat up in his bed. It had been a while since the last time he remembered those events from years ago, so it was almost like reliving the experience once again. Beside him, Kanon anxiously watched him get up.

“Thank goodness. I’m so sorry, I knew you were slow, but I figured you could dodge that.”

“Do you have to berate me the moment I get up?”

Waking up from a bad dream caused him to glare intensely at Kanon, but then he realized something.

“Ummm, don’t get me wrong, I appreciate that you were with me while I was out, but could you tell me what your hand is doing down there?”

He lowered his gaze to his crotch—more precisely, to Kanon’s hand resting on it.

“Huh!? Oh, I figured you’d get up earlier like this.”

“Something is gonna get up early, that’s for sure! Stop rubbing me, will you!?”

Al tried to shake Kanon’s hand off, but she didn’t care much for it, instead trying to divert his attention.

“Ah! I have terrible news, Al! The girls all went berserk after learning that you’d collapsed!”

“What now!?”

Fuming with rage, Al looked around, only to find the once-blooming fields transformed into a hellscape.

“Ahhhhh!”

A savage cry echoed across the land. Al turned his head toward the voice and watched as Sharon blasted multiple enemy soldiers away with ease.

“*Thunderstrike*! *Glacier*! Destroy them!”

Feena was unleashing a barrage of spells against the enemy troops. Some of them were blasted away along with a good chunk of the ground; others were frozen in place.

“Are you kidding me!? Why do you have to ruin this beautiful land!?”

The state of the land hurt him even more given that they had just finished repairing it after the battle a couple of days ago. Seeing the countless craters almost made him want to turn around and go back into the castle; he was in no mood to deal with it all.

“Anyway, Al! You have to stop Cecilia!” Kanon pulled Al closer and pointed ahead.

“Why? She’s out stripping the enemy general down to their underwear, isn’t she?”

It wasn’t clear if it was some sort of hobby for her or if she’d awoken to a new fetish, but it wasn’t Cecilia’s first time stripping someone down to their underwear. However, Al wasn’t aware of just how much Cecilia really cared for him, nor of the wrath one would incur for injuring her little brother. She was standing close to him, emanating an air of authority and power. Her usual smile was intact, but her cheeks were twitching nervously. Then, she opened her mouth.

“Sealed, nameless gods, hear my prayer! Curse the insolent savages who dared to kill my beloved Al with eternal suffering! May their souls be subjected to eternal torment!”

Her clear voice boomed across the battlefield, carrying a dangerous wish. An orb appeared in front of her, purple as the deadliest poison. Tormented shrieks swirled violently inside it, as if they were cursing every living thing in the universe.

“What the hell are you doing, Cecilia!? I’m alive, so stop that! Besides, what ‘nameless gods’!? Do you mean the devil himself!? Why does a priestess know how to form a contract with the devil!?” Al shouted while rushing up to her.

“Oh my, you’re alive! Thank goodness! I’m really happy, but could you give me a moment? I have to get rid of these foolish, cowardly brutes who dared to

lay a finger on you!”

“Well, they may be brutes, but I mean, look at that thing! It’s a ball of death and suffering!”

“Oh, but I’m a priestess. I would never take a life. This orb will simply rot their flesh, making them go insane.”

“That’s worse than death! Cancel it or something, please!”

“Oh my, if you say so. It’s a bit of a shame, though.”

She must’ve been relieved to see that Al wasn’t dead, so she canceled the spell. In the meantime, Al himself decided to ignore her last comment and merely turned toward Kanon.

“Kanon! Go bring Sharon back!”

“Whyyy? There are so many men there! It’s scary!”

“Wait, seriously?”

Al stared at Kanon in complete disbelief after hearing what Eshantel’s strongest warrior had just said. He considered going in himself, but approaching Sharon, who was surrounded by enemy soldiers, alone without the use of Heavenly Surge would be impossible.

“I know! In exchange for overcoming my deadly fear and bringing Sharon back, I want a kiss!” she proposed while Al was lost in thought.

“You know, this isn’t exactly the time for—”

“No, this is the perfect time to ask for compensation! Besides, it’s not like I’m asking for sex, so what’s with all the fuss? It’s just a kiss!”

Kanon was overly excited about her idea, while Al was stuck on how she had casually thrown in having sex as well. But while he was weighing his options, horrific screams kept coming from the battlefield. He didn’t believe a kiss from him would hold that much power, but he decided to go along with the idea.

“All right, but it’ll be a l-light kiss on your cheek!” he whispered bashfully, like a little boy who had just confessed to the first girl he ever fell in love with. But the moment he said that, Kanon disappeared from sight.

“I’ll bring her back! I swear it!” Kanon’s voice came from way outside the tent. She propelled herself far away with a single kick.

Why’s she so hyper all of a sudden?

Al watched her go, only to spot an ice sphere speed her way the moment she touched the ground. Kanon was ready, however, and sliced the ice sphere into pieces before it could do any damage. She looked at her best friend, the blue-haired Diva standing a bit further away.

“What are you doing, Feena!?” Al shouted.

“I heard your agreement. I won’t let Kanon get a head start on me.”

“What are you, a dog!?” Al poked fun at Feena, but he was too embarrassed to speak up, so his voice didn’t reach her.

“Oh my, that really is an issue we can’t ignore.”

“What do you mean you can’t ignore it!?”

“You’re not getting a head start either, Boing-Boing!” Feena said, completely ignoring her own hypocrisy as she conjured a fireball.

“Don’t call me Boing-Boing!” Kanon shouted while jumping backward to avoid the fireball, but…

Squish.

…she jumped right into two squishy mounds.

“Oh my. Cheaters must be punished.”

She had walked right into Cecilia’s breasts.

“Nh! I see, so it’s two-on-one!?”

Kanon jumped away from Cecilia and drew her sword.

“No. It’s a battle royale!”

Feena conjured her next spell and unleashed a barrage of fireballs, targeting both Kanon and Cecilia.

“Oh my, you wish to take me down with her?”

Cecilia, with a swing of her khakkhara, deployed an invisible wall that

protected her from the danger. Al shrugged as the fireballs repelled by Cecilia's ward flew toward the Imperial troops.

"Oh, your feeble magic can't break my—"

Shing!

Cecilia's unbreakable smile twitched for a second.

"Ahaha! Magic barriers are useless against physical attacks!"

Kanon slashed through the barrier with ease.

"Now's my chance! *Lightning Ball*!" Feena unleashed another spell when the ward went down.

"Whoa! That's dirtyyyYYYYY!"

The lightning ball struck Kanon's sword, sending electricity through the blade and into Kanon's body. All the while, the previously repelled spells hit the enemy army behind them.

"Oh my, that wasn't half bad. How about this!?" She deployed her wall once again and jumped toward Feena, prepared to attack.

"Nh! You almost got me!"

She barely managed to avoid Cecilia's Bind. Maybe this was all just a clever diversion on Cecilia's part, as she touched an attacking Imperial soldier after just missing Feena's arm.

"Graaah!" Terror struck the soldiers as they watched their comrade writhe in pain. Al was curious about the details of that Bind, but he was too afraid to ask.

"Ahaha! Very scary!"

Kanon unleashed a flurry of attacks on the petrified soldiers while shooting a remark toward Cecilia. Al wondered for a second if she really was androphobic, but his mind was pulled back to reality upon witnessing the new hellscape being created around him.

"How did this happen!? All I wanted from her was to bring Sharon back!"

"Why? Do you need me for something?" A familiar voice interrupted his complaints from behind. He turned around to see Sharon, holding an Imperial

soldier by the shoulder.

“He’s the enemy general. Jamka’s ambush was successful too; he should be back soon.”

Sharon slammed the enemy general into the ground. A short, skinny Altherian soldier who couldn’t have been older than fifteen walked up to them and tied the general’s hands with a rope.

“Huh? I don’t remember giving you any troops.”

“Don’t ask me, he just started following me around on his own!”

She took a troubled glance at the boy, and so did Al, who immediately understood everything from the boy’s longing stare. Sharon was not only an all-powerful Diva, but she was beautiful to boot—as long as her mouth was closed. Watching such a beauty gracefully dance across the battlefield would certainly make any young boy fall for her.

“What’s your name?”

“…”

Did you really just ignore me!? I’m your king, you know!

“Come on, tell us your name.”

“Lady Sharon, my name is Kotton!”

Yeah, okay, and you just spill everything to her.

The boy—and the smug look on Sharon’s face—was testing his patience.

“Lady Sharon, you saved me during the battle with Eshantel! I will forever be indebted to you!”

“I don’t remember saving you…” Sharon pressed a finger to her lips and began shuffling through her memories, but regardless of her answer, it was clear that Kotton was already enthralled by her.

“Well, whatever. Kotton, keep an eye on our luggage. We’ll be handing him to Cecilia later.”

“Wait, don’t you mean Jamka?” Jamka was the general of Althos’ army, so it made sense to Al that he could use the luggage as a bargaining chip.

“Of course not! If I give her an enemy leader, she’ll make me cookies!”

“Are you a child!?”

Al started to develop a serious headache as he watched Kotton pull the general into the tent. He couldn’t imagine being an accomplished general in the largest military power on the continent, only to be captured and be traded in for desserts.

“Anyway, Al! I know you’re the commander in chief, but don’t go out to the battlefield! You’re as weak as a kitten!” Sharon began berating him out of nowhere.

“Ugh! I wouldn’t have had to go out if you’d listened to my orders!” Even though Sharon’s words cut deep, he managed to squeeze out a comeback. Now, he just had to find a way out of this chaos. His dead-tired brain came up with a nefarious plan.

Wait! This could be the perfect chance to launch a counterattack! Don’t think you can always keep me down with your sharp tongue!

Feeling cheeky, Al gave Sharon a serious look.

“Wh-What!? I caught the enemy general, what else do you want from me?” Sharon’s instincts immediately sounded warning bells.

“Sharon. I have a way to stop this stupid fight in mere minutes, but… You know what? Never mind. You could never pull this off.” He elevated his act by furrowing his brow and shaking his head in apparent despair. Then, he peeked at Sharon.

“What!? Do you really think there’s something I can’t do? Come on, tell me your plan!”

She totally fell for it. Al raised his head and hid his grin with his hand.

“I don’t know. In all honesty, I don’t want to make you do this.”

Al looked away for a second to further fuel Sharon’s curiosity.

“There’s nothing I can’t do!”

Sharon was full of confidence. This was his chance. Al erased his smile and

looked Sharon deep in the eyes.

“You’d have to… do Heavenly Surge with me and use that power to stifle this brawl!” he said with a grave tone.

I won! I can already see you running away in shame! Don’t worry, I won’t laugh. Who am I kidding, of course I will!

Al was even prepared to take a slap from Sharon, in which case he’d have threatened to fondle her. It was truly a nefarious plan. He shook off the small pang of guilt he felt and looked at her. She was looking down in front of her, biting her lip with flushed cheeks. Al was certain of his victory…

“All right.”

“Huh?”

He hoped he’d misheard her, because if there was one outcome he wasn’t prepared for, it was this. But he had to realize that he brought this on himself, even though his original intentions lay elsewhere.

“I-It’s embarrassing, but if that’s what it takes to end this, I have to do what I have to do.”

Why do you have to be so reasonable today of all days!? How did I get into this mess!?”

His heart skipped a beat as Sharon bashfully stole a glance at him. While Al was wrestling with his feelings, Sharon slowly walked closer to him like a flustered, lovestruck girl, but her eyes were filled with determination.

Wait, are we going to do it right here? Right now?

His thoughts were interrupted by the gentle stroke of Sharon’s warm breath on his cheek. Her sweet, lady-like fragrance climbed its way up his nostrils and wrapped around his brain.

“Sharon…”

Sharon’s hug was gentle, like landing in a pillow fort. Yet for some reason, Al found it impossible to fight off the urge to stiffen his body. Feeling the tension in Al, Sharon gave in and relaxed her own body to let him take the lead. Her innocent yet sweet demeanor brought his thoughts to a complete standstill. He

was drawn to her lips as if under a spell…

“Oh my, what are you two doing?”

And just like that, the spell broke. Al’s sight was filled with his sister’s twitching smile, making him feel like he’d awoken from a sweet dream only to find himself in a nightmare.

“Greedy. Am I not enough for you?” Next to her stood the fuming Feena, cheeks redder than Sharon’s hair.

“That’s right! You promised me first!” Despite her smile, Kanon kept a hand on her sword.

“Ah… I-I’m going home!” Sharon was probably overcome with shame, so she rushed away. Al wanted to explain himself, but he couldn’t find anything that could calm the three sharp stares piercing him.

“Haah… I’m beat!”

Instead, he just gave up.

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A few hours after the Empire’s retreat, Al had somehow managed to slip away from the Divas’ wrath and back to the castle. He had two audiences to hold, so he was sitting in the throne room and doing some self-reflection while awaiting the arrival of his guests.

“Am I getting too ahead of myself? I mean, just recently, I kissed… Sharon, and groped her breasts; Feena, and groped her behind; Kanon, and did a bunch of other things with her; and now, I just pleaded for a kiss with Sharon. Well, technically I was about to activate Heavenly Surge, but still. Even for a king, it’s too daring to jump from one bride candidate to the other, especially considering that they’re the representatives of their respective countries.

“Haah… Could it be because of the Demon King’s influence on me? Maybe I’m just trying to shift the blame to someone else—more specifically, to the Demon King.”

His quiet monologue that even Jamka, the person standing right behind him, was oblivious to, was suddenly answered by someone.

“Oh my, Al. You have me all for yourself!”

He looked up to see Cecilia standing right in front of him.

“Ah! Cecilia, I meant… Wait, what is that!?” He was flustered for a second and accidentally raised his voice, but he quickly regained his composure.

“Oh my, you don’t like it?”



The reason for that was simple: his sister was wearing both a huge smile and a maid outfit.

“Oh my, according to Feena, your reaction was much different when she wore this for you.”

I mean, it was, but…

“That’s why we all decided to wear one!”

Al’s thoughts were interrupted by the Divas walking into the room, all wearing maid uniforms.

“Having so many Divas around you wouldn’t look good in front of guests,” Feena said.

“And how is having four maids around me any different!?” Al shut down her excuse while burying his face in his palms.

“Honestly… I don’t want to meet a Freiyan messenger,” Sharon said in a depressed tone.

“Then just don’t show up!” Al would have liked to tell her, but he hadn’t recovered from the previous debacle at the battlefield. All he could do was shamefully avert his gaze from her.

“Hahaha, why not! No one will realize that we’re Divas now!”

“I don’t think it’s that—”

“Your Majesty, the messenger from Freiya has arrived.” Upon hearing Lilicia’s voice through the door, the Divas split into two groups and stood on either side of the door. They were almost like real maids.

“Excuse me.”

While Al was busy appreciating their quick thinking, an authoritative voice spread through the hall. The Freiyan messenger, clad in crimson armor, entered the reception hall.

“Ahem… Come in.” Al quickly glared at the Divas in an attempt to hammer in that they couldn’t make a ruckus anymore. They had to stand there in silence until they finished.

Cecilia averted her gaze, confirming that Al's quiet warning was not very effective. Sharon, however, reacted much differently.

"Ran…bolg…" Her demeanor did a 180. Upon spotting the messenger, her eyes filled with fear instead of surprise. The messenger walked up to the throne at a brisk pace, wearing a brazen smile. In stark contrast to the messenger's orderly manners, his convoy looked like a couple of unorganized hoodlums who had just so happened upon some sets of crimson armor.

"Hmph. What a stuffy castle," the messenger whispered under his breath while respectfully bowing before Al.

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Highness. I am the first prince of Freiya, Ranbolg."

It was a textbook introduction, but Al still felt like he was being mocked somehow. He couldn't let himself get caught up on that fleeting feeling, though; he had something much more important to consider. He had figured the messenger would be a civil official or an army general at most, and Sharon was also dumbfounded by the arrival of the prince himself.

From what Al had heard about Ranbolg, his cruelty and ruthlessness were second only to the acting king. He was the leader of Freiya's infamous Knights of the First Order. They may have been called "knights", but there was nothing chivalrous about them. They were a bunch of bandits and mercenaries who were rumored to even ransack villages in their own country.

I would've locked Sharon up in her room if I knew he was coming, but I guess that's hindsight for you.

"It's an honor to welcome the prince of Freiya to our cozy little country." Al was almost nauseatingly flattering, but deep down, he wanted the prince to leave as soon as humanly possible.

"Please, I have been hoping to meet the Demon King—pardon, Your Majesty ever since I heard about your feats against the Empire."

In a turn of events, Al was the one who was nauseated. He wanted to respond in kind, but he was talking to the prince of Freiya. Angering him could very well lead to an all-out war, so he decided to let that comment slide.

“Either way, I simply had some time today to check on Freiya’s Diva, Sharon, after overseeing my eight thousand soldiers’ practice earlier this morning.”

For some reason, Ranbolg’s smile was getting on Al’s nerves.

“I have to commend you on your taste, Your Highness. I honestly didn’t expect to see the fiery Sharon wearing a maid uniform…” Ranbolg let out a hearty laugh and looked at Sharon teasingly. Sharon stiffened up and bashfully looked away, while Al started to get mad at his lascivious-looking stare.

“L-Let’s not get stuck on the details. May I ask what the purpose of your visit is?” He once again managed to stifle his urge to call Ranbolg out, and went with a diplomatic question. Ranbolg switched his gaze from Sharon to Al, who could feel the cynicism coming from his eyes.

“Honestly, I simply wanted to pay a visit. I wanted to see how our precious Diva, who has yet to come home despite being ordered to do so, is doing,” he said with a smile matching his cynical stare. That smile was enough to send chills up Sharon’s spine. She was visibly tense, and the color had drained from her face.

“I-I terribly sorry about that, but, umm…” He was desperately trying to come up with a smart response.

“Arghh!”

Al’s thoughts were interrupted by a scream.

“I’m Al’s wife! If you dare lay a finger on him, you’re dead!”

He looked over to see what the commotion was about. There, he saw a soldier, clad in a crimson armor and standing in front of Feena, with both his arms frozen solid.

“What are you doing, you stupid maid!? How dare you hurt me, a Freiyan knight!?”

The other knights drew their swords and glared at them.

“Hahaha! You can try if you want, but let me warn you: if you so much as step too close to Feena, I’ll chop you into pieces.” Kanon stepped in front of Feena and slid her hand down to the sheath of her sword. Behind her, Feena was

readying a spell. The serene throne room was about to be turned into a battlefield.

“Stop, you morons! Are you trying to embarrass me!?” Ranbolg’s voice boomed through the hall.

“Kanon, Feena! Don’t disturb the audience! Put your weapons down!”

They seemed to understand the situation, as they both stepped back.

“I am terribly sorry for my soldiers’ rude display.” Ranbolg bowed deeply. It seemed like their attack was just his entourage acting out of order. However…

“Listen to me! We’ll be staying here for a while, so don’t get rowdy on me!”

“Wait, you’re staying? What do you mean?”

Shouldn’t he consult me, the king, first about staying in this country?

“This unfortunate incident has soured the air, so I will take my leave now. We shall continue our discussion at a later date.”

Al wanted to clarify the situation, but after a quick bow, Ranbolg made his way toward the door. On his way, he approached Sharon and exchanged a few words with her before exiting. Al had no way of knowing what it was about, but it couldn’t have been idle chatter, considering that Sharon grew even paler than before. The Freiyan messenger may have left, but his sinister shadow still eclipsed the entire castle.

“Now, then…”

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Still stunned by the events, they hastily agreed to Ranbolg’s proposal. Al’s hands were tied; he was dealing with a prince who commanded an army of eight thousand. He couldn’t possibly have turned him down.

Given Ranbolg’s previous display, Al worried that he’d cause trouble if he were to interact with a normal maid, so he asked Lilicia to show him to his room. As a succubus, she should have been able to handle him well—maybe a bit *too* well—but Al hoped everything would go off without a hitch regardless.

After dealing with all that, all he wanted was a breather, but…

Sharon's been looking paler than the moon ever since she saw Ranbolg.

"Sharon, why don't you go and lie down for a bit?" he asked.

"Seriously!? You want to send me out while you have fun here with everyone else!?"

Al tried to be nice, but he was quickly shot down.

So annoying!

Despite his irritation with Sharon, Al was getting fidgety on his throne while thinking of his next guest. He couldn't wait to meet her again, yet at the same time, he wished they'd never meet again after how they separated the last time.

"To be honest, I'd rather not meet her while, well…"

He was surrounded by four Divas, all wearing maid uniforms. To any outsider, he must've seemed like a perverted king indulging in his fetishes behind the closed doors of the castle.

"I have to get them out of here…"

Asking them to leave the room had historically been proven to be ineffective, and asking them to leave him completely alone, which was what he really wanted, even more so.

"Pardon me. Distania's Diva has arrived," Lilicia said from the other side of the door.

"Huhhh!?" Al could barely decipher her words. After all, it had only been a few minutes since he asked her to guide Ranbolg to his room.

"You really didn't have to hurry so much…"

All Al wanted was more time; he wasn't prepared to welcome her at all. For a moment, he considered asking Lilicia why she was a living, breathing monkey's paw, but her answer simply would be "Because I'm a succubus", so he gave up on that desire. Instead, he settled with gazing sharply at the door, knowing deep down that she was giggling on the other side.

"Please—Ah!" Her carefree, happy voice was suddenly interrupted by the

door bursting open. Both Al and the Divas looked toward it, and his nostrils caught a familiar aroma.

“A-Al!”

Then, his ears were filled with a familiar voice. Al opened his eyes wide upon seeing his guest. Her hair was much longer than it had been the last time they’d met, but her strong, optimistic eyes hadn’t changed one bit.

“Al!” She called his name again and rushed toward him.

“Let her through!”

The Divas tried to stop her, but Al raised a hand to make sure no harm was done to her. He was relieved that they actually listened to him for once, but that blissful feeling was short-lived. He had nearly forgotten a crucial detail.

“Don’t run, Luna!” he shouted while jumping up from his throne. “You’ll—”

“Kyah!”

He was too late, making him wonder if one could outgrow their tardiness. Just like the first time they met, she tripped on her dress and tumbled to the floor.

Or so he had expected.

“Ahh!”

Luna’s spirited yell filled the room, pulling Al back to reality. There, he watched as she pulled her legs in and used the momentum of the fall to roll forward, stopping right in front of him. She hopped up from the ground and waved her index finger in front of him with a smug smile.

“Hehehe! Don’t think I’m the same ditzy girl I used to be! I’m improving every waking moment of my life!”

“Why are you working so hard on your landing!? If you want to improve, first make sure you don’t fall!” he said in a worried tone, but he was fighting hard to stifle his laughter.

It really is Luna!

Al’s heart was racing and his cheeks were heating up, all while he was trying his best to ignore the Divas’ sharp stares.

“I-I’m glad you’re here,” he said shyly. It had been nearly a decade since that incident, but that didn’t change the fact that Luna had almost been murdered, so it was surprising that she didn’t have a convoy guarding her.

“Thank you! I didn’t even get lost on the way!”

That’s not what I meant…

He decided to let her silly answer fly.

“Haah… I’m glad to see you haven’t changed.”

“Nope, sure haven’t.” Luna answered Al’s awkward look with a brimming smile. A pleasant warmth filled his heart; he almost felt like he had been teleported back to their very first meeting.

“Al, I’m happy to see that you two are on the same wavelength, but would you maybe mind introducing her to us anytime soon?” Sharon apparently didn’t enjoy being ignored, as she stared at them with judging eyes and crossed arms. Al honestly couldn’t decide whether it was nice that she was finally back to her usual self.

“P-Pleasure to meet you all, I’m Luna! Ah! I’m Distan—Aah! I bit my tongue again!” She timidly introduced herself to Sharon, biting her tongue in the process. However, there was proof of her strong-mindedness in her greeting. Not many people could take Sharon’s powerful glare head-on, much less with a smile, but Luna was doing just that.

“She’s a Diva, just like you, from Distania. Luna, you must be tired. Should we get you seated?” Al introduced her and tried to arrange some comfort for her while sitting back in his throne.

“Oh my, it’s rare for him to be so thoughtful.”

“She smells like a threat to our marriage.”

He heard trouble brewing between the other Divas, but he decided to let it slide.

“So, what brings you here?” Despite both of them holding important positions in their respective countries, Al didn’t feel like taking a formal tone with her.

“Ah! I totally forgot! Come in!” She completely ignored the question and

stretched her arm out toward the door. A girl was standing there, hiding in plain sight. She was like a miniature Luna, albeit with different hair and eye colors. She jogged up to Luna, while the Divas who'd been sending death stares toward Al calmed down.

It's almost as if she's trying to avoid revealing the reason for her visit, Al thought. But before he could take the time to ask Luna again…

"Al, this is Distania's Diva, as well as my personal bodyguard!"

"I see… What!?" He was completely stunned. *Isn't Luna Distania's Diva?* he screamed to himself.

Al gazed at the girl who was bashfully peeking out from behind Luna's back. Her dark-green hair was skillfully made into two braids, and her dark eyes were playfully darting around, checking every nook and cranny of the room. For all intents and purposes, she was like Luna ten years ago.

She's a little girl, through and through! He was suddenly overcome with disappointment, but not because he'd just lost his chance to do Heavenly Surge with Luna. At least, he hoped it wasn't that. *Anyway, is she going to be all right?*

"Wooow! She's adorable! Is she your daughter?"

"Oh my, look how much you've grown, Luna!"

"Hello there, I'm Kanon. Can you tell us your name? How old are you?"

"What an eyesore. One day, I'll bless Al with a much cuter daughter."

Oblivious to Al's inner turmoil, the Divas excitedly circled around their newest guests.

"Umm…"

"Saaya, listen to me. As part of the royalty, it's your duty to introduce yourself when visiting others. I won't do it for—Ah, shoot! I said your name!"



“Sis… Pleasure to meet you! I’m Distania’s Diva, Saaya. I turn six this year!” Saaya was a bit timid at first, but thanks to Luna’s help—or blunder—she managed to properly introduce herself. While everyone was charmed by little Saaya’s cute and proper introduction, Al alone was worried.

“Are you really a Diva?” He blurted all of a sudden, but he couldn’t really blame himself. *I mean, if she’s really a Diva, then…*

“What’s wrong with you!? She’s doing her best, okay!? Plus, she’s adorable!” Sharon, however, could and did blame him, and so did the others.

“Ah, wait! Don’t tell me you’re trying to bare your fangs at this little angel!?” Kanon jumped in front of Saaya, covering her. “Don’t you have any honor left!?”

“You’re one to talk, Boing-Boing.”

“Huh? Am I actually stuck with this ‘Boing-Boing’ nonsense!?”

Al somehow managed to survive Sharon’s fiery glare and let Kanon’s and Feena’s comedy routine slip past his ears, but…

“If you’re thinking about violating my precious little sister, I’d rather you die!” Luna delivered the killing blow.

“Wait, why do I have to drop dead now!? I just want to know if she’s actually a Diva!” Al reflexively tried to explain himself, but hearing his first love say she wanted him to die broke his heart. His last bastion of hope was that Luna was simply jealous of her sister.

“Oh my, you don’t have to worry, Al’s not into little girls. He’s all about the older sister-types!”

Before he realized what was going on, Cecilia appeared right next to him, grabbed his hand, and pushed it against her breasts.

“Ahhh! Hahhhn!”

“What are you doing!? If you activate—Huh? Wait, I’m wearing gloves.”

“Indeed. I simply enjoy your touch! Ahhhn!”

“What are you trying to do!?” Al tried to pull his hand away, but couldn’t.

“H-Hey, what do you think you’re doing in front of a child!?” Sharon quickly

covered Saaya's eyes.

"Cecilia, I expected more from you."

"Ahaha, so you like being dominated? I'll remember that!"

What the hell are you doing in the middle of an audience!? Is this how our Diva should act in front of another!? Haah, and she's not some random Diva, either. It's Luna, for crying out loud. She must be stunned to see this.

He took a glance at Luna. Rather than looking at them in shock or anger, she was simply trying to take in the unsightly scene unfolding before her. Her eyes crossed with Al's.

"Look at you go! I stepped out for a couple of years and you grew up to be a womanizer!" She said with a huge smile. Somehow, hearing her say those words hurt Al more than being bashed in the head by a rock.

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"I didn't feel like eating at all…" Al whispered to himself on the way back to his room. It was a standard dinner in the standard dining room. At least, it should've been. As per usual, Al's sides were taken by Sharon and Feena, and one seat further sat Cecilia and Kanon. Jamka and Brusch were also at the table, which rounded out their usual dinner lineup.

Now, usually, when a diplomat or anyone of the sort visited them, they would set up a wonderful banquet to honor their guests. That didn't happen. Instead, both Luna and Saaya joined them for dinner, while Ranbolg respectfully declined attending a banquet, opting to eat dinner in his room alone. Luna's reasoning was that it'd be boring for them to eat alone after coming all the way to Althos, so she'd most definitely prefer joining Al and the rest.

With all the guests officially rejecting the banquet, they moved to the usual dining hall along with Luna and Saaya. There was even more banter at the table than usual, which exhausted not only the guests, but Al himself too.

"I'm so tired. I'm ready to hit the sack!" Al had been feeling much better lately. He was rarely weighed down by his worries and regrets. "Is it because I'm getting used to this lifestyle?"

I’m not sure if that’s good or not…

“Al.”

“Who’s there?” Normally, he’d sense someone approaching him, but he was caught completely off guard. He figured he was too tired, but he couldn’t cut the conversation short because of that. After all, the one calling out for him was Luna herself. “Y-Yes? Do you…”

Unfortunately, the only two options in his repertoire were “Do you want more food?” and “Do you want me to fondle you more? Because that’s not happening.” Realizing that, Al slowly sank into an existential crisis, which he had no time for. His mind switched gears, shuffling through every combination of words he could think of in an attempt to string together a sentence that didn’t make him look like a fool in front of Luna.

“Y-You… want to see town tomorrow?” Forget about the stuttering, that was barely a sentence! And yet, Luna was smiling.

“I would love to! Let’s meet tomorrow morning at the gate!”

She didn’t seem to care about the absolute disaster of the audience with Al, nor about the mundane dinner. She simply bowed before him, turned around and ran toward her room.

“Watch out! Don’t trip!” He somehow managed to squeeze out some words of concern.

Wait, did I just invite her on a date? Al wasn’t sure if he should lament his limited vocabulary or jump for joy in anticipation of their date.

“I’m going on a date… with Luna…” He didn’t want to let anyone see him smiling so happily, so he hid it with his hands and hurried to his room.

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The next day, Al awoke to a surprisingly chilly morning despite summertime being so near. But he didn’t have time to complain. Last night, he had blasted through all the paperwork he’d had to do for the next day before going to sleep. After waking up, he went out to train with Sharon, then took a bath. To put it simply: he was sleepy, but he was ready!

“Al!”

Just as he was about to reach their meeting point—the gates—he heard someone call out to him. That someone was none other than…

“Luna!”

Al turned around to see Luna run toward him with her hair waving in the gentle morning breeze, only to watch her fall again. But using the same skill she displayed in the throne room, she pulled off a beautiful somersault and jumped up to her feet, safe and sound. Al had to give it to her, it was a feat of some sort.

“You got yourself all dirty before we even left! What are you gonna do now!?”

“Th-This will be my disguise!” she said with a lively smile, dusting herself off.

Well, that’s Luna for you, Al thought to himself.

“Are you ready?”

“Yep, let’s go!”

As they set out for town, Al felt her warm, gentle hand wrap around his.

Ah, crap! Heavenly—

It was dangerous to hold hands with a Diva without gloves on, so he tried his best to untangle their hands, but…

“Umm, I don’t want to trip, so…” The flushed girl beside him was hanging her head.

I guess she’s not a Diva after all. It’s a bit of a letdown, but it also means I get to hold hands with her!

All in all, it was a happy coincidence.

“Where should we start?” Luna’s gorgeous, brimming smile practically filled his peripheral vision. Al basked in her radiance.

“Al, Al! Where are you taking me next?” she asked in the middle of town while looking up at him. Their tour—or date, depending on how you looked at it—was going surprisingly smoothly. They had stuck together and walked through the city hand in hand, doing some shopping at general stores and stopping to

eat at stalls. The sun had already started its slow dive from the sky, but he was still feeling calm and collected.

I managed to read her just fine, though I'll have to do some work on my style. But maybe my social skills have improved thanks to them.

That calmness lulled him into a false sense of security as his mind ventured, thinking about how grateful he was to the girls. Suddenly, he felt an attack approaching, followed by a small thud.

"Hm? What is it?"

The ever-smiling girl was pouting, lightly hitting Al's chest.

"Al, were you just… No, not just now. I know you've been thinking about other girls all day!"

Okay, she's a Diva, confirmed. Never mind, I'm jumping to conclusions. The more likely scenario is that I'm too easy to read, but it's fine! I'm already a master at dealing with women!

He mustered all his baseless confidence, turned toward Luna with a smile, and…

"Are you hungry?"

…ran straight into a wall.

"What!? Al, either get serious, or get on your knees and beg for my forgiveness. Your choice. What does food have anything to do with this!?"

He had made one crucial miscalculation: offering food was only a valid strategy against Sharon.

"I-I mean, isn't begging for forgiveness a bit too much?" He wanted to play it off with a forced smile, but he only made the situation worse.

"I don't get it…" she whispered under her breath. Al looked at her for explanation.

"I don't get you!"

Luna stared back at him before burying her face into his chest.

Huh? It's me who doesn't get what's going on! Al was completely lost.

“Ever since the day those assassins attacked us, and I had to leave you, breaking my promise…”

He couldn’t even look her in the eyes in search of a hint.

“I worked hard to be able to stand before you and apologize… And to say ‘thank you’ with a clear voice and a big, honest smile.”

Wait, what’s she talking about?

“All this time, I’ve wanted to thank you for protecting me back then, but life got in my way. I couldn’t return until I became a princess, but when I finally crossed the border, I was so happy and determined. Then I stepped into the castle and saw you being happy and enjoying yourself with those gorgeous Divas, and I…”

“Wait, what do you mean you wanted to thank me? Didn’t you run away, cowering in fear?” Their recollections of the events were grossly different. Al grabbed Luna’s shoulders and pulled her back a bit so he could see her face.

“‘Cowering in fear’? What? I rushed back for bandages after you protected me, but by the time I got back, you were nowhere to be found. Then I heard that our engagement was canceled.” Tears were welling up in her eyes.

“Wait a second! Then it wasn’t you who broke the engagement because you found out I was the vessel of the Demon King?”

“What? No, I heard you ran away because I had a bounty on my head.”

He couldn’t pinpoint why this had happened, but one thing was for sure…

“Could it be that we’ve misunderstood each other this whole time?”

“It seems that way. If only I’d realized it sooner.” She hung her head, blood rushing to her cheeks.

Give me back the ten years my crippling social anxiety robbed from me! Al wanted to scream, but he knew it wasn’t Luna’s fault. Plus…

“We were…” Al began.

“Indeed. We were forced apart due to a misunderstanding.” Luna finished his thought.

If not for that misunderstanding, we might have…

They stood in a quiet, peaceful corner of the bustling town, looking at each other as the orange rays of the setting sun washed their cheeks.

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"Haah…" Al was busy working in his office, but suddenly he stopped in his tracks, his mouth curling into a smile. He and Luna hadn't talked much on their way back from town or during dinner, yet he felt like his feelings had finally reached her. No, rather, he knew they had. He… hoped he knew it!

"I'm sure Luna—"

Knock, knock.

Hearing the sudden sound, he quickly wiped the smile from his face.

"Oh my! Your wonderful, loving sister will be making you tea! Now just…" Cecilia flung the door open without waiting for an answer. After waltzing into the room, she put the tea set down while Al looked at her in complete bewilderment.

"Oh my, Al, no! That will be your after-tea snack!"

What are you talking about!? What after-tea snack!?

She locked the door behind her and fortified it further with a spell.

"Oh my, I finally borrowed it from Feena, but it feels a bit wrong."

Oh, okay, so it's from Feena… That makes sense. Al finally understood where Cecilia's outfit had come from. She was wearing bunny ears and revealing clothes—if they could even be called clothes—that didn't leave much to the imagination. Her shoulders and thighs were exposed for everyone to see, and her voluptuous breasts were on the brink of slipping out from her costume.

"Aren't these from our neighbors to the west—"

"Exactly! This is a bunny suit!" She excitedly interrupted Al and pushed her chest out. In the next moment…

Pop!

"Oh my!"

Unable to shoulder the immense pressure that came with its new position, the top button violently shot off her costume, releasing her bountiful breasts into the wild. Al quickly turned away, but he accidentally caught a glimpse.

“Didn’t you borrow that from Feena? What are you going to do about that?”

“It’s fine, I’ll apologize later.”

“Are you sure that’ll smooth things over?”

While trying to explore the possible solutions to this unfortunate situation, Al took his coat off and held it out to Cecilia, simultaneously doing his best to avoid being hypnotized by her swaying breasts.

“Just as expected of my lovely, kind-hearted little brother. Now, let’s have tea!”

Cecilia didn’t even flinch after what had happened, and started to prepare the tea. Despite her being almost bare-chested, she handled the tea set with the utmost care. Al wondered if he should commend her on being so careful and absorbed in tea-brewing considering the less-than-ideal circumstances.

“Oh my, this is a very special tea. I don’t want to spill even a single drop of it,” Cecilia said with a smile, answering Al’s innermost thoughts.

Am I really that transparent?

Al sat on the sofa across from Cecilia. He figured he’d quietly wait until she was done, since she wouldn’t step away from brewing the tea even if there was an emergency. That was easier said than done with Cecilia’s ripe melons in full view, though. She may have had his jacket on, but it didn’t cover much.

“Oh my, here you go.”

His eyes were glued to her breasts rather than the teacup.

Crap! Crap!

He grabbed the cup and gulped down the tea in a desperate attempt to divert his attention from Cecilia’s chest. In doing so, he walked straight into Cecilia’s trap.

“Hm? Cecilia, isn’t this much sweeter than usual?”

Thanks to his sister's hobby, he was equipped with enough knowledge to distinguish between good tea and bad.

"Oh my, you can feel it?" Cecilia said with a smile. "You seemed tired today, so I added a secret ingredient."

Normally, Al would've appreciated Cecilia's consideration. Normally.

"Don't you feel uncomfortable with your front in full view?"

Asking nonchalantly, he checked his temperature since he could feel blood rushing to his head. Cecilia's room wasn't exactly close to Al's, and the corridors were full of maids working and guards patrolling the castle at night. Althos may not have been a wealthy country, but their castle was nothing to sneeze at. It rivaled any other royal castle on the continent in sheer size.

"Oh my, worry not, my lovely little brother. I will not show my nude skin to anyone except you! I will simply put anyone I happen to come across to sleep from the shadows!"

"Why do you have to come up with this elaborate plan to knock our staff out!? Just change into something else!" That being said, Cecilia was loved by everyone. The staff would probably forgive her that much. "I'm more worried about our people than—"

Hic!

Al was starting to feel a bit dizzy, and his thoughts were getting hazy.

"Cecilia. Don't tell me the secret ingredient is…"

"It's exactly what you think it is. I put in just a dash of the highest quality Dingo brandy."

"Just a dash?"

"Indeed. About a one-to-one ratio."

"That's hardly a dash!"

Al fancied himself a glass of liquor every once in a while, but Dingo brandies were known for their sweet taste and unusually high alcohol content. He'd just chugged half a cup of that.

“Cecilia. What are you planning?” he asked while desperately trying to assess his position in his wildly-spinning world.

“Oh my, w-well, don’t misunderstand. It’s not because I’m worried you’re getting too close to Feena and Sharon, or because Luna is here too!”

“Why are you acting all whishy-whashy all of a shudden!? And ish not eben cute when youshd do it!” He managed to finish his comeback despite his slurred speech.

“Oh my, are you drunk? Let me help you sober up!”

She took out a small bottle with white liquid swimming inside it. Unsure if she was going to help him sober up or get him even drunker, Al glared at her.

“Whas’ya doin’?”

He was starting to question if he was hallucinating from the excessive amount of alcohol in his blood.

“Oh my, I couldn’t find a proper cup, so I’ll use this instead.” Cecilia tilted her head, asking with her eyes if there was a problem with what she was doing.

There was a problem. Two of them, in fact, and they were huge. Her voluptuous breasts had been dangling freely since the button incident. She squeezed them together with her hand and poured the white liquid between them.

“Traditionally, there’s a better way to consume this, but that would lead to a hairy situation.”

What could be better than drinking it from a small pond between your boobs!? And how could things get even hairier than this!?

Unfortunately, his comebacks wouldn’t help him, so he decided to take a safer route and summoned his softest voice.

“Sheshilia. I’m shupher dhupher habby for your conshiderashion, bwut lemme dwink it fhom a cub!”

“You can’t do that! Those cups are for tea, not medicine!” He was instantly shot down with what felt like a made-up rule, but there was nothing Al could do. Cecilia wouldn’t budge an inch when it came to tea.

“Now, please enjoy it!” she said while pushing her huge melons closer to him.

I have to sober up and make a run for it, but I need that medicine to do that. The gears were spinning in his head. Even if he decided to run for it, the moment he stood up he’d get smooshed by her massive bosom. *I can tumble over the sofa and run!*

Tumbling over a sofa wasn’t the safest thing to do drunk, but he didn’t have much choice. He collected all his remaining focus, and— “Oh my, where do you think you’re going?” Cecilia caught him by the head before he could enact his master plan, smooshing it between her breasts. All the pent-up medicine spilled out from the gentle, lovely pond they’d made and rained down on Al. At the very least, it helped his drunkenness a little bit.

“Oh my, look at you. You’re drenched! It’s okay, I’ll help you change.”

She didn’t reach out to Al’s drenched shirt. Instead, she slid her hands down to his pants.

“What are you doing with my pants, Cecilia?”

“Oh my, would you rather I did it with my mouth, you needy little boy?”

“I never said that!” He reached out to push Cecilia off of himself so he could see, but all he accomplished was groping her breasts.

“Ahhn≡ I had no idea you liked boobs this much!”

“What’s gotten into you!? Why are you so pushy today!? You’re kinda scary!”

“S-Scary…” Cecilia’s whole body twitched, and her movements stopped upon hearing Al’s desperate plea.

“Oh my, I won’t let that break me today!” she declared, pushing her chest toward Al with even more vigor than before. Her usual, carefree smile seemed much more earnest as she desperately chased after Al with her sticky, shimmering breasts.

“What the hell is going on with you today!?”

Thanks to the medicine being absorbed through his skin, his drunkenness had mostly faded. In return, however, something else has started to well up.

“Does it really matter!? We’ll be doing Heavenly Surge whether you like it or not!”

“Stop ignoring me!”

This is bad. She’s dead-set on having her way with me.

Cecilia suddenly broke eye contact with him.

“Buuut, disregarding Sharon and Feena, or, well, not disregarding them, but… Whatever, you even did Heavenly Surge with Kanon, and right after she entered the country! I’m your sister, so why won’t you…?” she said with a cutesy voice, but that didn’t have much effect on Al. Or, more accurately, he had no idea how she came to that conclusion.

“Stooop! Even if it’s for sealing the Demon King, I can’t—!” Perhaps due to still being slightly tipsy, his tongue slipped.

It’s okay, she never listens to me anyway.

“Is Heavenly Surge for sealing the Demon King?”

Of course she’d listen to me at the worst possible time! And she got it all nice and clear!

“Oh, no, it was just a figure of speech…”

Her smile suddenly vanished, leaving only doubt on her face. Al caved under the pressure and gave the first excuse that came to his mind.

“Unfortunately, Al, I have something important to attend to. We shall continue your treatment another day.”

I don’t think it’s unfortunate at all, though!

She flashed a small smile, got off Al, and headed toward the door. Al felt like he was left hanging, but at least the crisis has been averted.

“Guess I’ll change and go to sleep…”

He was concerned about Cecilia’s drastic mood change, but as the world around him was still spinning slightly, he decided to leave that issue for another day.

Chapter Two: Chaos and Severance

“Close the gates! Don’t go outside!” Jamka’s angry shout reverberated through the quiet castle.

“Seriously? The sun’s not even up yet, Jamka!”

Al’s head was pounding. For the first time in his life, he was experiencing the hell that was a hangover. As he sluggishly sat up, he heard a familiar voice coming from nearby.

“He really is discourteous. Al, I will wake you up by whispering sweet nothings into your ear, so go back to sleep.”

“Oh, that’d be great… Wait, what the hell are you doing here again!?” He was surprised how much he’d gotten used to seeing Feena first thing in the morning.

“It was cold last night. Are you mad?” She looked up at Al with pleading eyes while snuggling her sheets. Not only had the way she phrased things changed since their campaign to save Eshantel, but her personality had as well. She’d become much more cutesy and clingy. She stopped making excuses and became much more honest in her desire to be pampered by Al.

She did tell me she wants me to stay by her side…

Feena sneaking into his room was an issue, but now that Al had gotten a glance at her past, he couldn’t be so blunt with her. He crossed his arms and went deep into thought.

“Al, why don’t you get startled anymore?” she asked while peeking out from under the sheets.

“I mean, you get used to things if they happen every single day.” He told the boring truth, but Feena seemed to have read more into it, as she jumped up from her bed.

“Got used to it. It lost all its flavor. It got boring. Annoying. Despised.” She incoherently chained some words together while slowly approaching Al. Only then did he finally realize what she was wearing.

“Feena, are you…”

“Ah! Shoot!” Flustered, she tried to hide herself with her arms, but his eyes were glued to her. He’d seen her body countless times lately, so he figured it wouldn’t have such a huge effect on him, but it did.

She was wearing a baggy pull-over that covered even the tip of her fingers and had a few tiny food stains. Her thick pants were pulled up neatly, making sure that even her waist wouldn’t feel cold. Indeed, she was, for the first time since they’d gotten to know each other, wearing proper—albeit a bit oversized—pajamas.



“Why are you wearing…”

Her cheeks were completely flushed and her eyes were restlessly darting all over the room.

“Someone stole the clothes I wanted to bewitch you with last night, so I had no other choice.”

She hung her head, as if Al seeing her pajamas was somehow humiliating.

Why is she always teasing me with those skimpy clothes, anyway!? She has a great figure, so wearing something cute like this makes her a thousand times more adorable! I have to do something about this.

“Well, y’know, it’s refreshing to see you wearing normal pajamas for once. And you look really cute in them.” He decided to share his honest thoughts about the situation.

“For real?” His strategy was super effective; Feena’s face lit up with excitement. “In that case, I’ll make myself comfy in my pajamas!”

Al was relieved. At long last, he could be sure his mornings wouldn’t start with the birds chirping outside, the gentle sunlight shining through his window, and a half-naked girl terrorizing him.

“But I have to avoid being dull. I’ll only wear them occasionally.”

Or not. But at the very least, this morning would be— Knock, knock, knock!

“Al, are you okay!? Answer the door if you’re fine!”

Things had been rowdy outside since earlier, and now Kanon was bashing on the door. Something didn’t sit right with Al.

Wait, I don’t think I locked the door last night…

It was certainly careless of him, but he hadn’t had the mental fortitude to do so.

“I did! With three spells, nonetheless! Your door is completely unbreakable now!” Feena answered his inner conundrum in an almost bragging tone.

“Thanks, I guess, but why did you go to such lengths?”

“I didn’t want anyone to disturb us if you fancied some more time in bed.”

“What do you—”

Bwham!

He was interrupted by a loud roar.

“Ahaha! Al, are you okay?”

Kanon, the Inquisitor of Eshantel and a Diva, was peeking into the room through a massive hole in the wall.

“Ahhh. You know, no matter what I tried, I couldn’t cut through the spell on the door. Lucky for me, the wall was fair ga— Whoa!” She pulled her head back to the other side of the wall just in time to avoid the fireball aiming right at her head.

“Stop disturbing me, Boing-Boing!”

The source of it was, of course, Feena.

“Hey, tone it down! She could’ve gotten hurt…”

“Don’t worry—Ouchie!” Feena sat proudly, surrounded by countless magic circles, until Al gave her a whack to the head.

“I do worry! You’re destroying my room!”

“Are you taking Kanon’s side?”

“I’m not taking sides! I just don’t want my room blown to smithereens!”

There was already a hole in the wall with burn marks around it.

“Kanon! She won’t attack you again, so come out! Or, come in?”

“Hmph!” Feena pouted, and Kanon carefully peeked inside.

“It’s unruly out there… Did something happen?” Al asked, ignoring the unruliness in his own room.

“Ah, right!” she said while climbing through the hole. “An intruder was discovered at the treasury! Jamka closed the castle off and is now patrolling the area with the guards. I was close by, so I came to make sure you were safe!”

“There’s a thief!? What are the damages!?”

“Dunno. I didn’t ask,” she shrugged.

“I’m going to meet up with Jamka. You two…”

“It’s a wife’s duty to stay by her husband’s side.”

“Ahaha, I want to go too!”

“We don’t need weaklings!”

“‘Weakling’? That hurts more than Boing-Boing.”

Naturally, they completely ignored Al, who was in a much tighter bind than they realized. Even though they were close, Feena and Kanon were guests of the state. If all possible, he would’ve preferred that they didn’t see his nation getting robbed, but he couldn’t afford to waste time, either.

“All right, you can come, but promise me you’ll stay calm.” He gave a probably pointless warning before leaving the room through the destroyed wall.

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“Ah, Al! I’m glad you’re safe.”

On his way to the treasury, Al ran into Jamka, who was making his way to Al’s room. He took a disapproving look at the two Divas behind Al, which was completely understandable from the head of the guards.

“Tch. Walking around at the crack of dawn, sandwiched between two beauties. Why? Why am I…”

Never mind. He was just jealous.

“Was anything stolen?” Al didn’t have the capacity to deal with Jamka’s self-loathing, so he jumped straight to the matter at hand.

“Right. A thief has entered the treasury. We found traces of them trying to enter the late king’s study and the underground chambers as well.”

“My father’s study and the chambers…” That was some really scary news for Al. His father’s study was one thing, but someone had tried to enter the underground chambers.

“It wasn’t me!”

“Ah!” He felt a warm breath on his ears.

“Lilicia!? Where did you come from!?”

“I felt a wave of doubt crash over me,” Lilicia answered with a straight face.

“Can you blame me?” Al asked. “You’re the only one who knows about the chambers.”

“Sorry, but I wouldn’t be discovered by the guards,” she said proudly. Al found that to be a pretty convincing—albeit disturbing—alibi.

“Then who could’ve done such a thing?”

“I don’t know. Your castle, your problem… is what I’d like to say, but there were traces of some intriguing magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yes. There were minuscule traces of ominous magic resembling that used by demons. Well, maybe I was just seeing things.”

“No, no, we’re not shrugging this off like that.”

It was safe to assume that there were other succubi currently active in the world besides Lilicia. Their goal was unclear, however, and Lilicia probably wasn’t keen on sharing anything else, as she was working to revive the Demon King.

“Are you okay? Did you get turned on?” asked Lilicia, trying to seduce Al with her eyes as he stared at her absentmindedly.

“Don’t flirt with other girls in front of your wife, Al.”

“Tch, how inconsiderate.”

Both Feena and Sharon, who had appeared out of thin air, were shooting scornful gazes at him.

“I’m not flirting with anyone!”

“Whatever, let’s focus on the incident now. Do you have any idea who the culprit could be?” Sharon completely ignored his excuse and cut to the chase.

She must be doing it on purpose! Al screamed to himself.

“Nh! My Diva senses are tingling! There has been a crime nearby!” Kanon, striking a pose, assessed the situation with her incredible intuition.

“Really? Wow, thank you very much. I was under the assumption that ROBBERY WAS COMPLETELY LEGAL!”

“Oh my, shall we help you with the investigation?”

“When did you get here, Cecilia!? And why are you trying to complicate things the moment you open your mouth!?”

Oh, okay, now I see. This will be one of those days when I can’t get anything done. Al’s daily descent into the depths of despair had begun.

“It’s okay, just calm down. I will find the culprit in a heartbeat!” Feena said with a delightful smile—and to the complete dismay of Al.

“No, listen to me. I don’t need—”

“Then let’s have a contest to see who can catch the culprit first!” Sharon suggested.

“Yaaay!”

The Divas scattered in every direction.

“I’ll go warn our investigators that a storm is coming their way.” Jamka patted Al’s shoulder and left.

“Oh, for the love of… Why doesn’t anyone in this damn castle listen to me!?” Al whispered while looking up at the ceiling of the lonely corridor.

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“Shall we assess the situation, Watson?”

“Who are you calling Watson, Detective Boing-Boing?”

“Stop with the Boing-Boing! You’re ruining the atmosphere, Feena!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Detective Nutjob. Shouldn’t you be at the scene if you want to assess the situation?”

“I’m not a nutjob! That, and I just ran away from there; going back would look so lame!”

“This is hopeless. We won’t catch the culprit by focusing on keeping up appearances.” Feena put her finger against her temple and tilted her head back and forth. “She’s dumb as a brick. I should’ve partnered up with someone else.”

“That’s not something you say out loud!” Kanon sobbed. “Fine, then. Did *you* figure out who the culprit is?”

“Of course.”

“Wait, you did!?” Kanon shouted in surprise.

“Okay, you dumbo, tell me: who came to this country right before the incident?”

“Umm, Luna and—”

“Exactly! The culprit is Luna!”

“Wait, what about Ranbolg?”

“He didn’t flirt with Al.”

“How is that even slightly related?”

“Doesn’t matter. The culprit is Luna. Case closed.”

“That’s not even a proper hypothesis; it’s just your jealousy talking!”

“Do you have an issue with it?”

“N-No, I don’t.” Seeing Feena scowl at her, Kanon couldn’t do anything but cave under the immense pressure.

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“We rushed off in pursuit of the phantom thief, but who exactly are we looking for?” Sharon asked, glancing at Cecilia.

“Are you okay?” Ever since appearing at the treasury, her usual carefree smile was nowhere to be found, and she wouldn’t react to anything Sharon did. It was as if she was lost in her own little world. “Earth to Cecilia! Are you there!? Brother-lover, hebeph—Mghh!”

“Oh my, why are you calling me names? I’m not deaf, I was simply thinking,” she said, pinching Sharon’s cheeks without giving her time to react.

Damn, she's one fast priestess!

"Oh my, it's all thanks to the power of love!" Cecilia said with a teasing smile, as if she could read Sharon's mind.

"Phew. I'm glagh you'we shmihlink aghain."

"Oh my, I can't understand a word you're saying."

She brushed away Cecilia's hand.

"Because you've been pinching my cheeks! I said, 'I'm glad you're smiling again'!"

"I… Oh my, I'm terribly sorry. Thank you for looking out for me." Cecilia was taken aback for a moment, but she quickly collected herself and bowed to Sharon.

"I mean, I wasn't really looking out for you or anything…"

"Oh my, are you doing that splishy-splashy thing again?"

"It's 'wishy-washy', not 'splishy-splashy'! And I'm not wishy-washy!" Cecilia smiled coyly as Sharon turned away from her.

"Oh my," she exclaimed. "I just remembered that I wanted to ask you something."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"What was it like to perform Heavenly Surge with my lovely little brother?" Cecilia's face stiffened as she asked.

"Pfffwh! Wh-Where did that come from!?" Sharon's cheeks burned bright red—a stark contrast to Cecilia's ice-cold eyes.

"I simply thought it would be helpful to know."

"Wh-What!? Why!? I mean, I don't really care what you do with your brother, just leave me out of it!" Sharon wrapped her arms around herself as she spoke.

Oh my, she has become much more feminine since she arrived here, Cecilia thought, smiling as she watched Sharon blush. However, her biggest flaw was about to be revealed: her undying love for her little brother.

“Oh my. To think that those two flabs of fat rubbed up against my precious Al!” Her jealousy consumed her soul.

“Hey, that was uncalled for! Besides, yours are bigger!”

“That is indeed true. They’re full of my love for Al, so they’ll only grow as my insatiable love grows toward him!”

“I’m glad you’re so confident in your looks, but what do you mean they’ll grow!?” Sharon was staring Cecilia directly in the breasts.

“Shall we get back to the topic at hand? I want a detailed, vivid recollection of the event.”

“Why won’t you leave me alone!?” Sensing danger, Sharon attempted to flee the scene.

“Oh my, please wait! I simply wish to have a nice, calm discussion!” Cecilia chased after her, wearing an ominous smile. They’d completely forgotten about Heavenly Surge or the intruder; their minds were set on the grandiose game of tag throughout the castle.

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“This should do it.” Feena wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“Feena? What are we doing with this?” Kanon asked timidly.

“Heh, heh, heh. Witness my pit!”

“Yeah, I know it’s a pit! I’m asking why you dug a pit in the middle of the castle!”

“It’s magic.”

“I didn’t ask *how* you made it! I asked *why*!”

“That’s obvious,” Feena said, standing proudly at the edge of her pit. “Our newest guest, Luna, often comes through here. Being the ditzy girl she is, she’ll fall into the pit, and when she does, she’ll be submerged in the special acid at the bottom. This acid will dissolver her clothes, revealing any stolen goods.”

“Huh? Isn’t melting her clothes kinda bad?”

“Don’t worry. She’ll simply be too embarrassed to stay in this castle any

longer.”

“So *that’s* what you want, huh!? But it’s still a terrible idea! Luna is Al’s guest; he’ll never forgive you if you melt her clothes!”

“Y-You think so?” Hearing that made Feena visibly anxious.

“Oh, it’s a pleasure to see you, umm… Lesfina and Kanon.” The moment Feena started to have doubts, the target exited her room and walked toward them.

“Stop her, Kanon! I’ll fill in the pit!”

“Ahaha! You finally called me by my name!”

“I’ll use it from now on if we get out of this unscathed! Hurry!”

“I’ll try!” Kanon darted toward Luna.

“Look out! Clear the way!” Sharon, clearly panicking, suddenly turned down the corridor, rushed past Luna, and…

Wham!

…ran straight into Feena.

“Huh? What? Why is there a hole in the middle of the corridor!?” Sharon, holding herself by with edge of the hole, had barely had time to extend her arms and legs.

“I’ll explain later.” Feena herself was dangling above the hole, clinging onto Sharon’s waist.

“Huh? Wait! Aaaah, I can’t stoooop!” Kanon turned around to save the two girls but couldn’t stop her momentum in time, jumping straight on top of Sharon.

“Kyahhh!”

Splash!

All three of them fell into the hole.

“What is this!? My clothes…”

“Don’t worry, it’s harmless. It only melts fabric.”

“But if anyone sees me naked, I’ll lose the right to marry Al!”

Feena’s revolutionary invention dissolved their clothes in seconds, leaving them trapped at the bottom of the hole, completely naked.

“It’s okay. If we escape quickly, no one will—” Feena’s plan failed before it could even be put in motion.

“Hey, what’s all the commotion over there?” She really could’ve expected as much, knowing full well that the guards were scanning every nook and cranny of the castle looking for clues. Naturally, all the crashes and banter would garner some attention.

“Nooo!”

Feena was frantic for a solution. In mere moments, the guards would gather around them and look down the hole in pursuit of the thief.

“Gah. I can’t let anyone but Al see me like this.”

“Aww, I’m sorry, Feena.”

“Hey! I think you owe me an explanation!”

The girls were desperate; all hell was about to break loose.

“Are you okay? Ah! Why are you all…” Luna, peeking down into the pit, was in utter shock, but a cheeky smile appeared on her face. At least, that’s how Feena perceived the situation.

It’s all over, she thought. *She must’ve realized what I was trying to do. Now, she’ll put my naked body on display for the whole world to see! I can tell from that fiendish smile!* Feena was out of options. “But I’m Subdera’s Diva and Al’s wife! If I have to show my body to the world, then so be it!”

“Are you listening to me!? Explain—!”

“Wait! Stop! Feena!?” Pushing the completely dumbfounded Sharon to the side, Kanon jumped in to stop Feena, but she was too late. Feena had already finished conjuring her spell.

“I’m sorry, Al.” She was ready to blow herself up.

“Don’t come down here!” Luna’s voice filled the corridor before Feena could

release her spell. “You can’t come here! You’ll fall into the hole and die, so turn back, please!”

Luna was frantic but genuine, which was enough to convince the guards. The unused magical energy slowly dissipated from Feena’s hands.

“Luna…”

“D-Don’t worry, the guards are gone! Slip out and change in my room while you still can!”

I can see why Al likes her, but she’ll have to pry my place as his wife from my cold, dead hands, Feena thought to herself when she saw Luna’s genuine, innocent smile.

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“So, what did we learn this morning?” Al wanted to use lunchtime to confirm the morning’s events. He’d already heard the reports about them running around the castle screaming and digging a hole in the middle of one of the corridors to fill it with acid; what he wanted to know was how remorseful they were for ignoring the crime that had been committed and outright hindering the investigation.

“…”

Nothing. No apology, no reply, not so much as a peep from any of them.

“By the way,” Luna chimed in, “what exactly happened?”

“…”

Not one of them was willing to speak.

“What’s the problem? Why won’t you say anything!?” Luna put her utensils down and looked over to Al and the Divas. Al couldn’t bring himself to spell out embarrassing information in front of a guest of the state, though, so he let everyone continue eating in silence. Then again, Sharon, Feena, and Kanon were technically guests of the state too.

“Well, if there’s no progress at all, maybe we should just give—Cecilia? What’s wrong?” Al finally had a chance to put a stop to their reckless detective work, but Cecilia’s distraught expression was too enticing to ignore.

“Ah! Nothing, nothing at all! Now, it’s time to make my move!” Declaring her intent, she stood up and masterfully balanced a piece of bacon on her breasts.

“Umm, Cecilia? What the hell are you doing?”

“Bon appétit, Al.” Ignoring his protest, she approached him chest-first.

“Please, Cecilia, restrain yourself in front of guests.” Al played his final card, knowing full well that his chances of success were almost zero.

“Oh my, pardon me,” Cecilia said and sat back down.

“Huh? Huuuuuh!?” The room erupted with cries of bewilderment as everyone looked at Al in pursuit of an explanation.

“Don’t look at me, I have no clue what just happened either.” Al denied his involvement, but the sight of his sister defeatedly munching on a crispy piece of bacon laid atop her own boobs was so surreal it almost made him feel sorry for her.

“Cecilia…” Just as he was about to ask her…

“Alnoa!”

“Ahhh!”

…Brusch jumped into his arms, luckily while he was in between bites.

“Brusch!? What’s with all the fuss?” He tried to push her off while she rubbed her cheek against his.

“Alnoa! I caught the thief! I came for my pats! Headpats!”

When she whispered the crucial news into his ear, he stopped.

“Really? Great work!” After giving Brusch the headpats she deserved, he stood up like nothing ever happened. He’d forgotten about one thing, though: Cecilia was still eating the bacon off her breasts, and he had yet to uncover the reason behind that. Unfortunately, he had other things to attend to, so that mystery was to remain unsolved.

“Sorry, something of utmost importance has come up; I have to leave for a bit. Please enjoy your lunch, Luna, Saaya.” He apologized to his guests, but the other Divas must’ve also sensed that something had happened, as they all

stood up, much to Al's dismay.

What am I thinking? I can't leave our guests alone during lunch.

"Hmm… It's a wife's job to entertain the guests while her husband is out!" Feena said before sitting back down.

"Thanks, Feena. I won't be out for long."

She nodded at Al's request and turned toward the guests. "Worry not," she told them, "for I, the wife, will be taking care of you!"

Hearing that, Luna stared straight at Al, but he decided to ignore that for now, leaving the room with the three other Divas in tow.

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"Were you the one who went rummaging through the treasury?"

When they arrived at the prison in the depths of the castle, a relatively small man was brought before them, bound with rope. Naturally, despite being in the castle's depths, the prison was nowhere near the Demon King's seal. The prisoner looked awfully familiar to Al, and that intuition was enhanced by Sharon's jaw practically hitting the floor.

Oh, right. This is the guy who followed Sharon around like a loyal dog. His name is Kotton, I think.

"Why? Why did you do this!?" Sharon's woeful voice reverberated through the musty jail. Kotton silently hung his head.

"He needed money to flee the country."

"I rummaged through the treasury, the late king's room, and the entrance of the underground chamber to get out of this country." As if he'd snapped back into reality after hearing Jamka's assertion, Kotton confirmed the claims, though his confession felt a bit strange.

"No, that's not right. The Kotton I know would never sink so low!" Sharon interrupted Al's thoughts before he could come to a conclusion.

"He just admitted to the crimes himself!"

"Still! He didn't do it!" She vehemently jumped between Al and Kotton.

“What’s gotten into you, Sharon!? This is… Actually, this is exactly like you,” said Kanon.

“Oh my, I think she is much more volatile than usual.”

Is it just me, or are both Kanon and Cecilia much less patient with Sharon lately? Watching Sharon get so desperate over protecting a man didn’t sit well with Al.

“We’ll have him serve some jail time for now. We don’t have capital punishment, but he needs some time to cool—”

“I won’t let you get away with that!”

Cecilia was right. Throwing a tantrum like this is unusual for her.

“Wow, you’re really standing up for this kid. Did you get infected by Cecilia’s love for younger boys?”

“Oh my, I don’t particularly love younger boys. I love my little brother; that’s completely different!”

“Is that really something to be proud of!?”

Their discussion got completely derailed.

“I don’t know why you’re so protective of Kotton, but we’ll deal with our prisoner using our laws.” Al put it rather bluntly, but Sharon still wasn’t convinced.

“Seriously!? Why do you believe every word Luna says but argue with me!?”

“What!? What does Luna have to do with this!? Not to mention that you expect me to listen to you and pardon him just because you think he’s innocent!”

An eye for an eye. Al got too caught up in the chaos of the moment—probably because Sharon was so desperate for another man—and accidentally went a step too far.

“Why’s this guy so important to you?”

Wham!

Sharon’s fist hit Al square in the chest.

“You moron…”

She turned on her heels and didn’t even look back. The light pat on Al’s chest may not have caused physical pain, but it damaged his heart.

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“What do I do now?”

Al was resting in his office. Two days had passed since the incident at the prison, but his relationship with Sharon hadn’t improved one bit, and he had no plans to apologize to her anytime soon. In his mind, it was Sharon who had started spouting unreasonable nonsense, though a small voice bugged him for maybe going a bit too far himself.

He wanted to talk to her, but Sharon would rarely leave her room. When she did, it was usually for food, but she went back to her room the moment she was finished. Preoccupied with his inner struggle, he couldn’t get any work done.

“Actually, why do I care if she’s grumpy? She isn’t here destroying my room, at least,” Al said aloud in the middle of the empty room. He was nearing his wits’ end—not because of loneliness, but because the awkward atmosphere in the castle reflected poorly upon him as king. At least, that’s what he told himself.

“I’m totally, absolutely, one-hundred percent not in the wrong here, but at the same time, Sharon is a guest. I can’t be so blunt with her.” Al came up with an excuse to go out and talk to her. “Oh, speaking of which, the chefs are preparing a cake for Cecilia’s tea party. Maybe I should get a slice for Sharon. On second thought, I should get several,” he whispered to himself before making his way toward the kitchen.

“What do I do now?” Sharon asked herself as she sat on top of her bed. She knew her request was unreasonable, but she wanted Al to understand the weight of the chains on her limbs, the cold of the damp cellar floor, and the damning solitude of life behind bars.

“You moron…” She rolled around in her bed. “Did I go too far?”

She gazed at the ceiling and whispered in the silent room. She may have been heralded as a Diva now, but she was taken as a slave after her clan was

destroyed at the age of six. Still, despite her severe malnourishment and the constant beatings, she had stayed strong.

I may have been captured, but I'm still the chief's daughter. One day, I will definitely avenge my father. She managed to survive by clinging to that fickle hope.

But fate had other plans. The king of Freiya, the mortal enemy of her clan, bought her as a potential candidate to inherit the Diva's powers. At first, she viewed it as a perfect chance to get revenge, but she soon learned how naïve she was. The torturous training she was subjected to on a daily basis, the unspeakable punishments she suffered at the first sign of resistance, everything she went through was designed to completely subjugate her thoughts and feelings. As little as a questionable look would lead to a merciless beating—often with a whip—being starved for days, and sleepless nights in a cold cell.

Her will broke in a month, but she'd locked her precious wish for revenge deep inside her heart long before that. Ever since those days, she had been waiting for her chance to strike while obediently following their every order like a mindless doll, right up until the day she became a Diva and came to Althos to murder its king. The fact that her punishment for failing the assassination and disobeying Freiya's orders had not yet come was thanks to Al's dealings with them behind the scenes.

Wait, am I really in a position to ignore his decisions and call him names after all he's done for me?

Al had always let Sharon's inability to show him gratitude slide, but calling him names may have been crossing the line. However, Sharon was too proud to go up and discuss the issue with him herself, putting things at a standstill. With such thoughts swimming around her head, she was interrupted by a knock on the door. She immediately knew it was a certain young king.

"Do you have any idea what time it is!?" Despite her complaints, she sprung up from the bed. Just as she was reaching for the handle, her hand abruptly stopped.

"Ah! My hair!" She bolted to the dresser in a corner of the room, got herself ready in a heartbeat, and rushed back to the door. She took a deep breath, put

on a smile, and opened the door.

“Who is it at this hour? I’m just about to head to sleep, y’know,” she said in as annoyed a tone as she could muster.

“Oh? How dare you speak to me like that.”

“Huh? Wait, why…” A chill ran down Sharon’s spine as she stared at her unexpected guest.

“Know your place. The fact that you’re a Diva changes nothing.” Ranbolg looked at Sharon with disdain.

“M-My sincerest apologies. I was expecting someone else.” Sharon hung her head in an attempt to hide her disheartened expression.

“Well, it matters not,” he said with a sarcastic, friendly smile.

“Thank you very much.” Sharon didn’t return his smile; she kept her eyes fixed on the floor.

“May I ask what brings you here tonight?” she asked while tensing her muscles to hide the absolute terror welling up inside her. If her focus were to break, the painful memories locked away deep in her mind would resurface, poisoning her soul.

“I have something to discuss with you.”

“What would that be?”

This was the first time Ranbolg, who looked down on everyone around him, had initiated a one-on-one discussion with Sharon. It piqued her curiosity.

“We can’t talk here. Let me in!” he ordered, much to her chagrin. Just hearing him talk in his bossy, unsophisticated, crude manner made her want to vomit. “Hate“ was too weak a word to describe how she felt about this man—she loathed his entire existence.

But learning his weakness would be useful information for both me and Al. She wasn’t going to bury the hatchet with him, but she was ready to listen to what he had to say, so she awkwardly showed him inside.

“Come in…”

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“Damn, I wasted too much time.” Al had unexpectedly bumped into two guests at the dining hall: Luna and Saaya.

“Sorry, Al. Is it bad we came here so late?” They told him that they were looking for some snacks, since Saaya was hungry. He’d gotten the cake from the kitchen, but questioned if it was really the best choice considering Sharon’s lack of exercise lately. Regardless, on his way back, he decided to share half of it with them and stay for a small chat.

Then, he rushed toward Sharon’s room, but hearing Ranbolg’s voice from the corridor leading there, he stopped and hid against the wall. He snuck his way along the wall and peeked out, acting like a voyeur.

“What in the world are they talking about?”

He considered using wind magic to listen in, but that could have easily revealed his position, so he decided against it.

Wha—!? Why is he going inside now!?

He was invited into the room by Sharon after exchanging a few words. Al wasn’t able to get a good look at Sharon’s expression, but it was clear that she was hanging her head for a reason other than embarrassment.

“What’s going on?”

On one hand, he wanted to kick the door down and learn what was happening, but on the other hand, he was afraid that he’d regret learning about it. His indecisiveness had left him at a crossroads.

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“So, what did you want to talk about?” Sharon bottled up her feelings and tried to look as neutral as possible. She offered Ranbolg a seat while she remained standing—to leave herself the opportunity to make a quick escape if things went south, not because it was rude to sit down in the presence of royalty. Naturally, Ranbolg stood no chance against Sharon in a physical fight, but due to the chains cast on her by the Freiyan royalty, she was unable to disobey their orders.

“Hmph. I’m not here to hurt you.” Ranbolg smirked, seeing through Sharon’s earnest efforts, but she didn’t budge. Annoyed at being ignored, he glared at Sharon and continued. “Either way, let me cut to the chase. I was ordered to murder the king of Althos.”

He dropped a crucial piece of information like it was common knowledge. When she thought about it, however, that order made a lot of sense. It wouldn’t be unexpected for the king of Freiya to send another assassin Al’s way after Sharon’s failure and Al’s victory in the battle against the Empire.

“Hm? Are you okay? You look pale.”

Sharon touched her own face in disbelief after seeing Ranbolg’s slight grin, wondering what expression she wore.

“I received another order besides that as well.” He squinted to check if the trembling girl was still listening, and proceeded to spell doom for Althos. “I am to break our alliance with Althos and declare war.”

If the small, fragile country of Althos were invaded by both the Empire to the north and Freiya to the south, they would undoubtedly be swallowed up.

“B-But, wouldn’t it be better to keep using Althos as a shield while you prepare for war with the Empire?” Sharon recalled what Al had said about the relationship between Althos and Freiya.

“You of all people should be very well aware that the king is not a patient man, Sharon.” Ranbolg was right. The Freiyan king was infamous for throwing away thousands of lives in the name of territorial dominance. “He told me to take my army and trample Althos if I failed to assassinate Alnoa.”

He had eight thousand soldiers on standby. Against an army of that size, no matter how superior Jamka’s strategy was, no matter how many Divas they had, it would be an extremely difficult fight. If the Empire were to attack while Althos was occupied with Freiya, then…

The gruesome image of Althos in ruins flashed through Sharon’s mind, draining all the color from her face. Ranbolg couldn’t contain his laughter upon seeing that.

“There’s a catch. What if I told you there was a way to make your dream a

reality and save Althos?”

“Wh-What is it? What do I have to do?” she asked without a second thought.

I’ll do anything to save this country.

Ranbolg was ready to give her an ultimatum.

“You have to marry me.”

“What!? Marry!? Me and you!?” Sharon was completely dumbfounded.

“Hahaha, learn to speak, you dumb tramp! But it’s okay; I’m a generous man. I will forgive your shortcomings.”

Sharon almost gave him what for, but she managed to restrain herself before it was too late. Disregarding her clear confusion, Ranbolg continued.

“Listen to me. If we were to marry, I could easily usurp the throne. You are popular amongst our people, so starting a revolution would be child’s play. Once the king caves under the pressure, the country is ours to govern. If you so desire, we can behead the king once my plan succeeds. An enticing offer, is it not?”

Ranbolg was confident in his master plan, but Sharon had her doubts. The Freiyan king was known for his iron grip on the country, so uprooting him with a revolution may not have been as foolproof as Ranbolg thought it to be.

“What do you say? You won’t need this sorry excuse for a country anymore once you get your hands on the great Freiya, and you’ll even be able to enact your revenge. You get to fulfill your dreams by agreeing to this one simple proposal.”

It’s like making a deal with the devil himself—an enticing offer in exchange for my soul.

“Also, I have a little something here.” Interrupting Sharon’s thoughts, Ranbolg pulled a pale green crystal from his pocket.

“What? How!? Where did you get that?” Sharon knew all too well what that crystal was.

“It’s from a certain someone. I don’t plan to reveal their identity to you,

however," he said with a creepy smile. Sharon knew exactly where that crystal came from and how dangerous it was, yet all she could do was stare at it.

"This crystal will help me realize my dreams by creating the strongest army that has ever tread in this world. I have tested it on a lowly slave, and it was a tremendous success! He may have died in the process, but subduing the power of this crystal should be simple for a man of my caliber!"

What a fool. It was painfully obvious that things wouldn't work out well for Ranbolg. The person who gave him that crystal must've had a silver tongue, considering his unwavering confidence despite having watched someone be killed by the power of that crystal. Not long ago, Sharon would've jumped on the idea of letting him go berserk with power and finishing him off, but things had changed.

"Give me some time to think." That was the best she could do now.

"Huh? Are you trying to disobey me?" Sharon kept silent in the wake of Ranbolg's rage. "Tch, do as you wish. You couldn't disobey me even if you wanted to. But just to make sure we're on the same page: I'm sure you know what will happen to the Lost Children if you dare to pull any stunts."

Sharon grit her teeth to hold her emotions back.

"You have until tomorrow. Prepare yourself before I head back to my army." Ranbolg stormed out of the room.

"What should I do?" Sharon was paralyzed with shock.

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Finally, that creep left Sharon's room. He only spent a couple of minutes inside, so I don't think *anything happened, but…*

"Why am I doubting her!? She'd never do such a thing!"

Wham!

He headbutted the wall.

"Aghh!"

But it hurt more than he expected.

“Whatever!” While rubbing his head, he walked to Sharon’s room and knocked on the door.

“No answer.”

Maybe she’s getting dressed…

Wham!

This time, he headbutted the door, which hurt even more than the wall.

“What’s going on!? Wait, Al? You know, people don’t usually knock with their forehead.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Al shot back at the unamused girl.

Good, she’s wearing clothes, and she’s not roughed up at all. He slowly floated his eyes over Sharon from top to bottom, then peeked behind her to check the state of her room.

“What are you, a creep? Stop leering at girls’ rooms… It’s disgusting. I’ll call the guards!” Her merciless comments assured Al that she was just fine. “So, why are you here?”

“Ah, well, I got a bit hungry, and then I found some cake in the kitchen, and, well, you like sweets, so…”

Al was fully aware of how incoherent his answer was; he hadn’t even properly answered Sharon’s question. However, she smiled with delight after her momentary confusion.

“Hm, really? That’s surprisingly thoughtful of you! I was just racking my brain about a few things and was about to head out on a sweets hunt.”

“You? Racking your brain?”

Oh, crap! I couldn’t help myself!

But instead of getting mad, Sharon almost looked happy.

“What!? Yes, I do have a brain to rack, thank you very much!” she said while taking the cake from Al. That was the end of his bliss. “So, is there anything else?”

No, like, I totally didn’t ask the head chef for the cake so we could eat it

together or anything, and it's totally not common courtesy to share it with me either, he wanted to tell her. This was the perfect chance for them to have a nice talk, and maybe he could've learned something about her discussion with Ranbolg.

However, that's not how it worked out. Sharon was clearly hesitant to let Al into the room despite them having a proper reason to talk. Naturally, Al had no idea what had gone down between them, so he immediately jumped to the worst conclusion possible.

Could it be that she doesn't want me to defile their sacred love nest?

"Ah, Al! I've been looking for you!"

Surprised by the sudden mention of his name just as things were becoming unbearably awkward, Al shuddered. The person responsible for frightening him started running toward him, but…

"Whoa!"

…she tripped over her dress. She was about to fall, but she skillfully recovered as she always did, stopping right in front of Al.

"Oh, so this is where Sharon's room is! Ah, right! I was wondering where you took my leftover cake, but I see you came here to share it with Sharon!"

"Y-Your leftover…" Sharon froze in place as if her world had been turned upside-down.

Did he want to cheer me up by feeding me leftover cake he happily ate with Luna? Dejection, rage, and grief swirled within her.

"Hold it, just listen! It's not leftover, okay? I halved it for you. Plus, I didn't even get a bite yet…"

"Whatever." The betrayal of being served their leftover cake was too much for her to handle. "Just go! Take your cake and eat it alone!"

She shoved the plate toward Al. They watched as the cake slid off the plate and fell on the floor.

"Ah! What the hell are you doing!? I got it all for you!"

The cake he'd brought all the way to her room, taking great care so it would keep its shape, was now splattered all over the floor. It wasn't necessarily Sharon's fault, but after witnessing what happened between her and Ranbolg, he couldn't help but get mad.

"Sor—Wait, what!? I'm not so cheap that I can be bribed with leftover cake!" She was about to apologize, but seeing the dumbfounded Luna standing right next to Al awakened her obstinate side.

"I told you, it's not a leftover! Why are you always like this!? Can't you just own up to your mistakes for once!?" He immediately regretted saying that, but the floodgates were already open.

"Nhh. You idiot! Perv King! Casanova! Hope you get a heart attack, stupid!" She threw everything she had at Al and slammed the door.

"Umm, Al? Did I say something bad?" Luna was still completely and utterly dumbstruck.

"No, don't worry about it. Guess I'll go to sleep too," Al said and slugged his way back to his room.

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"Ugh. Ahhahahaaaaaaaaa!"

Strange. I didn't want it to turn out like this. Sharon counted to twenty after Al and Luna walked away from her door, buried her face in her pillow, and began to bawl her eyes out. *Where did I go wrong?*

A wild torrent of thoughts was swirling inside her head while she was crying.

Why is this happening to me? I could completely close off my feelings and ignore the pain when I was a slave, but now… What are these feelings? I'm happy when Al pampers me, but just thinking about him makes my chest tighten up. Seeing him with another girl feels like getting stabbed through the heart. I want to be by his side, and yet I don't want to see him.

Just as those conflicting feelings began to overtake her, she heard a knock on the door.

"Who's there?"

She shuffled through potential visitors, but couldn't figure out who it could be. It obviously wasn't Al, given their recent fallout, and she had nothing else to discuss with Ranbolg. Lilicia was a feasible option, though; she may have come to clean up the remains of the cake. Either way, Sharon frantically wiped her eyes and hurried to the door.

"Umm… It's me, Luna!"

It was the person she wanted to see least of all.

"Why are you here?" She opened the door ever so slightly and peeked out. Luna was standing next to the remains of the cake.

"Umm, you didn't get to taste it before, so…" Luna displayed a plate with two slices of cake, clearly signaling that she wanted to eat together with Sharon.

"Come in."

Why am I doing this? She couldn't wrap her head around her own actions. Did she invite Luna in because she didn't want to wrestle with her inexplicable feelings all alone? Was it because Luna's carefree smile eased her pain, or because she simply didn't want to seem pitiful? Whatever the reason, she let Luna in.

"Take a seat."

"Thank you."

They sat down on the sofa and ate in complete silence. Halfway through, Sharon broke under the awkward silence.

"Argh, come on! You came here to talk, didn't you!? Then talk!"

"Huh? Ah, yes, I did! I was lost in how delicious this cake is! I'd like to apologize for offending you earlier." Luna bowed before the thoroughly confused Sharon. Her beautiful, silky hair flowed down her head, right into the cake.

"Your hair will get all frosting-y!"

"Huh? Ah! Handkerchief, handkerchi—! Ah, I left it in my room!"

Sharon, unable to bear watching Luna losing her head, shuffled through her

pocket and handed her a handkerchief.

“Phew! Thank you! Ah, no! Not again!” Just as she finished wiping it clean, her hair once again landed on top of the cake. Watching her helplessly panic and fiddle around with the handkerchief cheered Sharon up. That’s when she realized something.

Hah, no wonder Al fell in love with such a clumsy ball of happiness. Compared to her, all we do is argue. Even today, I didn’t listen to what he had to say and lashed out. I’m sure he’s mad at me… Whatever. I shouldn’t compare myself to her.

“Say, what would you do if someone important in your life was in danger?” Instead, Sharon decided to ask the question that was weighing her down. For Luna, it was nothing more than a random question, so she looked straight into Sharon’s eyes and answered without hesitation.

“I would help them smile again, no matter what it takes! It doesn’t matter how dirty my hands get, how many hits I take, or who I have to fool. I’d put everything on the line in order to save them!”

There was something strange—almost ghastly—in Luna’s eyes, but they gave Sharon enough power to make up her mind.

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks! I’ll hit the sack now!” Sharon suddenly stood up and signaled to Luna that it was time to go.

“Goodnight.” Luna left the room.

Did she really come here to apologize, or did she have some other goal in mind? Whatever, it’s not like there’s any point in mulling it over.

“I have to fulfill this duty. No one else can shoulder this burden,” Sharon whispered to herself in the empty room.

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“I can’t believe this…”

The next morning, Al was sitting in his office. He was still preoccupied with his fight with Sharon, but a new issue had arisen as well. Kotton, who had admitted to being guilty less than twenty-four hours ago, was now claiming to be

innocent.

“I’m just as confused as you are. He was acting strange yesterday, but now he’s back to normal.” Jamka tilted his head in confusion. Besides them, Feena and Kanon were also present. Sharon, as expected, didn’t come, and Cecilia said she had something important to look into. “Maybe he got brainwashed.”

Al found Jamka’s theory feasible after hearing his report. Feena was completely out of the loop, as she’d stayed behind to fulfill her duty as Al’s wife and Al didn’t yet have the time to tell her about it after his fight with Sharon.

“Haah… Why didn’t I tell you earlier?” he said in a disappointed tone.

“Don’t worry. There might still be traces of magic lingering around. We should go check.” Feena was even more attentive than usual. Maybe she’d heard about his fallout with Sharon and was looking out for him.

“Then let me show you there.” Jamka left for the door, followed by Feena who stopped for a second to think.

“Kanon, come with us.” It was rare for her to willingly invite Kanon along, but she had her reasons.

“I won’t let you stay alone with Al!” she whispered so Kanon wouldn’t hear it. Al didn’t want to interject, because frankly, it seemed like a pain.

“Ah! You finally said my name! Sure, of course I’ll go! I’d follow you to the depths of hell!” Completely oblivious to Feena’s ulterior motives, Kanon excitedly jumped up from the sofa and trotted after Feena. At last, Al had some quiet time to— “Alnoaaa! This is terrible!”

Deal with even more unforeseen events.

“What is it, Brusch? Why are you so frazzled?”

Something was off. Usually, Brusch would jump right into Al’s arms, but this time, she stopped in front of him. She looked pale, which put Al on guard.

Unfortunately for him, his premonition was on point.

“It’s Sharon! She went back home with that other guest from Freiya!”

When it rains, it pours, he thought. All he wanted to do now was curl up in an

empty corner and bawl his eyes out, but he didn't have time for that.

"Bring me my horse! I'm going after Sharon!" Despite his light dizziness, he stormed out of the room.

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I screwed up! I really screwed up again! Al cursed himself as he rode.

"That doesn't matter. I'm not chasing after her to fight, I just want to talk to her. Besides, I have a thing or two to say to that bastard for leaving Althos without a word of goodbye!" He was trying to come up with excuses on the fly, but he could already hear Jamka berating him with, "A king shouldn't rush blindly after his guests!" or something.

"But what else can I do?"

In the end, he decided to not worry about it and deal with the consequences later. The more pressing question was if Sharon and Ranbolg had crossed the border yet. He wanted to catch them before they reached the Freiyan army.

Al arrived at the border with no luck. He changed horses and continued galloping with all his might. After a few minutes, he spotted several horses in the fields ahead, led by a golden-haired man.

"Sharon!" Al shouted, but she didn't even flinch. "You have some nerve, ignoring me!"

He kicked his horse and tried to catch up to them. He figured they'd also increase their speed, but a couple of soldiers actually stopped by the nearby woods, got off their horses, and waited for Al's arrival. Ranbolg's personal guards were smirking a bit further ahead.

"Haah, haah… Prince Ranbolg, don't you think it's a bit rude to leave without saying goodbye?" Al didn't exactly greet him either, but it was payback for their sudden departure.

"Haha. We're in a neutral zone—a no man's land, if you will. No jurisdiction can reach us here. Shall we come clean, Your Majesty?" Ranbolg said with a smile, not even acknowledging his rudeness. Regardless, they could at least cut to the chase. Al got off his horse and walked toward the two of them with his

arms spread wide open, signaling that he held no hostility.

“In that case, I’ll start. I’ll forgive you for disrespecting me and leaving the country without a word, but I want Sharon back! She’s a precious guest of my country, and a candidate to be my bride!” Al led with the very reason he followed them. Sharon’s body twitched when she heard those words, but she didn’t lift her head or turn around. Ranbolg took a step forward to cover Sharon.

It’s almost as if I’m some sort of demon who came here to kidnap her. Well, I guess I technically am a demon, but that’s not the point.

“Hmm, you’d call this your bride candidate when you’re already surrounded by a harem of beautiful women?”

Ugh. He’s not wrong, but hearing how he refers to Sharon like she’s an object makes me sick.

“What does that have to do with anything? Plus, Sharon loves Althos! Right, Sharon?”

She didn’t say a word. Instead…

“I have to admit, Althos is a very peaceful, comforting place to live, but that’s about it. It’s a great place to play house, but you have to remember that the Divas are much more than mere toys!”

“I’m not toying with them! They’re all precious—” Al cut himself off.

Actually, what are they to me? Clearly, they’re not my toys, even if Ranbolg’s trying to spin it that way, but that’s as far as I can think. I love spending time with them—we fool around and even fight once in a while, but we always help each other out. The time we’ve spent together and the experiences we’ve shared are definitely real.

“Haha! You seem to be all over this thing, Your Majesty! But I wonder, would your feelings be unchanged if you knew its real identity!?” Ranbolg explained with a wide, smug smirk on his face. Al just looked at him in confusion, curious as to what Sharon’s true identity could be. That look only fueled Ranbolg’s confidence.

“It was a slave!” he shouted victoriously, his voice reaching the far edges of the plains.

“Hmm? Yeah, and?”

“You must be utterly sho—Huh?”

Al was almost impressed by his own dumb expression as he casually shrugged off Ranbolg’s earth-shattering revelation.

“What is this!? Why aren’t you shocked!?” Like he’d been hit by his own spell, Ranbolg was completely and utterly stunned.

“Well, she told me about it a while back, but even if she hadn’t, it wouldn’t matter much.” Al told him the truth.

“Hahaha, I see! So you’ve fallen in love with it!”

“Huh!? Where did that—” Al’s face flushed at the sudden assertion.

“It is a Diva in name alone; it doesn’t amount to anything more than a filthy slave!” Those words quickly helped him regain his composure.

“Hey, I know she’s Freiya’s Diva, but isn’t that going too far?” He tried his best to keep his emotions in check, but…

“No, it’s less than a slave! Just by it being present, the army’s morale skyrockets! It’s just a tool to bring glory to our country! A mere doll we call a Diva!” Ranbolg’s ramblings got incrementally more terrible.

Are you for real? I mean, you have to know that Sharon could destroy you only using her pinky, he thought and looked over at Sharon, who was still standing there motionlessly, her gaze fixed on the ground. While Al thought about how strange a sight it was, Ranbolg stepped closer to her.

“Did you know? Lowly tools feel no shame!”

Ranbolg yanked Sharon’s shoulder, and began violently groping her breasts.

“Gh…”

Hearing Sharon stifle a scream and seeing her cheeks flush, Al was ready to spring into action. No matter how painful it was, though, he had to restrain himself.

It'll be an all-out war if I start anything with him. If only I could manage to get around that. Sharon could do something about this, so why is she taking his abuse!?

Seething with rage, Al stared at Sharon in search of an answer, but he got it from Ranbolg instead.

"Haha. This tool has been programmed through pain and terror. Over and over again from a young age, it was taught to never disobey royalty!"

Al knew she had been a slave, but he had no clue about the torture she'd endured. All the while, Ranbolg seemed to be enjoying himself.

"As such, I can do whatever I want with it!" Saying that, he slid a hand down Sharon's stomach.

Al couldn't take it any longer. It wasn't the right choice for the king of a country, but he couldn't watch the girl who always pushed on while carrying the burden of her past be bound by fear any longer.

"Let her go, you scum!" he shouted while launching himself toward Ranbolg.

"You really shouldn't. Anyone who dares to interfere with a couple's gentle lovemaking shall face the wrath of eight thousand Freiyan soldiers!" Before Al could point out his blatant lie, Ranbolg continued, "Oh, I didn't mention? We're going home to get married."



Al wondered if that was just a bluff, but seeing the defeat in Sharon's eyes, he decided it was the truth. Either way, he had to forge on; stopping would mean accepting what Ranbolg said. With clear, fluid movements, he unsheathed his sword and aimed between the two of them.

Clang!

An armored figure suddenly appeared in front of Al and skilfully blocked his strike. Ranbolg must've known his guards would protect him, as he didn't even flinch at Al's attack. He simply stood there, wearing his smug smile and fondling Sharon, while the soldiers hiding in the nearby thickets showed themselves, as if this had all been planned.

Al had let his rage take control, which led him to fall into a deadly trap. The gears in his head started spinning.

One versus eight thousand. It may have been unlikely that there were eight thousand soldiers hiding in the thickets, but that didn't change the fact that he was grossly outnumbered, which left him with only one choice.

"Haha. You're pretty full of yourself for being the biggest crybaby in Freiya. You won't even face the king of a tiny country like ours one-on-one."

His plan was to lure Ranbolg into a duel and use that chance to run away with Sharon. It was his only hope.

"Hehe. I expected something like this from the man with enough wit to withstand the mighty Empire using only a handful of soldiers. Okay, I'm in. Shall we have a duel, Your Majesty?" He immediately took the bait.

"Interesting. You seem well mannered and smart, yet…"

The soldier that held Al's sword at bay stepped back after receiving a single look from Ranbolg.

"Naturally. Only the smartest can survive in Freiya," he said while unsheathing his sword.

"Now, let me show you the strength of a rural nation!" Al immediately struck down with his sword after signaling the start of the duel.

"Haha, where are your manners? No wonder you're the king of the

boondocks!” Ranbolg avoided his strike with a simple backstep. “Take this!”

Ranbolg aimed right at Al’s head. Al managed to avoid the lethal strike by a hair’s breadth, then jumped back to put some distance between them.

Damn, he’s much better than expected. Al realized that this would be a tough battle in more ways than one.

“Is that an enhanced sword?”

Looking more closely at it, Al noticed that Ranbolg’s sword shone a dim blue.

“Indeed, it is. The blade is imbued with a spell to increase its sharpness, and my armor is also enhanced to improve its defense. This is the least amount of preparation I can do before a fight against the Demon King.”

Al couldn’t even call him out on it, as he was the one who had proposed the fight without checking his equipment first.

Our swordsmanship is about equal. I might have a small edge on him, but his equipment is far superior. He started to regret not bringing his trusty scythe with him. *But that doesn’t matter. I have to carry out my plan!*

He took up his stance and recklessly swung his sword at Ranbolg.

“Arghhhh!”

“Pointless! You can’t—! Wait, what!?” Al let go of his sword and disappeared from Ranbolg’s sight. “What are you trying to pull here!?”

Ranbolg blocked the sword flying at him and looked around in search of Al. He didn’t have to look very far, as Al had mounted a nearby horse and was making his way toward Sharon.

“Sharon! We’re getting out of here!” he shouted while leaning off the horse, desperately trying to reach her.

“No. I can’t leave.” Sharon slapped his hand away with her words.

Al looked at her in utter disbelief.

“Sharon…?”

“I have a dream to fulfill, and this is the fastest way to reach that! Plus…”

“What? Then—Gbhhh!” Instead of words questioning Sharon’s decision, a river of blood gushed from his mouth.

“A-Al!” Sharon rushed over to him. He had slid off the horse and was violently vomiting blood, countless arrows sticking out of his back.

“Sharon… Get… out…”

“No, don’t talk now!”

This is bad; the arrows punctured his lungs. He needs healing. No, maybe Heavenly Surge is the only thing that can save him now.

“Al, stay put for a bit,” she said and leaned over to him.

“Hahaha! How dare you call yourself a king, coward!?”

Hearing Ranbolg’s sinister laugh, the archers hiding in the thickets showed themselves.

“Ranbolllg!” Sharon glared at Ranbolg as if he were a disgusting cockroach.

“Watch your mouth. Getting married doesn’t mean you can raise your voice to me. Besides, King Alnoa has defiled our sacred duel. Subjecting him to punishment is only natural.”

Despite how fishy his actions were, Ranbolg simply shrugged his shoulders. Judging by the reaction speed of the archers, it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume that they had been prepared to strike at any point if the duel hadn’t gone in Ranbolg’s favor.

“It’s about time you accept defeat. You’ll become my wife, and that’s the end of it.”

Suddenly, Sharon’s body stiffened up as if she were bound by countless invisible chains. Ranbolg smiled at that and walked over to Al with a couple of armed soldiers.

“Sharon, sit tight and watch. These will be Your Majesty’s final moments!” The soldiers drew their swords and pointed them at the collapsed Al. “Now, finish him!”

The blade of the sword aimed at Al’s neck twinkled under the bright sun as it

relentlessly cut through the air.

Al's going to… die? Something awoke within Sharon as that sinister thought crossed her mind.

"Wraaaaaaaaagh!" She let out a feral growl, yanked her sword from its sheath, and blasted away the soldiers surrounding Al.

"Agh! H-How dare you go against my will!? Have you forgotten your past!?" Dumbstruck after witnessing Sharon's lightning-fast strike, Ranbolg still managed to squeeze out a threat.

"I won't let him die! I won't let you kill him!"

She was like a beast that had broken her chains. She stood in front of Al, protecting him from any and all incoming danger.

"Sh-Sharon! Do you have any idea about the consequences of your actions? If you keep this up, the Lost Children will…"

"Ah!" Sharon froze for a moment, which gave Ranbolg ample time to issue his commands.

"Our Diva has gone mad from the Demon King's magic! Second and third battalions, capture her!" Sharon had finally snapped back to her senses, but Ranbolg didn't give her the time to evaluate her options. "Infantry, move in! Spellcasters, bind her!"

Suddenly, countless spider web-like strings attached themselves to Sharon's body.

"What!? What is this!?"

"Rahhh!" While Sharon tried to set herself free by slashing the thin strings with her sword, the heavy infantry jumped on her from all sides.

"Leave me alone!" She blasted them away with a single swing, but a group of leather-clad soldiers was hiding behind them, all of whom jumped at her.

Tch, I can easily deal with these guys, but they could die if I use even an ounce more of my strength.

That slight moment of hesitation spelled her defeat.

“What are you doing!? Leave me alone! I’m your Diva! Let me go!”

The soldiers restricted her limbs, and the binding strings descended on her body from above.

“I see you’ve caught on. If you try to sever the strings, you’ll end up injuring the soldiers. This is the perfect plan against you, the tool who knows not to kill Freiyan soldiers!”

Sharon glared silently at him.

“Ahaha! They call you a Diva, but you’re truly just a puppet!” Ranbolg didn’t miss his opportunity to insult her.

“Tch.”

He ignored Sharon’s feral stare and slowly walked up to her.

“Sharon, oh, Sharon. Poor little Sharon. I’m so sorry, but your knight will perish at your feet. Don’t you think it would be merciful to end his suffering and deal the finishing blow?” he said as he shrugged and sarcastically shook his head.

No. He’s not dead. Sharon hadn’t given up just yet. If she could somehow manage to perform Heavenly Surge, Al could still be saved.

No, this can’t be happening… I have to do something, or… he’ll die! As that thought crossed her mind, she lost all precaution toward the Freiyan soldiers.

“Al!” Just as she concentrated all her strength into her limbs…

“*Fireball*! *Frost Ball*! *Lightning Ball*!”

…a familiar voice entered her ears, along with a thunderous roar.

“Aaaargh!”

Then, the sound of the ground itself tearing apart.

“Lord Ranbolg! We’re under attack!” The soldiers hiding in the thickets rushed out, running for their lives in a desperate attempt to escape the flames and ice rampaging through the area.

“Stand your ground! We prepared for an ambush by Divas! Make use of your training!” Even with the lack of leadership from their commander and countless

spells raining down on them, hearing the command caused the Freiyan troops to act, not wasting a single movement. Ranbolg left the direction of his troops to the man who shouted the order, the soldier who'd stopped Al's attack upon his first outburst, and turned toward Sharon with a cynical smile.

"Did you really think I was unprepared for this, despite knowing full well that Althos houses multiple Divas?"

"*Ice Ball*!" Feena aimed her spell directly at Ranbolg, but it didn't reach him.

"*Magic Blockade*."

For each magic barrier destroyed by one of Feena's spells, another immediately took its place.

"Archers! Two o'clock!"

With the magic blockade still in place, the archers unleashed hundreds of arrows. Feena was rooted as a result of her spellcasting.

"*Fire Wall*!"

The rain of arrows burned to ash as they tried to pass through the firewall that appeared mid-air, but…

"Cavalry, infantry, charge! Archers, keep up the pressure!"

…a follow-up order immediately mobilized the rest of the army. The plan was to overwhelm Feena with a number of synchronized attacks and use her divided attention to gain an advantage.

"Tch, that's nothing!"

After burning the next set of arrows to a crisp, she began preparing for the incoming cavalry. She noticed the dim purple glow of not just the soldiers' armor, but the horses as well, which indicated bolstered magical defenses.

"You leave me with no other choice." Feena continued to amass as much magical energy as she possibly could.

"Archers, fire!"

Another curtain of arrows was sent her way. The soldiers, whose bodies were protected, stayed their course, leaving Feena with the simple choice of death by

arrows or swords. The fact that she was carrying Al's heavy scythe on her back didn't aid her chances of escape. She was completely out of options.

At least, that's what the enemy had hoped for.

"Feena! Sorry I'm late!"

"No excuses. Take the cavalry!" Feena finally spotted someone—Kanon—rushing to her aid.

"Will you forgive me if I defeat them?"

"I can't hear you!"

Timing her spell perfectly as to stifle Kanon's voice, Feena deployed another wall of fire, destroying the incoming arrows with a thunderous roar.

"Come on! Why are you always so mean to me!?" Kanon complained, yet wore a smile as she hacked her way through the enemy soldiers. Their armor may have mitigated magic, but it provided the protection of a piece of paper when cut by Kanon's katana. "The back of my blade is enough to dispose of these small fries."

"You're doing all this with the back of your blade?" Feena asked while launching spells toward the enemy archers and mages.

"It's simple. I just cut through their armor and quickly turn the blade around."

"I don't think it's quite as simple as you think it is. You may be rotten to the core, but you're still a Diva. Stupid as you are, your swordsmanship knows no bounds."

"Feena, I think you're oversharing your thoughts. I don't know if you're praising me or cursing me."

"Both, but that doesn't matter right now."

"I know. I'll make a path, you take care of Al!"

However…

"It's Eshantel's Diva! Cavalry, fall back! Infantry, attack!" The cavalry immediately began their retreat, covered by a curtain of arrows.

"I have to hand it to them, they're impressive. But that's not enough to stop

me!” Kanon sliced through the countless arrows with ease, then readied an attack of her own.

“Hyahhh!” She slashed diagonally through the air at lightspeed. The wave of pressure it created knocked the retreating cavalry off their horses.

“Thanks. I will forgive some of your sins. Now, let’s see…” Feena said as she hopped on one of the free horses. She somehow managed to get on the horse without falling off and kicked its sides. Her goal was Al.

“Al!” Spotting the restrained Sharon by Al’s side filled her with both relief and rage. “Sharon, you musclehead!”

All she wanted was for Sharon to get over to Al and perform Heavenly Surge, but as she got closer, she saw that Sharon’s limbs were being restrained by four soldiers. She kicked the side of her horse once more in order to get to Al as quickly as possible.

“A Diva has breached our defenses! Protect Lord Ranbolg!” The heavy infantry immediately surrounded him, along with Sharon and Al.

“I don’t care for that foolish prince!”

Feena began amassing magical energy. She could easily launch the enemies away, but doing so would risk worsening Al's already severe injuries. He could end up buried beneath the soldiers, or if her spell was blocked, the resulting shockwave could blow him aside. Frankly, she didn’t know how much power she could unleash.

“There’s only one way.” She sped up even more, planning to ride the horse straight into the enemy soldiers and use that chance to get to Al. Close quarters combat was not her specialty, however. “I’ll do anything to save Al!”

“Feena! Get ready!” Sharon, holding Al in her arms despite the web-like threads still attached to her limbs, called out to her just as she finished her mental preparations.

“Aaaaaaargh!” With a fierce shout, she leaped over the guards and headed toward Feena.

“Lady Sharon, what—!?” She glared menacingly at the ring of soldiers she had

just escaped.

“Take care of him,” Sharon said as she handed Al to her.

“Sharon, come.” Feena laid the unconscious Al in front of her and reached a hand toward Sharon.

“…”

Seeing Sharon sorrowfully shake her head, Feena didn’t press any further.

“I won’t show gratitude. I’m going all-out the next time we meet.”

“I damn well hope so!”

With that, Feena turned around and rode off.

“Save him for my sake, too…” Sharon whispered as she watched them leave.

“What the hell are you doing!?” Ranbolg shouted from the center of the infantry. “This is our chance to capture Althos’ king! I won’t let it slip through my fingers!”

He raised his fist into the air.

“Archers, mages, mount our fastest horses and pursue them!” The soldier next to Ranbolg, a man named Gatou, gave his orders, and everyone rushed to their horses.

Originally, the Knights of the First Order was nothing more than a band of ruffians that couldn’t be controlled. When Ranbolg was tasked with leading them to stifle a rebellion, however, he discovered Gatou among the uprising.

Gatou’s mercenary group had been destroyed by the Knights of the First Order, so he chose to join them, and immediately showed great prowess. Thanks to his leadership, the disobedient band of scoundrels began following orders. It was also Gatou who had given Ranbolg the crystal, the final push he needed to attempt to usurp the throne.

“I hope you’re prepared, Sharon.”

Sharon was well aware of the fact that their narcissistic leader wouldn’t ignore the fact that she’d made a fool of the troops he had such pride in.

“I will personally take care of Sharon! Restrain her!” Ranbolg shouted, glaring

at her with a look sourer than a lemon.

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“Hahaha, they’re hot on our trail!”

The vast field transformed into a playground for a game of tag between the Freiyan army and the Divas. Feena’s horse wore armor and carried both her and Al, which slowed them down considerably; the Freiyan army would catch up before they reached the border. She also had to tend to Al instead of focusing solely on their escape. She had pulled the arrows out of his body and tried to stop the bleeding, but riding on top of the horse may have worsened his injuries, as blood continued to gush from his back and mouth.

“That does it. Kanon, I’m going to perform Heavenly Surge. Buy me some time.”

“Huh!? Ah, jeez! Fine, but I’m next!” While shooting off minor complaints, Kanon stopped her horse. “Sorry, but you can’t peep at Feena! She’s a real blusher!”

Kanon pulled her sword and struck the ground right in front of herself.

Wham!

Her strike upturned the ground, covering the area in a thick cloud of dust.

“Stop! We could be attacked at any time, so don’t wander off!” Sensing the danger, Gatou stopped the Freiyan advance.

Kanon’s strategy was successful, meaning Feena could proceed with the plan.

“Sorry, Al. I know our situation here isn’t the best, but…” Feena said as she turned Al around. The way they hugged atop the horse while she bashfully stole glances at his face was enough to make any young woman jealous.

“But I’ve always wanted to try out this ‘primal play’ stuff! Sluuurp!” The only difference was the dialogue.

Despite the less-than-ideal circumstances and Al’s unconsciousness, Heavenly Surge activated without an issue.

“Fwahhh… Al… Al!” Embracing the unconscious boy, she moved his hand to

her breasts. She looked like a sex-crazed pervert.

“Ahhh, Al! Now there’s no one here to stop us!” Judging from the way she tried to strip the unconscious Al while on top of the horse, she was acting like one too.

“Feena, the dust is about to settle! Wait, what the hell are you pulling back there!?”

“Shoot! I was so close too!” She quickly fixed his clothing.

“You talk about shame, but you have the least of it between all of us,” Kanon whispered while running after Feena’s horse.

“Why are they so tenacious!? Feena, can I let loose?” Kanon sighed while dealing with the incoming arrows. The seemingly endless battle was taking its toll on her body, but she could still go at it.

“Let me think…”

Feena had been empowered by Heavenly Surge, and Al had also stabilized, but he was still unconscious due to the massive blood loss.



They still didn't get payback for hurting Al. Shall we wreak havoc then make a run for it? She wanted to give Kanon the green light, but decided against it when she spotted the person standing a bit ahead of them.

"No. We have to leave some for her too."

"Who's 'her'?"

"You'll see."

Feena desperately tried to gallop as fast as possible until they finally reached her.

"I'm counting on you," she said while galloping past the person waiting for them.

"Oh my, worry not." Her golden hair gently waved in the wind, catching the attention of the incoming Freiyan army.

"That's Althos' Diva! Stick to the plan and surround her!"

They carried out their plan in an orderly fashion, even when facing off against a single person; their cool-headed strategy showed just how much research Ranbolg had done before coming to Althos. The two thousand-odd soldiers formed a circle around Cecilia with the heavy and light infantry at the vanguard, the archers behind them, and the mages at the very edge of the circle.

"Not even you, Althos' famed Diva, could possibly defeat an army of this size! Now, surrender before we scar your beautiful body! Then again, you'll be scarred even if you do!"

The sea of soldiers opened up, giving way to the leader of the Knights of the First Order: Gatou. Despite his overwhelming military power and his apparent disrespect toward the sole Diva, Gatou approached her cautiously. The surrounding soldiers were staring at the gorgeous girl with lust, some licking the corners of their mouth as wild delusions overtook their minds. Any normal girl would collapse shivering under such immense pressure, but Cecilia was anything but a normal girl.

"Oh my, do you seriously expect to leave unpunished after everything you did to my lovely, adorable little brother?" Her quiet but stern voice filled the area.

“Hah! Your precious little brother lost because he was a weakling! No, even less than that.” A couple soldiers approached her while throwing insults her way, but…

“Shut up!”

Wham!

…Cecilia’s usual kind and collected demeanor was no more. She mercilessly swung her khakkhara at the soldiers, sending them flying all the way back to the edge of the circle.

“How dare you—!?”

The soldier who’d jumped in to attack Cecilia suddenly froze in place. This infamous band of scoundrels, murderers, and bandits, unafraid of even the gods themselves, were paralyzed by the pure, maddening bloodlust radiating from Cecilia. The entire army of two thousand-plus soldiers was caught up in her inescapable rage.

“E-Everyone! Attack!” Gatou managed to escape Cecilia’s suffocating grasp. With his shout, countless arrows and spells began flying toward her, and the vanguard jumped at her with their swords drawn. Knowing Cecilia’s inability to cast spells, they figured the strategy they used against an expert spellcaster would work on her, but…

“Aaaaah!” A primal roar filled the fields. Freiyan soldiers went soaring through the air in all directions.

“Arghhh!” Cecilia caught a soldier in each hand, using one to repel the incoming spells and the other to fend off the rain of arrows.

“What the hell is going on!?”

Gatou had always thought of Cecilia as a refined lady with a wonderful smile. Or rather, he still considered her as such, and couldn’t wait to see that adorable face warped with terror. What he didn’t expect, however, was to see was that adorable girl lift a soldier by his head with one hand.

“Oh my, walking under the clear skies and bathing in the sunlight is always fun if I’m with Al. But the only place I will walk with the fools who dared to injure

my beloved brother is the path of eternal pain and suffering!”

Gatou was terrified. What scared him the most was the way Cecilia’s smile had never wavered since the whole ordeal began.

“D-Don’t falter! She may be a Diva, but she’s alone! We can defeat her with numbers and strategy!” he said while instinctively taking a step back, but not because he was a coward. It was because his instincts were screaming at him to run for his life. However, as the lieutenant general, he couldn’t allow himself to run away even if his very own troops were subjected to torture unimaginable by the human mind. If he ran away, he’d be praying for the sweet release of death once Ranbolg found out about it.

“Lieutenant General! Is that really Althos’ Diva?” a soldier next to him asked in awe. Gatou wondered the same thing as he watched Althos’ Diva brush off his army of two thousand only using her physical capabilities, not relying on holy magic at all.

“Oh, there!” Cecilia shouted as she used the soldiers in her hands to mow down the enemy.

“Oh my, what a shame,” she said disappointedly as she threw the long-unconscious soldiers into the crowd.

“Cavalry, infantry, step back! Archers, mages, support their retreat!” Gatou was leading his troops to the best of his abilities, but he’d slipped up.

“Oh my, is it really a good idea to give me space?” Her smile didn’t change one bit, but the air around her did.

“Gentle gods watching over us! Protect your feeble servant from the incoming danger!”

A wall of light surrounded her body, deflecting the incoming arrows and spells. It was a perfect, impenetrable shield against both physical and magical attacks. Naturally, Gatou was concerned about fighting a practically invincible enemy, but he was even more concerned about Cecilia’s words.

“Did she just say ‘gods’!?”

It was common knowledge, a universal law, that any religious figure would

only serve one god. Cecilia's prayer, however, was addressed to multiple gods, and her impenetrable shield was proof of its success. Gatou couldn't believe the divines would allow her to serve multiple gods.

"Wasn't she supposed to be a healing specialist?" Gatou whispered in disbelief.

"Oh my, that is correct. My healing prowess is thanks to my powers as a Diva. What you're seeing here is the power of love," she answered calmly.

"Sealed, nameless gods, hear my prayer! Scatter the petals of plague! Show the fools who hurt my beloved Al ##### and #####! Pass your divine judgment on them!" Cecilia's voice reverberated across the plains.

Ah, I see. This is the end for me. Today—right here is where I'll die, Gatou thought to himself as he watched countless purple petals dance down from the sky. A few seconds later, only Cecilia was left standing.

"Ahh!" She suddenly collapsed to her knees. "Oh my, it is exhausting to pray to numerous gods at the same time."

Cecilia's wrath knew no bounds.

"Anyway, I have to get back and tend to Al!" Saying that re-energized her. "Oh my, the power of love truly is absolute!"

Just like that, she set off on the long trip home.

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"Sharon. You must be subjected to punishment for your sins against the Freiyan army."

After their fight with Althos, the Knights of the First Order set up a camp in the neutral zone for the evening. Sharon was brought in front of a quasi-court in the commander's tent.

"Do you admit to aiding the escape of King Alnoa?" Ranbolg asked, seated behind a desk with both his legs propped up on it. Sharon, surrounded by soldiers on both sides with her arms restrained, simply nodded in response. She didn't even feel like playing dumb; she simply wanted to get this over with.

"Our attack squadron hasn't suffered a single casualty, but they were deeply

traumatized by what happened. For any normal soldier, the damage you caused to our country would spell certain execution!”

Well, it was you who ordered the pursuit despite the clear chance of an ambush! She glared at Ranbolg, but he didn’t seem to mind it at all.

“Right. I’ll accept your punishment once we get back.” Sharon averted her gaze from Ranbolg in a theatrical fashion and sulked, expecting a merciless beating once they made their way back to Freiya.

“That would come much too late. We have to increase the morale of our troops before we invade Althos!”

“Huh? ‘Invade Althos’?” Sharon couldn’t believe her ears.

“You said you wouldn’t attack Althos if I went back home with you! Are you going to break your promise!? Let me carry my own sins; leave Althos out of it!” she berated him, still looking away.

“True, I did promise that. But we were attacked by Althos’ king himself. As the prince of Freiya, I can’t let such impudence go unnoticed.” Ranbolg trampled over their promise like it was nothing. “Not to mention that their king is now deceased. Even if he did somehow survive, he’ll need time to recover. This is the perfect chance for an invasion.”

Ranbolg was right. He may have not been aware of the Demon King’s regeneration powers, but he was very aware of the fragility of a country without a leader.

“I already sent a messenger to Althos with a declaration of war. I sentence you to the whip. We are confiscating your sword, stripping you of your status as a Diva, and sending you to solitary confinement with your tent under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Your punishment will go into effect the moment we finish with the preparations. Now, let’s get to work!”

Sharon was more worried about their war with Althos than her own punishment. She stole a glance at Ranbolg, only to be met with his lascivious glare.

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After being brought to the tent which served as a make-shift solitary cell, she was tied to an iron cross.

“Haah, haah… He hasn’t changed a bit, has he?” Sharon mumbled to herself through gritted teeth, her back throbbing. Not only was the whipping as brutal as ever, but Ranbolg had even made it public, subjecting Freiya’s very symbol to grave humiliation.

Furthermore, using the excuse that Sharon’s clothes were the property of Freiya that shouldn’t be torn during punishment, he made her strip to her underwear and take the hundred lashes almost naked. As the so-called knights gathered around her to watch the beating of a half-naked, defenseless girl with lustful eyes, it became clear that Ranbolg simply wanted to humiliate her.

“Is this all? Is this what they call a puni—Oww!” she said, but the burning pain in her back worsened with the slightest twitch.

“Honestly, I’m glad it’s ove—” She was a moment too quick on her sigh of relief. “Who’s there!?”

Feeling a presence different from the guards, Sharon readied herself.

“Hah. The fun is only just beginning!”

Warm candlelight illuminated the tent, but behind that warm light was a face that froze the blood inside Sharon. It was the person who had beaten her with the whip just a bit earlier: Ranbolg himself.

“Your body has changed considerably since the last time we met. You’re nothing like the squeaky brat I once knew.”

A cold sweat broke out on Sharon’s forehead as all her terrible memories came flooding back to her. Back in the day, Ranbolg was not the brute who’d whip her mercilessly, tearing deep into her flesh. He held back and slowly, ever so slowly whaled on her. He beat her hands and legs for hours on end, making her fingers swell to the point where she couldn’t even hold utensils. He reveled in Sharon’s suffering.

There were times when he’d beat her legs so much, she could only drag herself along the ground like a worm. She clearly remembered the taste of the lunch she’d had to eat off the ground like a paralyzed dog. To this day, her body

tensed up with fear whenever she saw that whip.

“I have to say, your screams were delicious for a slave.” He poked the defenseless Sharon’s breasts with the hilt of the whip.

“Tch. I’m Freiya’s Diva. You can’t subject me to more humiliation!” Despite being toyed with, she tried her best to keep her spirits up. She couldn’t afford to break now.

“I can’t? Why not? Who’s gonna stop me? The King?”

Ranbolg’s creepy smile set off countless warning signals in Sharon’s mind. She wanted to set herself free and run away, but…

No, I can’t! I’d just suffer even more!

A dark room, candlelight, and a whip. Everything that triggered her childhood trauma was right around her. Ranbolg pressed the whip against her bosom as if he was trying to show it off to her.

“You… Aghhh!” Ranbolg forcefully pushed the base of the whip against her breasts to torture her even more.

“You were a slave back then, but now you’re a Diva! You’ve earned the right to be violated by your gracious prince!”

Sharon wanted to scream, but stopped herself at the last moment. She should’ve been able to fight back; unlike back then, she was strong enough to break those chains with ease. But seeing Ranbolg’s happy yet dirty smile paralyzed her limbs.

“You… can’t…” She squeezed out a tiny word of protest.

Ranbolg was clearly taken aback. A strong stench of liquor entered Sharon’s nostrils as he audibly sighed in front of her, his face distorted with rage.

“Really, now? You may be a Diva, but you’re all mine now. Don’t believe me? Let me show you!”

Her tiny flame of bravery was extinguished; her complexion became paler than candle wax.

No. Don’t. Don’t. Don’t. Don’t, don’t, don’t don’t don’t!

Sharon lost all hope in her weak, frail self who couldn't resist the man making her into his own plaything. All she could do was make a wish.

Save me, Al…

She knew all too well how futile her wish was. She had willingly turned her back on Al and refused his helping hand, but as Althos' invasion was imminent, she had nothing to show for her actions. She knew that to Al, she was nothing more than a traitor.

"Gehehe. You've grown quite a bit, haven't you?"

"Ah! No…"

Ranbolg didn't plan to wait for Sharon to collect herself. He began caressing her bloody back, then slid his hand down her waist and all the way to her bottom. Clenching her teeth, she tried her best to endure the humiliation, but tears suddenly welled up in her eyes. It was unclear even for Sharon if they were tears of regret.

"Hehehehe, I'll explore every nook and cranny of your body tonight," Ranbolg said lustfully and stepped closer.

No. No no no no no! If I have to be ravaged, to be toyed with by this man, then… At that moment, Sharon made a decision. Deep in her heart, she said one last goodbye to the boy referred to as the Demon King, pushed her tongue forward inside her mouth, widened her jaw, and…

"W-We're under attack!" The guards screamed from outside.

"Tch, just when we were getting to the good part. What's going on!?" Infuriated, Ranbolg stormed out of the tent.

"I-I'm safe?" After being dazed for a few seconds, Sharon finally sighed the pent-up air out of her lungs alongside words of relief. She tried to recall what had just happened. "Tch, that bastard!"

All she wanted was to run to the river and scrub her body until her skin peeled off, but just as she was fantasizing about removing the filth from her body, she felt another presence approaching.

"Sharon, ya there?"

“Airi, is that you?” Sharon asked, realizing she’d heard that voice before.

“Yah, yah! Oi, Sharon, been a while!”

The person entering the tent answered in a lively tone.

“Airi! You’re alive!”

“You betcha! I ’ave all me digits, too!” Despite being bound by chains, Airi wiggled her toes for Sharon. “Wait, we can’t be foolin’ around! We ’ave to get yer back sorted ’fore it gits worse an’ leaves a scar!”

Airi took a step closer to Sharon.

“Merciful God watchin’ over us, bless me wit yer ’ealin’ ’ands.” She placed her hands, glowing with warm light, on Sharon’s back.

“Wait, when did you become a priestess?”

“Nah, I ain’t a priestess! I’m a paladin!” she declared with a smug smile. “Fer goodness’ sake, what was ’e thinkin’, beatin’ ya up like this! That’s how ya’d treat a girl!? What if ’e left scars on yer beautiful skin!?”

She treated Sharon’s injuries one by one while mouthing off against Ranbolg.

“I’m not a girl, I’m a proper woman!”

“Huh!? Whatcha mean, ‘woman’? Didja do somethin’ naughty wit Alnoa? Ya got all plump an’ jiggly since we met; didja let ’im play wit ’em? Ya can tell me, I’ll keep it ’tween us!”

“Haah… It’s good to know you’re the same old perv I know so well.”

“You betcha! Boobs’re me life!”

“I was just kidding! You don’t have to boast about it!” Sharon acted upset, but deep down, she was grateful for Airi’s unexpected visit. “I also have to thank whoever planned this night raid.”

Despite coming a bit late, she was still grateful for the distraction.

“Hmm? We did that! Well, we really just burned tha storage tent, but at least Ranbolg’ll be out all night lookin’ fer tha attackers.”

Her mysterious savior seemed to be standing right in front of her.

“Wait, then you…”

“Yep! It ain’t no coinkydink! But dun worry, Ranbolg’s lettin’ us Lost Children look after ya!”

“Does that mean all of you are fine!?”

Sharon made a single request of the king before she accepted her duties as a Diva: “Don’t kill any of the Lost Children as long as I am serving as your Diva.” The king had accepted her request, probably because he planned to use them as hostages against Sharon.

“Yah. All five ’undred Lost Children’re alive.”

“Thank goodness.” Sharon released all her worries with a deep sigh.

“Ain’t much ’as changed since then, but at least we’re fed an’ allowed ta go inta battle. They dun rob us of our chastity, neither,” Airi said with a wry smile.

The Lost Children were used as sentinels for encampments. Despite serving under Ranbolg himself, he viewed them as dirt, so he’d never so much as touch them. It was probably a blessing in disguise.

“An’ we can move ’round an’ do a whole buncha things when we’re outside Freiya!” she said happily, but the chains dangling from her legs denied that claim. “But that’s enougha that. Sharon, ya saved our lives! We’re free ta live as long as ya listen ta them, but if ya go against their wishes ’r die, we’ll be killed too.”

“I-Is that so?”

Sharon averted her gaze. She wasn’t used to being regarded as a savior.

“So we trained ’ard ta always be there fer ya when ya need us!” Airi said while gently caressing Sharon’s back. She was done healing her wounds.

Haah, so doing all this wasn’t in vain!

“Okey-dokey, artichokey, I’m done ’ere! Yer still gonna feel pain fer a couple o’ days, but it should be ’unky-dory after that.”

Sharon felt blood rush to her cheeks when she heard Airi’s lively words.

“I appreciate your consideration, Airi, and I think what you did is wonderful.

Hearing about it nearly moved me to tears, but could you stop touching me?”

“Huh? How come? Ain’t like they’ll get smaller!”

“Maybe not, but my gratitude certainly will!”

If not for Airi groping her, theirs would have been a perfect, ideal reunion. Regardless, Sharon was incredibly happy to see her again.

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“Sharon! Ah! Grkhhh!” Al awoke from his nightmare drenched in a cold sweat, but he immediately recoiled from the throbbing pain in his back.

“Is this… my room?”

Battling his terrible headache, he tried to recall what had transpired before he got into his bed.

“Oh, that’s right.” He remembered reaching out for Sharon, but nothing after that. More specifically, nothing after Sharon declined his help.

“So, what should I— Huh?” He spotted Cecilia by his bed, dozing off. She’d probably spent several days and nights nursing Al, as he could clearly see dark circles forming under her eyes.

“Thank you, Cecilia.” He gently pet her head, being careful not to wake her up.

“Nh! Hehehehe, don’t be so rash, Al… Mhhh…”

I wonder what kind of dream she’s having.

Seeing Cecilia’s delighted smile, Al’s face also bloomed into a smile.

“Mhhh, nooooo! Al… we’re siblings… Nahhh! ≡ Not there… Ah, stahhhp… Ahhhn!≡ Jeez… You naughty little boy…”

Seriously, what sort of dream is that? Al felt betrayed by his previous, soothing feelings triggered by Cecilia’s sleeping face.

“I always have to rely on others to save my neck.” Al thought he had finally become more competent as a king, but based on his recent actions, that wasn’t the case. He’d once again let his emotions control him, leading him to run headfirst into battle and have the tables turned on him.

“That is not true at all!” While he was blaming himself, Cecilia awoke from her slumber.

“When did you wake up?”

“When you said, ‘Thank you’.”

“Yeah, right! I’m sure you were awake all along! Urgh!”

A sharp pain ran up his back as he overexcited himself.

“Oh my, calm down! I closed your wounds, but you haven’t fully recovered yet!” she said as she expertly undressed Al to check on his wounds.

“You didn’t mindlessly charge into battle against Freiya. You were fulfilling your duties as king.”

Cecilia’s calm explanation left Al with a couple of questions, the first of which being if she was biased toward him. After all, they were siblings, and the care she showed him didn’t go unnoticed. But instead of confirming his suspicion, Al used his chance to say what had been on his mind for several days.

“Then you should rely on me, too. I noticed that you’ve been feeling down lately. Is there anything on your mind?”

“Oh my, really? Well, yes, very much so! The bill I handed you the other day —” Cecilia averted her gaze after a moment of thinking, and started talking.

“You don’t have to lie to me. I always have my eyes on you, so I know when you’re telling the truth.”

For the record, he meant that as her brother, nothing else.

“Eep! Y-You’re… always watching me!?”

That small detail went right past Cecilia, of course, but Al decided to go along with the slight change in nuance and nodded to further the discussion.

“Oh my, I never thought you would see me as a woman.” Cecilia was getting more and more flushed, which led Al to the conclusion that the conversation was going further off the rails than he originally anticipated.

“Anyway, please, tell me if anything happens! I may be unreliable, but we’re siblings!”

Cecilia looked into Al's eyes with a smile.

"Oh my, you've grown quite a bit, haven't you? I will cherish my memories of the days when you were running after me."

Wait, I don't remember anything like that. Al couldn't bring himself to deny that dazzling smile.

"My goodness. Now that you're all grown up, I want nothing more than to push you down on the bed and partake in some… adult activities. I will restrain myself, however, and explain what happened."

Proposing something so normal for siblings was strangely abnormal coming from her.

"Keep calm and listen to what I tell you. You collapsed on the battlefield and have been unconscious for two days. During that time, Freiya declared war on us. Their reason was our alleged restriction of the Freiyan Diva and our attack on the prince of Freiya."

Her words helped Al remember some of the events, but they also raised numerous questions.

"How should we proceed after this?" Cecilia asked in a kind tone, paying extra heed not to blame Al.

"I'll do what I feel is right," he said, staring straight into her eyes. "I'll save Sharon and fend off the Freiyan invasion! I can't do that alone, of course; I'll need all the help I can get. Would you please lend me your strength?" He phrased it like a wish, but in reality, it was only his cowardice talking.

"Oh my, have I ever declined any of your requests? Of course I haven't! I'd gladly throw myself into a smoldering pit of fire, the depths of the ocean, or even the comfort of your bed!"

She had never denied a request from him before. Her answer was slightly uncanny, but Al showed his genuine appreciation for her undying support with a smile.

Chapter Three: Battle on the Plains

“You’ve got some nerve, eating peacefully when we’re up to our eyes in trouble!”

Al dragged himself to the dining hall to have breakfast, only to immediately be told off by Jamka.

“I admit, Ranbolg made some mistakes, but tell me: what was going through your tiny brain when you charged at a former guest of the state!?”

As Jamka smashed his hands down on the table, Saaya jumped up and hid behind Luna. Other than those four, Feena, Cecilia, and Brusch were also present at the table. Sharon, of course, was not there.

“Calm down, Jamka. Luna and Saaya are guests too; startling them would look bad for the whole country. Besides, don’t you think it’s strange?” he asked Jamka while simultaneously calming him down and enjoying his breakfast.

“Don’t I think what’s strange?”

Feena answered Jamka’s question. “They’re acting too fast. No general should be allowed to declare war without the approval of their country, despite what atrocities they or other guests may have suffered. They planned this from the start.”

“But I still can’t accept you rushing after Sharon all alone.” And, naturally, as his self-proclaimed legal wife, she couldn’t miss the chance to deride Al.

“I’m really sorry for that, Feena. I’d like to apologize to you too, Kanon.” Al bowed before them. From what he’d heard, Feena, Kanon, and Cecilia had taken on the entire enemy army by themselves, so he couldn’t thank them enough. Yet, for some reason, Feena averted her gaze.

“It’s okay. The compensation was more than worth it,” she said while giggling, which made Al wonder what in the world had happened while he was unconscious.

“Either way, our enemy is an army of eight thousand led by the tyrant Prince Ranbolg, while our numbers barely scratch half of that. We’ll need a damn good

plan if we want to beat them!”

“Certainly, Ranbolg’s army was a handful to deal with at first. They’re rumored to be a band of misfits and mercenaries, but they followed Ranbolg’s and their lieutenant commander’s orders to the letter. Individually, their skills were above that of an average soldier’s, though they were nowhere near the level of an Eshantel warrior! Plus, Lady Cecilia easily disposed of them once she let loose!” Kanon threw in her two cents. Ever since their battle with Ranbolg’s army, Kanon started referring to Cecilia as ‘Lady’, looking at her with genuine awe and dread.

What in the world happened in that battle?

“Their army is skilled and numerous. I experienced their wrath first-hand. But…” Al took a dramatic pause and looked at each person present. “But, I think we can win with everyone’s help. It’ll be tough, it’ll be risky, but I want to save Althos. And there’s one more thing I’d like to do.”

He sat up straight in his chair.

“I want to save Sharon. Please, lend me your strength to save her!”

He bowed in front of everyone.

“Oh my, I already gave you my answer.”

“It’s a wife's job to fulfill her husband's requests. Also, I want to save my friend.”

“This is my chance to repay you for everything! Trust me, I’ll tear them a new one!”

“Ah! I-I’ll help too!”

Cecilia, Feena, Kanon, and even Luna offered their help.

“I’ll be there for you too!”

“Mm.”

Brusch answered Al’s request as well, while Jamka simply nodded.

“Thank you all so much.” He was a bit embarrassed after getting so much support, so he decided to stuff his mouth with chicken to hide his slight blush.

I can't let myself get carried away this time. I won't charge at them; I'll fight to the very best of my abilities!

The sorrowful eyes of a certain crimson-haired girl crossed his mind. He mercilessly bit into his chicken while staring at the empty space in front of him.

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"Useless, all of you! Why didn't you find the assailant last night!?" Ranbolg slammed his fists on the table at their temporary headquarters.

"We're using all of our power to search for the perpetrator! Please, give us a bit more time." Gatou, who had just recently woken up from the nightmare Cecilia's spell induced, let Ranbolg's wrath slide. Despite how it seemed, Gatou, the ex-mercenary, had never sworn loyalty to him. He was simply on a secret mission that required him to see Ranbolg's orders through to the best of his abilities.

"Hmph, whatever. We should begin our march toward Althos. I trust that the army is prepared to embark."

Gatou silently nodded. Their strategy for dealing with Divas in the last battle was deemed mostly successful. He believed that with a bigger platoon, they could even hold a certain blonde-haired, blue-eyed Diva at bay. Understandably, Gatou himself didn't want to face her again and planned to keep his distance from that part of the battlefield, but…

"Lord Ranbolg! Our scouts have reported movement at Althos! They've begun amassing their troops and are ready to march on our location!"

"What!? Are they out of their minds!?"

According to reports, Althos only had four thousand-odd soldiers. It was unbelievable to hear that they were now taking the initiative with an army half the size of Ranbolg's own. It seemed like a foolish act of self-destruction, a plea to die an honorable death. That was perfect for him, though, as he didn't want to spend any more time in the middle of nowhere.

"Good, we'll engage them. Everyone should've recovered from that Diva's attack, so mobilize all the troops and move out according to our training!" Ranbolg's orders echoed through the tent.

Althos will fall. After that, I'll go back home, marry Sharon, start a rebellion, and usurp the throne! Ranbolg smiled as he went over his roadmap to success.

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"Hmm… Where am I?"

Sharon woke up on the ground. Despite spending the night on a thin rug, which was a far cry from the luxury beds she was used to, she'd had a pleasant dream and felt completely refreshed.

"Bah, I 'ate this!"

Next to her was the half-naked Airi.

"Oh, I see…"

Ranbolg considered yesterday's attack an attempt to free Sharon, so he moved her to the Lost Children's tent for further surveillance. After being stripped and chained to the others, she had been left there for the night, but she was happy to see them first thing in the morning.

"I'm not dreaming. I'm not dreaming, right?"

To make sure that she was, in fact, awake, she gently poked the peacefully sleeping Airi's cheeks.

"Mhhmhmhm… Nooo, stahhhp…"

She wasn't dreaming, but…

"Naaah! Stahhhp! I'm flattered, Ya Majesty, but Sharon—"

Wham!

"Aaaah! Oi, that 'uuuurt!"

Airi was rolling on the floor while rubbing the top of her head. Sharon was certain that this couldn't have possibly been a dream.

"Oi, now! Dun be so rough on me! I can't even foight back now!" Airi said while sitting up and staring at Sharon with her brown eyes.

"You were having a strange dream, so I wanted to snap you out of it," Sharon answered with a nonchalant tone and a playful smile.

“Hmmm, it’s quite rare for you to not hold back, Sharon. Or did you find her comments revolting to the point that she deserved your unfiltered wrath?” the person lying next to Airi addressed Sharon in a sleepy voice.

“You really think I’d ever do something so pitiful?” Sharon answered calmly.

“I see you’ve still got that habit of denying claims of mischief with a straight face.”

“Fer real! Ya always ’ave on a mask, but yer twitchin’ mouth gives ya away!”

“What!? That’s not—” Sharon hurriedly covered her mouth, but that didn’t stop the others from chiming in.

“Hey, Sharon! What kind of person is Alnoa? Is he cool? Nice?

“He’s a total tenderfoot! B-But, well, I guess he’s n-n—nothing! Nothing at all!”

The tent roared with laughter as a small crowd formed around Sharon. She knew all of them, and they hadn’t changed at all in the past years. No matter how tough or brutal their circumstances were, they endured with a smile.

Maybe this is where I truly belong, she thought while enjoying their chit-chat.

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“The only question is who we should leave behind,” Al said to himself while scratching his head.

He was in his office along with the three Divas, Jamka, Brusch, Luna, and Saaya. Luna was definitely the odd one out, but since she had been inevitably caught up in the situation, Al invited her to the meeting to discuss her immediate return to her country. It was a real shame, but it had to be done. Al considered inviting her to have some fun as reconciliation once things settled down.

“Is there really anyone we *can* leave behind? Based on the plan you proposed, I’ll be necessary to command our troops.”

“Me too! I’m your future bride, and you totally need an expert reconnaissance network, right!?”

Ignoring Brusch's comments about being his bride, she was right. Both her and Jamka were absolutely necessary on the battlefield, along with Cecilia, Feena, and Kanon to boost their military strength.

"Haah… Y'know, I'm starting to realize that we may not have enough staff."

"Oh my, but you have me! I'd massacre an army of ten thousand for you!" Cecilia said boastfully.

Al heard that when Feena was making her escape, Cecilia single-handedly dispatched two thousand soldiers, which was an incredible feat and would definitely come in handy in the upcoming battle. However, he had also heard that she'd collapsed from exhaustion.

I don't want to push her any further, he thought, but he knew deep down that her help was invaluable.

"I'd love to have you with us, but don't you dare push yourself past your limits!"

"Oh my, to think that the heavens blessed me with such a kind little brother! It must be the overwhelming love speaking that we've crossed the boundaries between siblings! Just hearing your kind words gives me strength enough to face a million—"

"My love didn't cross any boundaries, and I told you not to push yourself! Hm, Feena? Is everything okay?"

Feena had been silently staring at them for a while now. Interestingly, she was sitting between Cecilia and Kanon despite always taking Al's side when possible.

"Hmph!"

"Huh? What? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You didn't do anything."

He was starting to feel relieved, but Feena's mood didn't improve one bit.

"Ahaha! She's just jealous! Luna and Lady Cecilia have been hogging you all for—Nghh!"

“Can it, Boing-Boing!” Feena elbowed Kanon’s side.

“Whyyy!? Don’t bring that name back!”

It seemed like Kanon’s feelings were more hurt than her body.

“Right, sorry,” Al said. “You were the first ones to dive into eight thousand soldiers to save me, so showing some gratitude is the least I can do. So tell me, is there anything I can—”

“Hug,” Feena responded immediately, looking at Al with puppy-dog eyes.

“Huh? No, I mean, that’s—”

“Mm≡“

Cutting Al off, Feena jumped at him, over the desk that separated them.

“Nghhh! Why so sudden—”

“Ooh! Me too, I want one too! Give me a… Ah! A piggyback ride!”

She changed her mind after taking Feena’s death stare.

“Why now!? Do you really want a piggyback ride in the middle of our strategy meeting!?” Al, still holding Feena, stood up to further illustrate his complaint, but that was a grave mistake.

“Ooh! I’m being carried like a princess!”

While Feena reveled in joy, Kanon quickly circled around Al, and…

“There!”

…hopped on his back.

“Wait, you’re… actually not heavy at all, but…”

Even during such a surreal experience, he could appreciate Feena’s sweet scent and the soft feeling of Kanon’s chest pushing against his back. As a man, he couldn’t bring himself to shake them off, so he accepted his fate and sat back down.

“Well, I’m glad we could settle this with some hugs, but couldn’t we have done this at a later time?”

“No.” An instant, unanimous response. Al was still dumbfounded by the

situation.

“Haah… Normally, I would condemn you for letting women use you as a hug pillow, but I can’t bring myself to do so for some reason.” Luna’s eyes were filled with pity for Al.

“You look like a father whose children are clinging to him after running away from your wife!” Brusch said sympathetically, not bothering to filter herself. Al identified with her description surprisingly well.

The conversation had derailed so far that he didn’t think there was any way out of their deadlock.

“Umm, we were talking about who should stay behind, am I correct?” Luna came to his rescue. Al silently nodded. “What if I stayed here?” she added.

“Wait, you? Here, in this castle?”

Al hadn’t expected such a development.

“Yes! I came here in hopes of forming an alliance with Althos, so helping in your time of need would only be natural.” He realized he’d never asked Luna about the reason for her sudden visit. “With me looking over the castle, no one has to stay behind!”

She raised both her hands to her mouth and chuckled, appreciating her own idea. Having Distania’s princess, Luna, and their Diva, Saaya, watching over the castle would certainly be reassuring. Al crossed his arms and glanced at Jamka for advice.

“Don’t even think about it. We’re not officially allied with Distania yet, not to mention that Luna is a guest. If anything were to happen to her, it’d become an international crisis.”

“I’m also technically a foreign guest.” Unexpected help came to Al from his lap. Feena voiced her opinion while staring at Luna with a smug look, as if she’d gotten revenge on her.

“Plus, an alliance was in place with Freiya and look what happened.” Naturally, Kanon also took Feena’s side. Now, all eyes were on Cecilia.

“Oh my, I really don’t care what happens as long as I can go with Al.”

Now it was all up to Jamka and— “Thanks for staying!” Brusch bowed to Luna, which meant it was all up to Jamka.

“Then, umm… I’m terribly sorry, Lady Luna and Lady Saaya, but, well, could we possibly, umm…”

Jamka’s hesitation wasn’t uncalled for in the slightest. Luna and Al might have been engaged in the past, but that was years ago. Jamka didn’t want to ask why Luna would offer an alliance and direct help, but not knowing their real intentions frightened him.

“Okay, then what if I let Saaya take part in the battle? That’d prove our alliance to you, wouldn’t it?”

“What!? No! Then who’s gonna be here to protect the castle!?”

Al realized that leaving her here would technically have her participating in the battle as the last bastion of defense.

“I would join you, but I can’t leave Saaya alone…”

“But you have no problem sending her out to the battlefield!?”

It was a bizarre situation. They had been locked in a stalemate just moments ago, but now they were heading toward complete chaos. Cecilia decided to add another option into the mix.

“Oh my, then how about this! I’ll cast a super basic Bind on Luna!”

“What’s with that satisfied look? obviously, we can’t do—”

“Let’s do it!” Luna interrupted Al. “Let’s do it! If stringing me up naked is what it takes for you to trust me, then so be it!”

“Not that kind of bind!” Al reflexively shut down Luna’s delusions, but her foundation didn’t shake at all.

“Why not? It should work for both Jamka and Luna.” Kanon joined the conversation.

“You know, I’m pretty new here too, so I kind of understand how she feels. I have Feena for myself, so I don’t feel like as much of an outcast as she probably does, but I also want to get to know all of you better.”

Al was completely awestruck.

Did something possess you? I never thought the happy-go-lucky girl who always fooled around with Feena would have such deep thoughts.

“Al, I understand your reaction, but don’t you think ‘happy-go-lucky’ is a bit too demeaning?”

Hey, who taught you how to read my mind!?

“Cut it out, Al, or I’ll get mad.” Kanon whispered into his ear in an upbeat tone, but her eyes were colder than the darkest winter night. Al was absolutely certain that she could read minds.

“Anyway! We don’t have time to argue about this! Cast Bind or Discharge or whatever else you want at me! I’m ready!”

“Why are you so excited about becoming a target for spells!?”

Al wanted to plant his face into his hands, but since both of them were occupied by Feena, he had to settle for a sigh.

“Jamka, would you be okay with that?” Al glanced at Jamka to finally settle this issue and move on.

“All right, let’s go with that. Lady Luna, please promise us one thing.” Jamka returned Al’s gaze, urging him to take over. Al nodded in agreement and looked at Luna.

“Luna. If even for a second you feel like you’re in trouble, run. I said the same thing to our citizens and the castle guards. Even if we lose the castle, we can recapture this lump of stone at any time.”

“Hey! What king refers to their castle as a ‘lump of stone’!?” Jamka got caught up on the semantics, but everyone in the room understood the meaning behind Al’s words. Human life was more important than the country or the castle. That principle was the foundation of Althos, after all.

“Oh my, allow me to cast a simple Bind, then.”

For some reason, Cecilia’s eyes lit up when she uttered the word ‘Bind’.

“Thou shall submit to my beloved, adorable brother’s words, protect thy

brethren, stay by their side. Should thou break this oath, let—" Cecilia's divine words filled the room, but based on their previous experiences, most of the people in it plugged their ears. Luna bravely endured Cecilia's entire speech despite obvious discomfort planting itself on her face.

The next morning, Al left the castle alongside his four thousand soldiers.

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"Good luck, Al!"

Al waved to Luna, who stood atop the castle walls. Judging by the blue, cloudless sky stretching out before them, it was safe to assume that they'd have to battle under the blazing sun.

After marching for a while, Al remembered something and moved next to Kanon.

"Hey, Kanon…"

"Oh wow, that's rare. You never come to talk to me." There was a lot of truth in that statement.

"I'm, uh, sorry for yesterday. Or, well, for everything."

"Huh? Sorry for what?"

Unsure of where to even start with his apology, Al simply bowed his head.

"I never realized that you were lonely. I should pay more heed to your warriors as well."

Being busy was not a valid excuse, as he should've prioritized helping Kanon and her troops—his brand new citizens—assimilate faster.

"Hahaha, why the long face?" Kanon was puzzled at first, but quickly began laughing at Al.

"I promise I'll pay more attention to you. Feel free to make yourself at home, and come to me if you need anything. I'd be happy to help with any of your requests."

"Huh!? 'I'll take care of your every need, you don't have to worry about anything for the rest of your life!' you say!?"

“No, I never said that. All I’m saying is that you should consider yourself family —” Al realized his grave mistake, but it was too late.

“F-Family!? Then after this battle is over, do you think we can make a descend —”

Fwooooosh!

A harrowing, frigid breeze was suddenly unleashed next to Kanon, to the point where it started freezing her flushed face.

“Cold! It’s too cold, Feena! Are you trying to turn me into a snowman!?”

The ice crackled on Kanon’s face as it slowly broke up and fell onto the ground.

“Tch, you can handle this much.”

“Yeah, but do you really have to freeze me just before a battle!?”

Kanon’s warriors witnessed their accomplished leader’s childish quarrel from behind. Despite having known her as a fierce, battle-hardened man for years, their loyalty to her didn’t falter in the slightest.

I’ll have to get to know them better too. If I don’t, he’ll never forgive me. The face of her friend who’d passed crossed her mind.

“Maybe I should have a pub built after this battle.” A certain crimson-haired girl popped into his mind after uttering those words. “Right. I’ll have to stuff her with food once we’re back home.”

He gripped the reins and set off for the border, where Sharon was being held captive.

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“Yeah, seriously! He’s a weakling, yet every time I ask for half a slice of cake, he goes off about food costs and me being fat and all! How cheap can you get!? And don’t even get me started on…” Sharon was gently stroking her silver hair ornaments while telling the others about her life in Althos, or, more specifically, while badmouthing Al.

While the soldiers were restlessly running around outside, the Lost Children,

chained up and wearing what amounted to scraps of clothing, enjoyed their time in the cafeteria, eating and listening to Sharon's stories. Regardless of their circumstances, they were happy to be reunited. After moving to the cafeteria, Sharon had been bombarded with questions upon Barbara's proposal.

"Our duty is to monitor the area and to act as your personal guards. In order to carry out our duties to the best of our abilities, we need to know everything about your life. As such, we will interrogate you right here, right now!"

The Lost Children consisted of five hundred youths gathered by the Freiyan king in search of the next Diva, but they were currently being used as a bargaining chip against Sharon. They'd received the same torturous training as she had and were a notch above the average soldier in terms of combat ability, so they were also deployed as combat slaves under the direct command of the Freiyan royalty. The platoon's commanding officer was Airi, while Barbara was their lieutenant. Now, they were all listening to Sharon go off on Al with a collective wry smile.

"Did I say something strange?" Sharon was simply enjoying their reunion without giving much thought to what she was saying.

"Well, you didn't say anything weird, but, you know…" Barbara looked around for support, which she got in the form of four hundred ninety-nine simultaneous nods. Sharon was completely dumbfounded.

"Nhhhh! Tha's it! Imma ask it straight!" Airi had been listening with her arms crossed, but she suddenly jumped in front of Sharon.

"You're too close! What!? Is there something in my hair!?"

She moved her hand to where Airi was looking, but all that was there was her silver hair ornament.

"Where'd ya get that? Who got it fer ya?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I bought it myself?"

"O'course not! The Demon King'd break loose if ya got sumthin' so girly yaself!"

Airi, despite being rude, was pretty much on the mark. As a matter of fact,

Sharon had gotten it from the Demon King.

“So, who did you get it from?” Barbara gave Sharon a look like a parent urging a child to spill the beans on mischief they’d caused.

Sharon slowly realized that she was trapped in all directions. The pressure on her was getting suffocating as the sea of people stepped closer and closer, staring at her in search of an answer.

“Umm, it’s from… Alnoa…” She caved under the pressure, and answered with deadpan eyes, to which…

“Haaaaaaaaaah…”

…the room was filled with half a thousand disappointed sighs.

What is this, some sort of a séance? Desperate for an explanation, she pleaded to Airi with her eyes.

“Yah, yah. I’ll explain it to ya slowly, that yer thick, dull block’ead can process it, got it?”

“Who are you calling a blockhead!?”

“You, Sharon. She’s calling you a blockhead.”

Sharon struck back, but Barbara immediately came in with a sneak attack.

“List’n, Sharon. We’re at war wit Althos, and want intel on ’em. Do ya understand that much?”

“Do you really think I’m that dumb? Of course I understand that!”

“So then why ya only talkin’ ’bout Alnoa?”

“Wait, did I talk that much about him?”

They specifically asked Sharon about information on Althos, so she’d tried her best to give them breadcrumbs.

“Ahhh! Ya’ meat’ead!”

“What!? That’s rich, coming from you! Maybe try specifying what you want next time!” Sharon started to get tired of being called names, but Airi was also at her breaking point.

“Ya know, I still learned sumthin’! Yer all over that Lord Alnoa!”

“Me? All over Al? Where did that come from?” Sharon tilted her head in confusion. Deep down, she knew exactly where Airi was coming from, but she was trying to shoo those thoughts away.

“Haah… An’ ya dun even realize it.” Airi lifted both her hands and theatrically shook her head. The others also seemed to be in utter disbelief.

“Come on, what’s this look on everyone’s face? I mean, Al is…”

Sharon shuffled through her memories. She realized that recently, thinking about Al caused an inexplicable tightness in her chest. What was even more baffling to her was that being next to him only made that feeling even stronger. But naturally, being the way she was, she could never admit to that.

“What!? I’m not…” Sharon’s gradually weaker resistance was completely snuffed out by Airi.

“Then why’re ya wearin’ tha ornament ya got from Alnoa an’ not tha one ya got from tha second prince? Just watchin’ ya stroke it all the damn time’s makin’ me red as a chili pepper!”

“Huh? Who’s stroking what?” Sharon herself hadn’t noticed what she was doing.

“Indeed. When you talk about Althos, particularly Alnoa, your face lights up. Would you like to confirm it with a mirror?”

“No, there’s no way that’s true!”

“Why’re ya pitchin’ a fit? All ya talked about was ’ow much ya love that Alnoa!”

“No! It was more like boasting about having a Casanova for a boyfriend!” Sharon desperately tried to explain the apparent misunderstanding.

“Haah… That’s why yer never gonna kiss. Yer like a dull, naïve lil’ girl.”

Airi’s insult was the final straw.

“Huh!? I’ll have you know that I’ve already—”

Crap! Too late. She could virtually see the thousand ears perk up at her

statement.

“Who did you kiss!? Was it Alnoa!?”

“Where did it happen!?”

“Sharonnnn, how did it taste?”

“Wow, I never thought this meathead would…”

“She’s already taken her first step into adulthood!”

Disregarding the curious looks from the surrounding soldiers, the girls flocked over to Sharon. She cursed her mouth for working faster than her brain, but if she didn’t put an end to this quickly, she’d be bombarded with even more questions.

I have to spill the beans, don’t I?

“It was with…”

“Kyahh!”

Everyone’s focus shifted to the source of the sudden shriek, which had interrupted Sharon’s confession.

“Too noisy. Stay put like the good slaves you are.” Behind them, Ranbolg, fully armed, kicked one of the girls to the ground and gave a stern warning to the others.

The tent went dead silent. Not only did no one raise a voice of concern, but they didn’t even cross eyes with Ranbolg. It was surreal to Sharon.

“Hmph, anyway. We’re going into battle in a few hours. Get your chains sorted and prepare for dispatch.” He threw the key to the chains onto the ground, turned on his heels, and left.

“Are you okay?”

Sharon was slowly catching on to how little had changed since she slipped away from Ranbolg’s claws. She was frozen in place for a good ten seconds after he left, and only then was she able to rush over to the abused girl. The roots of the curse put upon her were still nested deep inside her soul.

“Am I imagining things, or did he say that we’re going into battle soon?”

“No, you’re not imagining anything.”

Time stopped for a second before the tent started bustling with chatter. Airi and Barbara cast worried glances at Sharon, who was silently, internally wrestling with herself.

Althos against the Lost Children… Who should I side with?

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“Alnoa, everyone’s in position!” Brusch reported before galloping off to the side. The two armies faced off against each other on the plains near the border under the blazing morning sun. Al glared at the Freiyan army and took a few steps forward. Cecilia, Feena, and Kanon caught up to him shortly after, and with that, he was ready to address his troops.

“Listen to me!” he shouted from the top of his horse, which made everyone cut their chatter and focus on him. Al was never good with public speaking, but he couldn’t show any weakness. Not before a battle. “We stand here today to face the Freiyan army! As has become almost customary, I once again have to say that the odds are against us, as their army is double the size of ours!”

He theatrically slumped on his horse, causing a few giggles in the crowd, but that wasn’t enough. He needed more engagement.

“Their general is none other than the cunning, brutal dictator, Ranbolg! If we are to lose this battle, he will undoubtedly rule our country with fear and tyranny!” Feeling the tension, the soldiers fell completely silent. Al chose his words carefully to illustrate just how grave their situation was, as he truly believed that Ranbolg would transform Althos into a living nightmare.

“But we have three Divas, the embodiments of the great Valkyrie on our side! No enemy stands a chance when we have such powerful allies!” He purposefully decided to exclude Sharon from his speech to avoid creating any unnecessary confusion. He then raised his hand toward the sky while standing next to the three Divas.

A moment later, the crowd erupted. It seemed like the presence of the Divas was more effective at firing the crowd up than Al’s acting.

“I know! Let’s have a feast today in celebration of our victory!”

He unsheathed his scythe and raised it to the sky.

“Yeaaah!” The crowd grew even louder.

Wow, they’re more excited than I thought. Al was starting to gain some confidence in his theatrical abilities.

“Oh my, I will personally pour a cup for the person who does the best!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The ground beneath the countless cheers shook as Cecilia raised her weapon to the sky and made an enticing offer. Following her example, Feena and Kanon also raised their weapons high into the air.

“I will pet their head.”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“And I’ll… Just do your best!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Ah, okay, I see how it is. They’re only in high spirits because of the girls, huh? No, it’s okay, it doesn’t hurt at all. I’m fine, really.

He didn’t want to wait until the excitement died down, so he turned his scythe toward the enemy and put on his coarsest voice.

“Prepare to attack! He directed everyone’s attention to the battle at hand. “Cecilia, Feena, I’m counting on you.”

“Oh my, leave it all to me!”

“Understood. I’ll show them the power of an angry wife!”

“Let’s go, Kanon!”

After getting cheerful answers from Cecilia and Feena, Al took Kanon and disappeared between his troops.

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“Gatou, the enemy is right in front of us. Why won’t you order an attack!?”

Gatou ignored Ranbolg’s mad scream and merely stared at Althos’ army from their headquarters. Their forces arrived just as he imagined, but their high

spirits and booming battle cry worried the seasoned general. He also found their formation unusual. Their vanguard consisted of heavy infantry, boasting incredible defenses thanks to their full-body armor and metal shields, instead of cavalry, a much more conventional choice for a field battle.

"I wonder what that sly king is up to."

Hearing Gatou's whisper, Ranbolg glanced at Sharon.

"Beats me. Who knows what that—Ahem, what goes through Lord Alnoa's mind." Sharon answered, looking away from Ranbolg.

"Hahaha! Seems our precious Diva woke up on the wrong side of the bed today!"

Ranbolg's mood immediately improved upon seeing Sharon's distressed face. He had ordered the Lost Children—Sharon included—to act as his personal guards, presumably because he didn't want to risk having the girls change sides on the far-away battlefield. Or maybe because he wanted to see the despair on Sharon's face once Althos had been crushed.

"You just have to stay by my side. Putting you on display is enough to boost our troops' morale," Ranbolg said with a smirk.

"I'm nothing but a pretty doll to him," Sharon said in the faintest of whispers.

Haah… If things hadn't turned out like this, I'd be at the head of the army, fighting alongside Al. She lamented her fate. *Maybe that's only because Al's poor, understaffed country needs all the help it can get, but at least I was more than a living, breathing decoration.*

Ignorant of Sharon's struggles, Ranbolg stared at the enemy army.

"Hmph. Their dirty little tricks will change nothing. They're an insignificant dot on the map with the military genius of a shepherd. They stand no chance against my fabled Knights of the First Order. Listen up! All forces, attack! Trap the enemy army and destroy them with all your might! This is it!"

This is the final piece I need to get my hands on Freiya!

Sharon made an educated guess as to how Ranbolg's sentence should have ended, as he couldn't say something like that out loud in front of Airi and the

other Lost Children. Regardless, he ordered his eight thousand troops to engage Althos without giving any heed to Sharon's feelings. But even if he knew Sharon's innermost feelings, he wouldn't have understood why his actions gave birth to a small bud of defiance in her heart.

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"The enemy has made their move! They want to use their numbers to surround us!" After a brief report to Al, Brusch immediately rode off to the other direction.

"Thanks, Brusch!" Al raised his voice and waved at her to catch her attention.

She heard his words and waved back, shouting, "You're welcome! I'll go and get more intel!"

"All right, here we go. Feena! Wreak havoc on them! Cecilia! Charge in once the enemy has faltered!"

"Roger."

"Understood."

The wind spell they used to communicate was working like a charm.

"Kanon, are you ready?"

"Of course!" Kanon raised her sword, and began her speech in a manner not unlike a certain crimson-haired girl. "Listen here! The time to repay their favor has come! Show these Freiyan bastards the strength of Eshantel!"

"Hooah!" The warriors imitated Kanon and pointed their swords to the sky.

Bwooooom!

The ground roared beneath them. Everyone looked toward the source of the impact—a gigantic flame pillar blasting countless Freiyan soldiers away. The battle had begun.

"Attack!" Carrying his scythe, Al charged forward.

"*Fireball*. *Frost Ball*. *Lightning Ball*."

The blue-haired Diva dispatched countless spells from inside a protective phalanx of heavy infantry soldiers. She'd managed to put a stop to the incoming

cavalry by freezing, shocking, and burning the vanguard, with the soldiers behind them simply tripping over their fallen comrades. However, that didn't stop the enemy from quickly locating Feena and sending countless spells and arrows her way.

"Shields up! Don't let anything reach Lady Feena!" the commander ordered his troops.

"Sir, yes, sir!" the entire heavy infantry unit shouted.

"Oh my, *Absolute Magic Barrier*!"

The soldiers raised their shields and Cecilia cast a magic barrier, but a couple of arrows and spells slipped through their defenses, hitting the shields and finding their way into the small gaps of the soldiers' armor.

"*Fireball*! Are you okay?" Feena asked the weary soldiers while keeping up her barrage of spells.

"Worry not, Lady Lesfina! We of the heavy infantry will protect you to our dying breath!" He answered with a hearty smile while pulling an arrow out of his elbow.

"Thanks, but don't die. I want you to keep supporting Althos for a long time to come," the blue-haired Diva from Subdera said before letting out a small chuckle.

"Whoa…" The soldiers gazed at Feena in awe, forgetting the chaos around them.

"U-Understood! Then I'll be at your service until the time comes for me to part from this mortal world!"

"But you're Althos'—"

"Raaaaah! Listen up, you bastards! Protect that wonderful smile at all costs! Should you meet your maker in battle, flip him off and get your ass back here! No lives will be lost today!"

Feena's words seemed to have fired up the troops.

"I'm Al's wife, so I suppose it'll work out somehow." With that, she got back to blasting the enemy with countless spells from behind the cover of the wall of

soldiers.

“Oh my, let me know if you get injured and I will get you back on your feet immediately. But I will punish you if you come to me with mere scratches!” A calm, collected voice boomed through the tense battlefield.

“Listen up, you bastards! I understand that getting punished is a fantasy for some of you, but this isn’t the time for that! Do your best to protect Lady Cecilia’s bright smile!”

“Hooah!”

Their enthusiasm wasn’t just for show; they fought for the girls with everything they had. The heavy infantry alongside Feena continued their advance through the hellish battlefield, and before the Freiyan army could react, they’d made their way into the heart of the enemy troops, splitting their forces in two.

Their phalanx might have made it into the thick of the battle, but the enemy headquarters was still a ways away, and the wave of Freiyan soldiers only grew as they inched closer to their goal.

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“What the hell is that man doing, trapping his own forces!?” Ranbolg viewed their efforts as nothing more than a desperate struggle, but the simple fact that they didn’t throw in the towel drove him mad.

“What are you fumbling around for!? Crush them already! The first unit to break their defenses will be rewarded!” His orders gave each individual unit an incentive to work toward, but it also decreased the unity between his troops.

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“Don’t overextend! Focus on defense!” Jamka’s order boomed across the battlefield.

Only two, maybe three enemy soldiers could get close to any member of Althos’ phalanx at once. Blinded by the elusive reward, they kept up the continuous pressure, but their stamina was finite. Slowly but surely, the Freiyan war machine started to lose steam, but the exhausted soldiers at the front

refused to give up their spots to incoming reinforcements in pursuit of the reward. This resulted in the phalanx being surrounded by a group of dead-tired soldiers who could do nothing but poke at them every once in a while, while the able, fresh reinforcements endlessly piled up behind them.

"I'll double the bounty of the first unit to tear down Althos' defenses!" Al used this chance to spread fake information using his trusty wind spell, further damaging the Freiyan army's spirit.

Watching from the headquarters, Sharon noticed a fatal flaw in Al's plan. The Freiyan army may have been in complete disarray, but that didn't rob them their numerical advantage. Althos' soldiers were humans too; the Divas' smiles may have kept their spirits up for a while, and they may have been supported by Feena's relentless barrage of spells and Cecilia's healing abilities, but their stamina was limited. It was only a matter of time before they would be overwhelmed and swallowed up. But then…

"Rahhh!"

…a new unit charged through the middle of the split battlefield, led by a man wielding a huge scythe and a girl wielding a long blade. Sharon stared at them in awe.

"Al. Kanon."

Hearing Sharon's relieved whisper, Ranbolg furrowed his brow.

"Focus! Increase pressure on the sides! Vanguard, prioritize defense! Stop their cavalry at all cost!" Gatou's orders carried across the field.

"The first and second lines of defense have been breached!"

Looking back at the battlefield, Ranbolg realized that the third line of defense had been breached as well. Furthermore, he could see Al rushing toward them with his own eyes.

"Move it! Get out of my way!" Al swung his scythe, carving a path for himself on the battlefield.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Kanon rode next to Al, slashing through the incoming spears. "Ahaha! I'm not letting you lay a finger on Al until we reach our goal!"

“Kanon watch ou—!”

Al noticed a couple of Freiyan soldiers behind Kanon. He didn’t have the time to get his scythe in position to fend off the incoming blades.

“Sorry, Kanon!”

“Kyah!”

He grabbed her shoulder with his free hand and pulled her away from the danger.

“Leave him alone, you bastards!”

A katana suddenly swung in from the side, breaking all the swords aimed at Al and Kanon. By the time Al turned around to check what had happened, the pursuing Freiyan soldiers were lying on the ground, unconscious.

“For crying out loud, Kanemitsu. Thanks for the help, but keep in mind that I’m a princess!” Kanon explained while sitting in Al’s arms, fending off the incoming attacks.

“Ahn, Al! You’re so rough!≡“

He knew exactly what the change in her tone meant.

“Kanon, we don’t have time for that now! Please…”

“I know, I know!”

Do you really, though?

She looked straight into his worried eyes and roared as she dispatched a couple of enemy soldiers with a single swing, then grinned.

“I told you, didn’t I? As much as I’d love to flirt, we have to get through here somehow!”

Kanon kept swinging her sword from the comfort of Al’s arms.

“I really appreciate your hard work, Kanon, but could you get back on your own horse soon?”

“Noooo! I like it here! I can’t—”

“*Ice Pellet*. A big one.”

Thunk!

She was interrupted by a lump of ice hitting her on the head.

“Quit your bickering and hurry up!”

“Ugh! Feena, you meanie!”

Kanon collapsed in Al’s arms.

“This is bad!” He shook Kanon by the shoulder, to which she put her hand on his and squeezed it tightly.

“I’m fine, just a bit dizzy. Things are heating up back there, so it’s time to say goodbye!” She slipped out of Al’s arms, sending a wink his way before hopping back on her own horse. “Beware, you fools! My love tanks are full! May the gods have mercy on any poor soul who gets in my way now!”

Al didn’t even bother asking what ‘love tanks’ were; he simply watched in awe as Kanon wreaked havoc amongst the enemy troops.

“Hiyah! Yah! Yah! Yah! Yah!”

The enemies were falling at an alarming rate.

“Go! Follow her lead!”

The warriors spread across the open road behind Kanon.

“Whew! Well, that’s the fabled Eshantel warriors for you, I suppose. But I can’t laze around back here either!” He was just about to follow the trail Kanon had blazed, but two warriors rode in front of him and blocked his path.

“Hey, you’re in the way! Move!” Al shouted, but all he got in response were cheeky smiles.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, a battle is waiting ahead of you. I believe that you should save as much stamina as possible. Getting you there safely is our battle to fight, and we won’t let anyone steal our glory!”

Their argument was, effectively, “Everyone should stick to their own job”.

“Guess I’ll listen to them and take a small breather,” he wished, but wishes are rarely granted on the battlefield.

“Hold fast! Hold until the very end! Your comrades who got knocked out are now coming at them from behind! Once we get them inside the pincer, Althos is done for!”

Freiya’s last line of defense was their heavy infantry with magically boosted defenses. They’d managed to slow down Althos’ advance considerably, to the point where they’d come to a standstill.

“Ahaha, that’s all she wrote, huh?”

Kanon looked at Al and shrugged. Inviting his help, the warriors finally let Al through.

“Good luck, Al!”

“Huh?”

As he rode up next to Kanon, she wrapped one arm around his waist and effortlessly lifted him up.

“Feena told me something really interesting. Apparently, you can cancel a Diva’s powers.”

Al had a really bad feeling about this.

“Kanon. Can we talk about this another time and focus on their heavy infaAAAAAH!”

“Of course! Now, gooooo!” She threw him high into the air, and…

I’m flying.

…swung her twinkling blade right at him with all her might.

Clanggg!

“Aaaaaah! Dammit, Kanon! I’ll remember thiiiiis!” Al just had enough time to leave some parting threats before he flew across the sky toward the enemy’s headquarters.

“Don’t worry. You can curse me out all you want after you bring Sharon back,” Kanon said with flushed cheeks as she watched the king shoot off into the distance.

“Haah, haah. I’m here. Let’s finish this!” Al had arrived safely—albeit in a less-

than-graceful manner—sliding on his butt for a couple of yards before coming to a halt. Pain radiated through his lower half, but he couldn't let that stop him. Not when Feena, Kanon, and his entire army were fighting with their lives on the line just outside.

Hold tight. I won't take long, I promise.

Eager to put an end to this battle, he fixed his stance and drew his scythe.

"Pfwahahahaha! Magnificent! Absolutely magnificent! I expected sheer strength to crush any plans you had, but I didn't think you'd make it all the way here like a reckless madman!" Ranbolg seemed to be enjoying himself. "Notify all troops! Cease all military activities at once! We'll show our appreciation for King Alnoa's arrival and settle this battle with a duel!"

Ranbolg gracefully drew his sword from atop his horse. This was to be a grand battle between the Demon King and the Prince, a story often depicted in fairy tales. Seeing how beat up Al was, Ranbolg must've been certain of his victory. Unfortunately for him, he got one crucial detail completely wrong.

"Hey, I'm not fighting you! I came here to fight the Diva!"

"…Huh?" Ranbolg stared at Al, his mouth left wide open.

Not gonna lie, I'm glad I got to see that, but I have more important things to do. Al ignored Ranbolg, and looked at his opponent.

"Come, Sharon. Let's settle this once and for all."

Sharon wore the same dumb expression as Ranbolg.

"Right. Let's put an end to this quarrel with a duel." After confirming that Al was fine, she answered with a gaudy smile.

"All right. I will approve of your duel, but remember: if our Diva wins, Althos will have to surrender," Ranbolg declared pompously.

Good, everything's going according to plan.

Al was happy to hear that, as getting to this point of the battle had been a grueling experience. They'd had to face an army of eight thousand without relying on any carefully crafted plans or anything, but luckily, everything had worked out the way they wanted. The only question that remained was how

much time he could buy.

“Someone grab me my sword!” Sharon was visibly stoked for their throwdown.

“G’luck, Sharon!”

Someone grabbed her sword and stuck it into the ground right in front of her.

“Thanks, Airi.” She removed her sword without even looking at her. “Jeez, I didn’t expect a challenge from a weakling like you. That’s fine, though. Let’s set the rules! I’ll have you admit defeat without killing you, and if you land a single hit on me, victory is yours! Plus, I’ll even apologize for the cake.”

Al didn’t hear the last part of Sharon’s sentence; he only looked at her and smiled wryly.

“I see you aren’t making this easy on me.” The rules may have sounded favorable for Al, but he’d never even managed to touch her during their practices. “But all right. Let’s begin!”

“Show me what you’ve got!”

“Same to you. Don’t you dare hold back; show me what a Diva is capable of!”

“I’ll make you wish you’d never said that!”



Al held his scythe at an angle and Sharon raised her sword. The large-scale battle should’ve been over, but the pressure was stronger than ever at the Freiyan headquarters.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FINAL BATTLE!

“I’ll end this in a heartbeat!” Breaking their intense staredown, Sharon put a leg forward and jumped at Al. “Aaaaaaah!”

She closed the distance between them in an instant and mercilessly swung her sword at him.

“So fast! Hey, Sharon, are you trying to kill me!?”

Sparks scattered through the air as Al hurriedly blocked Sharon’s swing with his scythe.

“You asked me to go all-out, didn’t you!? So I’ll go all-out!”

He’d simply wanted to go with a turn of phrase often used in similar situations; he didn’t actually think Sharon would take him up on it. But without any consideration for his feelings, her blade once again approached him, drawing a beautiful arc in the air.

“Wah! Eep!” Al held onto his scythe as though his life depended on it and screamed like a little girl.

Clink! Pzzzzzt…

After successfully blocking the attack, Al’s scythe flew out of his hand and slid along the ground with an unpleasant, mocking sound, as if it were laughing at its own wielder. Sharon looked at him boorishly, almost disappointed.

“Al, how many times have I told you to get a good grip on your weapon!?”

He remembered that advice very clearly. Acting like a bad student who’d let down their master, he averted his gaze.

“Gotcha!” He reached for the daggers at his sides, enhanced with Sure Hit, and threw three of them at Sharon. He figured his surprise attack would give him enough time to pick up his scythe.

“Kyah!”

Hearing Sharon’s pained scream, Al swung his head around to see her crouching down while covering her face with her hands.

“Ah! Are you okay!?”

Forgetting about the duel, Al threw all his plans out the window and rushed to Sharon. She immediately looked up, revealing her beautiful, spotless face, but Al didn’t have the luxury of relief.

“Al… What are you doing, falling for the simplest trick in the book!? We’re fighting, if you hadn’t noticed!”

He fell for her trick hook, line, and sinker. It was in his nature to help those in need, so he completely dropped his defense as he approached Sharon. His only option was to brace for her brutal counterattack.

“But, since you rushed to help me so quickly, I’ll forgive you just this once!” She flicked his forehead, which was more painful than expected, and bashfully looked away.

“O-Oh, okay.” Al could only babble when he saw how embarrassed she’d gotten.

“Oh my, he’s having an awful lot of fun during this historic battle.”

“A meaningless farce.”

“Right? Even their training sessions felt more serious than this.”

Al had a couple of things to say to those backseat fighters, but he chose to focus on the duel.

“A-Anyway! Prepare yourself; we’re starting over!” Sharon heard the comments as well, but unlike Al, she couldn’t let them slide. She shrugged off her previous bashfulness and faced him with a fire in her eyes. “Don’t fumble around anymore! Fight like you mean it!”

The battle restarted with a powerful strike from Sharon.

Claaang!

This time, Al managed to block her blow.

“Good! See, you can do it if you try! Now then…”

He successfully blocked her follow-up attacks as well. Sharon was clearly holding back, but the force that traveled down his scythe with each attack

reverberated through his bones, nearly making him drop his weapon.

“Good, let’s get this ball rolling!”

Sharon powered herself up even more. Ignoring the pain in his arms, Al clutched his scythe.

“What are you playing around for, Sharon!? Win this stupid duel already!”

“Kyah!”

Ranbolg’s angry shout was followed by a feminine scream.

“Airi!”

“Sharon! Dispose of King Alnoa at once! If you don’t…”

Ranbolg held a knife to Airi’s chest. His actions seemed to be on the lubricous side, only enhanced by the girl’s racy expression.

“Ya damn perv! Git that knoife—”

“Silence!”

Al’s instinct about the depravity of Ranbolg’s threat seemed to be on the mark, but what was even more surprising to him was the scream that had come from the athletic, powerful-looking girl’s mouth.

She looked forward wordlessly, giving Al the impression that the girl being held hostage had a similar past to Sharon’s. He glanced at her for confirmation, but got nothing of the sort.

“Sorry, Al. I’m going all out,” she whispered before launching a lightning-fast attack.

“Agh! Grahhh!”

She wasn’t kidding. Her sword collided with his scythe, yet it sent him flying all the way into the group of onlooking soldiers.

“Are you okay!?”

If Kanon hadn’t caught him mid-air, he definitely would have mowed down a platoon’s worth of soldiers with his own body.

“I’m not, but…” As Kanon helped him get back on his feet, he clenched his

scythe and glared at Sharon. “All right, it’s time to get real! I’ll beat that cockiness out of you!”

Talking big, he carried his scythe in one hand and launched himself toward Sharon while lobbing a dagger her way. Then, he flipped his head to the side.

“These toys will never—Ahh!”

Pow!

Immediately after deflecting the dagger, a blinding light flashed in front of her.

“This is the prototype of our newly developed ‘Firecracker Mark II’! It doesn’t do any damage, but it’ll blind you for a while!”

He pulled out a couple of regular Firecrackers and littered them around Sharon to mask his steps with the explosions.

“Take this!” Holding his scythe backward, he swung at Sharon from behind.

Clink!

Huh? Wait, I was expecting her to hunch down in tears.

“What are you shouting before a sneak attack for!? Are you stupid?”

The disappointment in her voice was as clear as day. She’d successfully used Al’s voice to pinpoint his location, and blocked his scythe with her sword after it slightly tore the back of her clothes.

Well, at least she won’t get mad at me for exposing her chest. Wait, what are those scars? He spotted a couple of ugly scars on Sharon’s back, but he didn’t have the time to ask where she’d gotten them.

“Oh well, that was just a distraction. My real goal is this!” Saying that, he took out a leather water pouch from his bag and impaled it on her sword.

“Wait, is this—!?”

Al’s mouth curled into a smile at Sharon’s dumbfounded expression.

“Exactly. It’s oil!”

After confirming that her sword had been coated in oil…

“Fire! Heed my call!”

…he produced a tiny flame at the tip of his finger and sent it flying.

Whoosh!

Her sword was engulfed in flames.

“Ahhh! H-Hey! What the hell are you doing!? This is a sacred artifact!”

“Just trying to get any edge I can!”

Sharon dropped her sword, greatly impairing her offensive power. This was Al’s chance to strike.

“Aaaaargh!”

He put all his might into his next attack, but she dodged it with ease. Regardless, he had to forge on. He employed every lesson he’d learned from her with his next flurry of attacks.

Pulling his arms closer to his side and lowering his stance so his swings would be more focused, Al began relentlessly yet precisely swinging at Sharon while also faking some of his strikes to throw her off.

But nothing worked. She danced around his strikes like a graceful ballerina.

“You’re finally putting our training to good use, but that won’t work anymore! I’m much nimbler without my sword!”

Al had expected her to be more agile, but his estimations were way off.

“How can you be so fast when you’re always stuffing yourself with food!?”

Sharon barely managed to dodge an overhead swing from Al.

Fwump!

His scythe got stuck in the ground.

“Because I’m a Diva!” She stepped on the scythe with one leg and kicked Al away with the other. “The tables have turned!”

Seeing that the flames had long dissipated from her sword, she jumped back and picked it up.

“Surrender now if you don’t want to get hurt even more!”

She watched Al tumble across the ground while resting her sword on her shoulder.

“Hah! Do you honestly think I could face Cecilia, Feena, Kanon, and all the citizens who fought tooth and nail to get me here if I surrendered after getting scratched up a little!?”

Al got up and charged at Sharon headfirst.

“Huh. Okay, then I’ll beat that sense of responsibility out of you!”

Sharon blasted off toward Al, closing the distance in a blink of an eye.

“Aaaaahhh!”

One swift strike to the side was enough to send Al flying, but her relentless onslaught didn’t end there. She practically teleported behind the airborne king and hit him back in the direction he’d come from. She repeated this routine a few times before letting him catch his breath.

“Gah! I know you’re holding back, but this still hurts like hell!”

He may have not taken any damage from the sword itself, but being pummelled back and forth took its toll on his body.

“So? Ready to surrender, or do you want seconds?”

She pointed her sword at Al’s neck. He could almost feel the bloodlust seeping from her blade, and yet he managed to stay calm.

“Why don’t you come back to Althos instead?” Al said, blindsiding her.

“What!? You have no idea what you’re talking about; I’m here to fulfill my dream! The time I spent in Althos was for my dream as well, not because I enjoyed your company!”

“I’m the Demon King. Don’t you need my power to fulfill your dream?” Al took Sharon’s powerful, rage-filled gaze head-on.

“It doesn’t have to happen with you! Wouldn’t you also take the shortest route to your dreams!? It’s clearly the right choice, so surrender and—”

“Then why are you looking at me like that!?” he interrupted. “You should be overflowing with joy since you’re at the brink of reaching your dream! If beating

me to a pulp will get you a step closer to realizing your goal, then come at me! Don't hold back!"

Al's voice carried the last droplets of power he had. Sharon watched in silence as he used his scythe as a cane to help himself up from the ground.

"You're always so happy to smack people around, but I can see the pain in your eyes every time you swing that sword."

Completely defenseless, he slowly dragged himself toward Sharon. He grabbed the tip of her sword and pressed it against his own chest.

"If you have to defeat me for your dream, then get to it! If you can't kill me while holding back, then knock me out! Breaking a limb or two and making me crawl should be easy enough for you!"

She knew. No matter what divine protection Al had, he couldn't escape a Diva's attack unscathed. The force of her strike would carry through even impenetrable armor, and the human body wasn't designed to withhold a barrage of high-powered strikes.

"What, you're telling me to get serious while you're not even powered up with Heavenly Surge? I might end up killing you, idiot!"

The truth spilled from Sharon's mouth, as did a single tear from the corner of her eye. She'd confirmed to him that she'd been holding back the whole time, and that she knew that as long as he lived, no matter what happened to his country, his dream would live with him. That's why he decided to push on.

"But I have to press forward. I won't betray my own dream. Being defeated here would mean throwing everyone's trust, hopes, and dreams away. The dreams of my people, Cecilia, Feena, Kanon… and you."

"My… dream…" Sharon felt a mix of surprise and happiness learning that she had a place in Al's dream.

"Exactly! Ever since we shared that moment looking out at the lights from the castle wall, we've shared the same dream. So if I lose here, your dream would die along with mine! Isn't that… Isn't that why you look like you're being tormented!?"

It was such a self-absorbed argument that she would have thrown countless complaints at him on any other day. But now, she couldn't. If she did, her dream might die for good. All she could do was stare completely stunned at Al, who wielded his scythe.

"Al, m-my… my dream…"

The legs she used to relentlessly pursue him, the arms she used to mercilessly attack him—they were trembling.

"I know. It might take a while, but I promise, I'll help you get there. So please, come back!"

Al, barely able to stand, swung his scythe at Sharon. The moment it touched her side, he collapsed.

"Al… Okay. All right, I lost. Let's go home. I want to go home."

Sharon caught him in her arms before his body hit the ground. Her face visibly lit up, vanquishing the rugged look occupying it before. The events that transpired could be called an extensive lovers' quarrel or a heroic duel, but one thing was for sure: the fight was over. At least, they thought it was.

"Fire!" Gatou's voice, along with a hail of arrows and a raging firestorm, shattered the tranquil scene.

"Hahaha! Well done, Gatou! We don't need a Diva corrupted by the Demon Lord!"

Sharon shot an angry glare at Ranbolg while holding Al in her arms. This was the worst timing for an ambush; escaping the incoming danger was impossible even for a Diva. They would perish on the spot.

"I'm sorry, Al!" she said as she hugged him tighter.

"I told you, it's 'thank you', not 'sorry'." He slipped out of Sharon's arms and stood in front of her, protecting her. "Demon King! Lend me your strength!"

He turned his palm toward the sky, allowing the black magic that spewed forth to eclipse the sun. The incoming arrows and spells were sucked into that black magic and disappeared into nothingness.

"Wha—!? Wait, are you the real Demon King!?" After witnessing Al's

incredible power, Ranbolg's jaw almost hit the floor.

"*Ice Lance*!"

Feena used the opportunity to cast an ice lance at Ranbolg, which pierced his hand.

"Owwww! What the hell are you doing!?"

"Simple. I thought Sharon's friend would come in handy later, so I saved her."

Disregarding Feena's cryptic comment, Airi slipped out of Ranbolg's grasp and rolled away.

"Ranbolg, ya approved o' this duel! Why can't ya take tha loss?"

Everyone who witnessed their battle looked at Ranbolg.

"Oh, that's right. We are the victors!"

"Indeed. My new job as Al's legal wife is to train him to be a proper husband. Don't worry, it won't take long. We'll go over everything in a single session without any breaks, be it for lunch or the bathroom!"

"That sounds like literal torture."

The Divas claimed that the battle had ended according to the conditions, but…

"Shut up! I never accepted this duel! I'm done fooling around. All forces, massacre Althos and kill Sharon, the traitor!"

…Ranbolg scrapped the duel and screamed at the top of his lungs. Orders were orders, and as such, the Freiyan soldiers began carrying them out.

"Oh my, he should learn when to give up."

"Is that really the issue here while we're surrounded by thousands of soldiers? Things couldn't have gone worse!" Kanon said to the strangely carefree Cecilia.

"She's right. This wasn't a wise decision."

"Why? Do you want to sacrifice yourself and drop a meteor here, Feena?"

The Freiyan soldiers were struck with fear.

“I could, but I won’t.”

Hearing Feena’s denial, however, they let out sighs of relief.

“Brusch! Let’s do it!”

Boom!

At Cecilia’s command, an explosion shook the ground and a pillar of flame appeared behind her. Buying time by dueling Sharon had been worthwhile after all.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry. I should’ve mentioned that Brusch’s unit would burn your rations and supplies if you were to oppose the duel’s outcome,” said Cecilia with a content smile while using the bright pillar of flame as a backdrop. That sight struck fear in the enemy, as well as Kanon.

“Oh my, I believe you must surrender now.”

Freiya’s defeat was inevitable, but unfortunately, Ranbolg’s tyranny knew no bounds.

“Keep up the pressure! Once we defeat the Divas and march into Althos, we’ll get our hands on their supplies!”

“Don’t you dare threaten my people!”

Even Sharon froze for a second at the sound of Al’s enraged scream. She slowly turned her head toward him, and her eyes widened upon seeing the completely drained and beat-up Al stand up and look at her with fire in his eyes.

“Inexcusable. I can’t let him get away with that. Sharon, sorry to ask this after everything, but…” He flashed her a cheeky smile.

“Hah. Like I could defy the winner of our duel.”

Sharon smiled back at him, tightened her hug, and leaned closer to his face.

“Al, umm… This is a tiny little bit embarrassing, but I’d like you to touch me where Ranbolg did. Wipe his filth off my body.”

She directed his hand to her chest. Al gulped as he felt Sharon’s breasts change shape in his grip, but imagining the horrors she’d endured caused an insatiable rage to well up inside him.

What the hell did that bastard do to you!?

While he foamed at the mouth with anger, Sharon led his other hand down her torso.

“Umm… No one has touched me here before,” she said as he reached her upper thigh. Feeling confusion and hesitation in his movements, she pulled even harder, leading him right between her legs.

“Huh? Whoa, what!?”

In the midst of his seething rage and ever-growing lust, feeling his hand between Sharon’s warm thighs made him forget to breathe despite his heart racing faster than ever. He glanced at Sharon’s face to see that her cheeks matched the color of her hair.

“Ah! Say, could you, maybe, umm… take the lead now?”

This is it! She’s been hiding her ultimate weapon all along!

Learning about Sharon’s shy, bashful side spelled Al’s doom. He’d completely fallen for her, and he understood what she wanted from him. He slowly released her breasts and moved his shaking hand to her lips.

Boom!

Heavenly Surge activated the moment their lips touched, but something was different this time.

What is this…? The mana—no, something else is taking over my entire being.

An explosive surge of mana filled his body, and his stamina not only returned, but increased tenfold. In addition, Sharon’s memories were mixed in with the surge of power. Her feelings of grief, abandonment, and regret overtook Al’s soul.

So that’s what happened with your back…

Al suppressed his boiling rage and embraced Sharon as gently as possible. She was caught up in a flurry of emotions completely different from his, though her experience was more or less the same as last time: her body was heating up and her thoughts were hazy. However, her spasming body, caught up in the waves of mana and pleasure, was assaulted by something she’d never

experienced before.

“What’s happening!? It’s almost like… I can feel you inside me… Hahhhn! Could it be… No, noooo… Ahhh! Something’s flowing into meeeee! Ahhhhhhhn!”

Did I just lose my purity? After losing control for a moment due to the surge of mana and lust, the link between her and Al was finally severed. *Strange, my stomach feels warm. It’s… kind of nice.*

She found herself happily stroking her stomach as Heavenly Surge finished. She wanted to enjoy the cozy warmth.

“What is this? It’s like I’m… bearing Al’s chi—”

“Let’s do this, Sharon!”

She was pulled back to reality with a pat on the shoulder from Al. Looking up at him, Sharon realized that he was fuming with rage.

“Why are you so mad?” she asked in a worried tone.

“You did well.” Al pet her head and fluffed her hair. From that simple action, she understood what was happening.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right! It’s a bit sudden, but I’m turning my back on Freiya!”

She turned her blushing face around, begrudgingly lifted her sword, and blasted off toward the Freiyan troops. Al, swift as the wind, passed her and jumped into the swarm of heavy infantry standing in their way.

“Aaaaargh!” He swung his scythe with a primal roar and mowed down multiple soldiers with a single strike.

“What are you standing around for!? Attack! That bastard is half dead already! Mages, provide cover!” Ranbolg was frozen in place witnessing Al’s sudden revival, but Gatou had his wits about him.

“Demon King! Lend me your strength!”

Black flames engulfed the incoming spells. The soldiers rushing to Ranbolg’s aid were easily mowed down.

“W-Wow…” Sharon stood back, watching in awe as Al single-handedly destroyed the enemy’s defense. He didn’t rely solely on the Demon King’s power, but used his own techniques as well to swiftly and easily decimate the enemy troops. Someone tapped her shoulder while she was lost in admiration.

“Oh my, he’s rather mad. I wonder what happened,” Cecilia said while keeping the incoming soldiers at bay with her weapon.

“Cecilia…”

Finally, it hit Sharon. She realized what was happening around her.

I… I betrayed Al. Am I really allowed to be saved by him and go back to his side like nothing ever happened?

The moment their eyes met, Sharon averted her gaze and stared at the ground in front of her, while Cecilia smiled.

“Oh my, he jumped through so many hoops to save you. I would feel bad for him if he got an empty husk in return.”

In any other situation, Sharon would’ve pounced at her, but this was different.

“But…” Sharon couldn’t get that damning thought out of her head.

“Listen, Sharon,” Cecilia said, letting out a small sigh. “Al is now enraged. Enraged beyond belief. He’s mad because of what they did to you and is fighting to make it right. You should think about whether it’s right to acknowledge my beloved little brother’s efforts with such a lonesome expression.”

“Cecilia, I…”

She clenched her transformed relic, Dáinsleif, and raised her head. Instead of being distraught, she wore a smile Cecilia herself would be jealous of.

“Now go. Go, and break free from your chains with your own two hands.”

Cecilia looked at her with the warm smile of a kind mother, to which Sharon looked back with teary eyes and a bright smile of her own.

“Thanks. I’m off!” She shot toward the Freiyan soldiers, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

“The ex-Freiyan Diva, Sharon, moving out! Come, let’s dance!”

Sharon’s powerful smile had finally returned.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Ranbolg heard Sharon’s wild scream in the distance, but he didn’t have time to worry about that. The soldiers defending him were getting knocked out at an alarming rate.

“M-Mages! Archers! Get rid of him!” He gave out a panicked order.

“Demon King, lend me your power!”

Immediately following Al’s shout, black flames burst up behind Ranbolg, who was retreating with Gatou while being guarded by the Lost Children. The soldiers stationed around the headquarters also rushed to help, but they were no match for Al and Sharon’s rampage. Slowly but surely, they were catching up to him.

“Stop that man! Whoever stops him will drown in riches!” he shouted while running away at full speed.

Seeing their general run away killed the soldiers’ motivation, but they were ready to put on a fight for a hefty bounty. Driven by greed, they moved quickly, firing countless arrows and spells toward Sharon and deploying a magic barrier around their position.

“Aaaaahhh!”

She simply flicked the fireballs away and cut down the rain of arrows.

“Arrrrghh!”

Al sliced through the thick magic barrier with one swing, and blasted away the soldiers behind it with the next.

“You think you can stop me with that now!?” Al shouted, drenched in a cold sweat.

Controlling his strength when he was powered up with Heavenly Surge was no easy task. The mana in his body was running rampant, just like when he’d performed Heavenly Surge with Feena. It was like riding a wild horse, but this

time, the pressure was even stronger. He felt like the Demon King would take over his entire being if he were to give in to his rage. He was desperately trying to control it, but every time Sharon entered his field of vision, he remembered the terrible scars on her back, which sent his emotions into a frenzy.

“It’s all your fault! Why did you have to do that to Sharon!?”

He spun his scythe, knocking out soldiers one after another, but Freiya’s numbers were far superior, and he quickly found himself surrounded.

“Shall I give you a sneak peek at hell!?”

Anyone would have been frightened if they were surrounded by a group of soldiers, but not Al. Not now. His eyes weren’t feral, like those of a beast ready for the fight of its life, but curious, like a child ready to crush some ants.

“H-Hey! Where the hell are the reinforcements!? What are those fools doing!?”

“Kyah!”

After being forced to retreat, Ranbolg finally lost his composure and hit one of the nearby Lost Children. He didn’t even look at the girl tumbling to the ground, and he’d rather have had his tongue cut out than apologize. This was a completely normal thing for him; those girls were nothing more than lowly slaves, after all, unable to even complain. But he felt like something was off. Even after relieving his anger, his mood didn’t improve in the slightest.

“It’s because of that Diva! It’s all Sharon’s fault!”

To divert his thoughts, he kicked the girl again and again, yet his anger didn’t fade. He frantically looked around in search of the reason, and soon enough, he found it. It was right in front of his eyes: the abused slave was glaring back at him.

“Y-You filth! How dare you glare at me like that! Come here, I’ll teach you how to behave like the obedient, worthless slave you are!”

Her face, her stomach, her limbs. Ranbolg’s wrath didn’t leave out any part of her body, but the girl’s scornful gaze didn’t change.

“We’ll… We’ll follo’ Sharon,” Airi, the tormented girl, whispered.

After witnessing Sharon's transformation, she wanted to change too. She wanted to break free of her chains, smile, get mad, fight, and experience love just like Sharon did. She wanted to experience life itself. So, for the first time, she defied the very god of her world. Simply glaring at Ranbolg filled her heart with an insurmountable dread, but she kept on staring so that eventually, she would change.

The flame that awoke in her soul eventually spread to the other Lost Children, and the number of eyes fixed on him reached the hundreds.

"What? What are you jumping on her back for!?" Ranbolg screamed like a cornered dog and looked down at the collapsed Airi. "You whore! You're still looking at me like that!?"

Ranbolg drew his sword and pointed it at the chest of who he believed to be the origin of this rebellion.

"Die!"

Thud! Thud! Thud thud!

Just as Ranbolg was about to strike, he watched his soldiers take flight in the background. By the time he regained his focus, he was face to face with the crimson-haired Diva.

"I'm sorry, but you won't get any reinforcements. You're about to learn that the friends I made in Althos are much more skilled and relentless than I am!"

Sharon winked while all hell broke loose behind her. In the midst of earthquakes and screams, Ranbolg could see a Freiyan soldier or two launch into the air. Feena, Kanon, and Cecilia were wreaking havoc amongst the enemy troops.

"Hah! So you think you've won!? I hope you didn't forget that I still have this!" He sheathed his sword and pulled out the whip that had tormented Sharon for years, a deranged smile on his face. "Hahaha! Do you remember this!? The burning pain when it touched your skin!? The time you could barely even wriggle along the ground!? Remember!? You'll never escape this whip! You'll never overcome the terror deep within your soul! If you want to break down and apologize, this is your chance!"

The sight of the whip and Ranbolg's words triggered Sharon's vivid memories of her past. The days spent being whipped for the smallest, most asinine reasons, the sleepless nights spent weeping with pain. As more and more pictures of her past flashed before her eyes, she became completely paralyzed with fear. But right there, on the verge of breaking down, someone patted her on the shoulder.

"Sharon, get this: men are stupid, and if left alone, they'll become cocky. At least, that's what I read in one of Feena's books."

She turned to face Al, who was looking at her with a gentle smile.

"Hm. I guess you're right. You've been pretty cocky lately, after all."

As if she had merely been pulling a prank, she looked back at Al with a powerful smile and shrugged his hand off her shoulder.

"Hey, don't lump me into the same group as that guy!"

Al shook the hand that was just brushed away.

"Don't worry, I'm not. Now, just stand there and watch like you always do!" Leaving Al with insults as a form of gratitude, she turned back to Ranbolg.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!" Sharon's roar shook the earth. All fighting stopped, and Ranbolg himself felt like he had stepped into the cave of a feral beast.

"Wh-What are you…"

That beast slowly approached the confused Ranbolg one step at a time.

"Yeah. I remember what you did to me!"

Sharon wore a grin. A grin that, unbeknownst to the frightened Ranbolg, defied her past. For the first time in her life, she went abroad as an assassin. For the first time in her life, she walked the streets freely and experienced the full extent of the cuisine. For the first time in her life, she met with different Divas and made friends she could banter with. And for the first time in her life, she fell…

The time she spent in Althos was such a thrilling, fun experience that it completely blew her dark past out of the water.

“Why!? Why are you smiling!? This whip should strike fear in your heart!” Ranbolg said in a shaky voice.

“Why? Let’s see… Maybe because I’m not only a Diva, but the bride candidate of the Demon King.”

“Enough of that nonsense!”

Crack!

Ranbolg desperately struck down with his whip, aiming right at Sharon’s face in hopes that it would once again strike fear in her soul.

“Huh. This hurt a lot when I was a little kid. I was deathly afraid of your whip.”

But his last pillar of hope was destroyed by a ferocious yet beautiful smile.

“Wh-Why aren’t you doing anything!? Gatou, you too! Protect me!”

No one answered the cowering tyrant’s woeful cries. Everyone present was petrified by Sharon’s display of raw power.

“Y-You filthy slave!”

He slashed at her with his sword as well as his words.

“Ranbolg. I’m going to break my chains and become free!” she said and brought her sword roaring down toward him.

Clanggg!

Ranbolg’s sword flew high into the air as Dáinsleif’s handle planted itself into his guts.

“Gahhh!”

He collapsed on the ground with a painful groan, and Sharon looked down at him with a powerful smile.

“In Althos, we never kill anyone, no matter how terrible of a person they are. I’ll spare your life today.”

“Hah! Absolutely not! I’m not going to be beaten by some slave…”

Sharon ignored Ranbolg’s mad ramblings and turned toward Al.

“Al. I can no longer return to Freiya, so, umm… Please take good care of me.”

“We’re happy to have you for as long as you want to stay. No matter how much time fulfilling your dream takes, Althos will always be your home,” Al said with a smile. Now, it was truly over, once and for all.

At least, that’s what everyone hoped for.

“Bwahahaha! I’ll die! If I lose this battle, they’ll kill me!”

They all looked at Ranbolg and realized that he was holding a pale green crystal.

“Ah! That crystal!” Sharon had completely forgotten about it.

“Ahahaha! Die, you fools!” The crystal slowly entered his body. “Gyahahahaha! I’m… I’m…!”

Ranbolg bloated right in front of their eyes. The armor, no longer able to contain his body, was violently shot away.

“Guhahaha! Gwarghhhh!”

There weren’t any other prominent changes to his appearance, but just like during the incident with Kanon, his body was enveloped in an ominous cloud of mana.

“Haah, you should learn when to give up,” Sharon said as she prepared for the imminent danger.

“Thank goodness. I’d have come off as a bully if I punched that crybaby prince in the face,” Al said jokingly, but the tension was palpable in his voice. “Let’s do this!”

“A-Al?”

He ignored Sharon and charged at the monstrosity with his trusty Mistilteinn.

“Bwaaaaarghh!” Ranbolg was unable to produce human speech. He picked up a sword lying around him and swung at Al.

Kashan!

Mistilteinn easily cut through his magic-imbued sword.

“Grohh?” Ranbolg flinched in surprise, but Al pressed on.

“Take this! And this! Experience the torment you inflicted upon others, you bastard!”

“Graghh! Gwahhh!”

Al pounded him with the base of his scythe from every direction.

“What’s happening? How is he winning so one-sidedly?”

Ranbolg, under the influence of the crystal, was not a weakling in any sense of the term. He had a powerful presence on the battlefield that would have made anyone cower in fear, yet he was being beaten on like a sandbag. Completely lost as to what to do, he gave up on defending himself and half-heartedly swung his heavy arms at Al.

“Hey, don’t give up just yet! This is nothing compared to what Sharon had to endure! We’re just getting started!”

Blinded by rage, Al kept up his skillful, relentless assault. He jammed the handle of his scythe right into Ranbolg’s stomach, causing the monster to keel over in pain, then brought the handle up to its chin in one fell swoop, toppling the gigantic beast. Despite the anger boiling inside him, he executed these moves masterfully, careful not to make Ranbolg faint from the pain.

“Stop, Al! That’s enough! You’ll become just like him!” Sharon’s voice snapped him back to reality.

“I was… enjoying myself?”

He looked down to see Ranbolg lying on the ground, back in his human form. His face was completely swollen, and his body, especially his back, was riddled with welts.

“You went too far, Al!” Sharon approached him with a bitter smile.

Al realized the truth in her words, as he himself was shocked by what he had done. Struggling to find the right words, he looked at Sharon and…

“A-Anyway, we won!”

…lifted Mistilteinn high into the air.

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The post-battle dealings went smoothly, since they made the losing Freiyan army clean up the battlefield. They were holding a meeting in a tent with the representatives of both sides: from Althos, Al and Sharon participated, while Freiya was represented by Gatou and Airi. Ranbolg couldn't make it to the meeting due to the injuries he'd suffered on the battlefield.

"This might sound strange coming from me, but are you certain you don't want to take any prisoners? I don't believe the prince has given up on Althos yet; he'll probably invade again once he recovers from his injuries." As an ex-mercenary and battle-hardened veteran, Gatou didn't hold any resentment toward the winning party and went into the post-battle dealings immediately. He even expressed his worries for Althos, which made Al appreciate dealing with such a level-headed representative instead of Ranbolg.

"Don't worry. Our Diva will make sure they don't hold any grudges against Althos. She will persuade them not to invade us again."

Gatou's worries were not baseless, but Al has expected as much. A certain Diva was giving a speech to the enemy soldiers a bit further away from their tent, wearing an enchanting smile.

"Oh, I see." Gatou kept his calm throughout the meeting, but his face twitched slightly when the topic shifted to Cecilia. It seemed like she had deeply traumatized the veteran mercenary.

"More importantly, as you know, we torched your rations. I'm sure that'd make your march back home difficult, and I'd rather if you didn't pillage the villages on your way back, so I'd like to offer you some of our rations. Not for free, of course."

Al wanted to repay his kindness.

"Don't worry. We hid some rations along the way, just in case."

Befitting of a veteran like him, Gatou had a perfect plan in place.

"Hey, Al. Ask him about *that*." Sharon, who was acting as Al's bodyguard, tugged his sleeve to get his attention and looked at him pleadingly. Al nodded and turned back to Gatou.

"One last thing, Gatou. I have a favor to ask."

“The victor writes the rules. Give us your orders!” he answered with a wry smile under the tense pressure.

“All right then, I guess this is an order. When you give your report, could you please tell them that all the Lost Children died in battle?”

Sharon had told Al earlier that the leader of the Lost Children, Airi, harbored a strong resentment for Ranbolg.

“Hmm… I don’t mind, but is that really necessary? They could simply seek asylum in Althos.”

“No! If that bastard learns they ran away or changed sides, he’ll go mad! He’ll dig up any of Airi’s living relatives he can find, and brutally, mercilessly murder them!” Sharon answered.

“Okay. I’ll put that in my official report, but I can’t take responsibility for the others.”

Al had expected that as well.

“Don’t worry. Cecilia’s, umm… suggestions are really effective.”

“Don’t you mean ‘brainwashing’? Well, not like it really matters. If we dig too deep, she might…” A chill ran down Gatou’s spine as he remembered something. It made Al wonder what had happened between them.

“Either way, I’m counting on you. In return, I won’t reveal your position as a spy for the Empire.”

“Wha—!? Ah, crap… How’d you find out?”

Al had thought he would get a bigger rise out of Gatou, but seeing the man almost shrug it off, he decided not to go in-depth with his answer.

“Call it my sixth sense.”

Al was acting cool, but in reality, Brusch had managed to dig up information on Gatou. They figured it’d be better if the Empire kept themselves occupied with Freiya instead of waging war on them, so they decided to keep it a secret.

“Oi, so now that we’re officially dead, ’re we all gonna be livin’ in Althos? This mean I can finally live wit Sharon!?” Airi, who was silently standing behind

Gatou, excitedly leaned in to join the conversation.

“Yeah. Also, you’re not slaves anymore. You’re citizens of Althos now.”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Bless yer heart! Bless yer heart, Al!” Airi rushed toward him.

Wait… are we really doing this now?

He braced for impact, but she casually ran past him.

“Sharonnnnnn!”

“Kyah!”

She jumped at Sharon and tightly wrapped her arms around the dumbfounded girl.

“Sharon! We’ll be together forever! I ain’t lettin’ ya go! I ain’t!”

“H-Hey, Airi. Stop, that hurts.”

Airi slid one of her hands up Sharon’s stomach, all the way to her chest.

“Hey, where do you think you’re touching me!?”

“Why not, why not! Ain’t this what friends do?”

Sharon seemed to have a soft spot for Airi, and instead of lashing out, she only looked at her with a troubled expression. That changed when Airi tried to flip her top.

“Stoooop!”

Wham!

She karate-chopped the top of Airi’s head.

“Aww, sorry…”

With teary eyes, she got off of Sharon and apologized to her, but Sharon gave her no pardon.

“Groping is banned, understood!?”

“Whyyy? Ain’t that what defines me!?”

Sharon shot a pitiful but stern look at Airi before bashfully averting her gaze.

“You can see me whenever you want now, so just calm down.”

Blood rushed to her face.

“Sharon… A’right! I’ll only grope ya five times a week! We c’n meet whenever, after all!”

“Isn’t that a bit too much!?”

Sharon sulked and looked away from her, but it was clear to any onlookers that she was happy.

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After confirming that the Freiyan army had begun their retreat, Al and his troops also made their way home. The march back was slow, as everyone was exhausted. By the time they reached the castle, the sun was sinking below the horizon.

Al was getting dizzy from the toll on his body, but he forged on. He had to so he could finally take a nice, relaxing bath. The rest of his army was also driven by similar desires, but as they reached the castle, they realized that something was off.

“Wait, has that always been your flag?”

Sharon shed some light on the issue.

“Oh my, that is Distania’s flag? What an ill-mannered prank!”

“Oh yeah. Luna must be playing a prank.”

Al quickly reached this conclusion, but that was not the end of the strange happenings. The castle gates that were usually open were now closed tight. A girl stood in front of them. It was Luna’s sister, Saaya.

“Guards! I know Luna is cute and friendly, but this is taking the joke too far! You too, Saaya! Use your head! Don’t always listen to your big sister!”

He got no response from Saaya or the castle guards.

“Ahaha! This is not a joke.”

Instead, a girl wearing a jet black dress appeared atop the castle walls to answer Al’s demands. It was Luna. Something else caught Al’s attention: she

had an almost completely naked Lilicia on a leash, obediently following her on all fours.



Huh. I was under the impression that Lilicia was more on the sadistic side of the spectrum, but I guess I was wrong. That thought passed through his mind for a split second, but there were more pressing matters at hand than to ponder it further.

“Luna, we’re all dead tired here! Cut the jokes and let us in!”

Pew!

He was answered with an arrow whizzing by his ear.

“Hey! Cut the crap!” Sharon was getting visibly upset.

“I’m not joking. This is my castle now,” Luna said, brushing her off.

“L-Luna! This isn’t funny!”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I was a bit worried that you’d gotten smarter when it came to women, considering the flock of Divas around you, but you’re still the same dumb—or rather, simple and naïve boy you always were.”

A cold sweat broke out on Al’s face.

“Oh my, shouldn’t you be under the effects of my Bind?” Cecilia asked, but Al already realized the loophole in the Bind conditions.

Luna hadn’t actually violated the terms of Cecilia’s spell. All she had promised was to run if she felt she was in danger. Even if she considered Althos’ forces enemies, as long as she didn’t feel threatened, Cecilia’s spell wouldn’t activate.

“What’re you trying to pull!? This is our castle!”

Sharon had seen enough. She drew her sword and pointed it at Saaya.

“H-Hey, there’s no need for—”

“Hehehe. You can do as you please with that puppet.” Luna cut Al off and flashed a chilling smile. Everyone’s attention centered on the small Saaya standing in front of the gates.

“Ahahaha! I’m nothing more than Lady Saaya’s humble body double! A lowly puppet! Please, do as you wish!” the usually silent girl said with a big smile.

“We have our entire army and multiple Divas. You can’t beat us all alone!”

Feena said from beside the raging Sharon.

Luna signaled to someone, and the gate slowly opened before them.

“Haah… I swear, Luna, you went too far this—!”

Just after Al let out a sigh of relief, thinking her terrible joke was finally over, a group of people appeared beyond the gate. They were dressed in clothes one would see when passing through the streets of Althos, and wielded wooden rolling pins, frying pans, and other household items. Despite their terrible complexions, Al recognized many of them as Althos’ citizens. They were ready to fight with their makeshift weapons, wearing their plain clothes against a fully outfitted army and multiple Divas. Suffice to say, no sane person would have agreed to such conditions, which left Al wondering how this had happened.

Are they hypnotized? he thought, but looking at the group standing at the gates sent shivers down his spine. It wasn’t some simple hypnosis.

“Ohohoho! Now, my lovely little puppets! Destroy the Demon King’s army!”

Upon receiving her commands, the group started moving.

“I don’t know what sort of spell she used, but be careful not to hurt—”

“Arghhh!”

The words stuck in his throat, as one of his citizens was standing right beside him. The man had some semblance of life in his eyes, but his face was pained as if he were fighting against his very existence.

“Wha—!? So fast!”

Suddenly, the horse Al was riding stared him dead in the eyes. His attacker snapped the horse’s neck, which collapsed after a brief delay, blood gushing from its orifices. The king collapsed with his horse, leaving him without any means of escape.

“Al!” Sharon jumped from her horse to catch Al.

“*Grand Spell…* No, I won’t make it!”

Feena tried to create a wall between Al, Sharon, and the citizens, but she was too late. While she was busy chanting, numerous citizens rushed toward her.

“Watch out, Feena!”

Kanon protected Feena with her katana, but she couldn’t make it to the already surrounded Al and Sharon. They were both exhausted due to the use of Heavenly Surge, which considerably impacted their reaction time.

“I’m sorry, Al. This is the end for you,” Luna said without the slightest hint of remorse in her voice.

Cling!

Al heard the ring of the all too familiar bells behind him.

“Oh my, step back! How dare you hurt my lovely little brother!?” Cecilia was standing right behind him with her khakkhara in hand. “Thinking that you can stand on the same ground as me while using such a lowly curse is quite bold of you!”

She swung her khakkhara.

“Gahhh… Ghahhh!”

The pain and hatred disappeared from the citizens’ faces with a snap, and they all collapsed like marionettes.

“Thank you, Cecilia.”

“Oh my. Al, Sharon, please escape.”

As she was making way for Al’s and Sharon’s escape…

“I expected you to cause the biggest headache.”

…a small shadow appeared behind her.

“Oh my, I sense the Valkyrie’s power. Are you, in fact, a Diva?”

Cecilia’s smile didn’t change despite Saaya’s relics—her two daggers—being pressed against her neck.

“Lady Luna will let King Alnoa live if you come quietly. Or, you may choose to continue fighting the endless horde of Althos citizens,” Saaya whispered to her.

She looked around, only to see that the citizens had once again conglomerated around Sharon and Al, wearing the same pain-and hatred-

ridden expressions as before.

“Oh my…” Cecilia’s unbreakable smile slowly faded from her face. She closed her eyes for a few moments before letting go of her khakkhara.

“C-Cecilia!”

No. I can’t let her die, Al thought and put his hand on Sharon’s shoulders. *This isn’t the end. We can get out of this with Heavenly Surge.*

It wasn’t fair to Sharon, but he had no other choice.

“Al! Don’t even think about it!” Cecilia stopped him before he could activate Heavenly Surge. “I can’t explain why right now, but you must not use that power anymore!”

It seemed like Cecilia had learned something.

“Al. I will now become a damsel in distress. Your job is to retreat, rest up, and come back to save me. I will be waiting for you.”

Cecilia… Why?

Pulled away by Sharon, Al could see Cecilia fighting back tears as she was surrounded by their brainwashed citizens.

“Cecilia! I’ll come back for you at all costs! So please…”

Cecilia flashed one last smile as the Althos forces made their retreat.

Epilogue

Al and his vagabond army set up camp in the same plains where the battle with the Freiyan army had taken place only hours before. Everyone was deathly tired, but the shocking events at the castle had shaken them to the core. People were chatting and drinking to relax and eventually catch some elusive sleep.

How did it come to this?

Al was drinking in his tent while trying to reorganize his thoughts. He had access to four of the seven strongest individuals in the world. Not only that, but his army contained Eshantel's elite warriors, which allowed him to rival the Empire's and Freiya's most elite and savage units. Furthermore, he now housed five hundred Freiyan troops. He was well on his way to creating a happy, lively country without any slaves, yet he found himself camping in a tent on some empty fields. Meanwhile, his country was occupied by the enemy and his sister Cecilia was taken as a prisoner.

"What am I doing with my life?" He buried his head into his arms, desperately trying to figure out his next move.

"Al. Can I come in?"

Sharon stepped inside the tent.

"What do you want? Go to sleep, I'm sure you're exhausted."

He was so preoccupied with himself that his genuine concern had come off rather rude. Deep down, he was prepared to face the impending hell Sharon would rain down on him.

"I was wondering if you were okay."

Instead of cursing at him, Sharon was trying her best to stay kind and warm.

Is she here to console me?

It was a nice gesture on the surface, but it rubbed him the wrong way.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just—"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Sharon lashed out at him. She was fidgeting

around a little before starting to talk again. “Al, I don’t want to pretend that I know what you’re going through. I’m dumb, terrible with words, and nothing like Cecilia, but I want you to depend on me more! I don’t know how to help you, but what I do know is that I can stay by your side! I can share your pain.”

She stared at Al with tears in her eyes. Unable to bear it any longer, Al averted his gaze with a deep sigh. He realized how stupid and self-contained he was. By the time he glanced back, Sharon was already crying.

“Hey, hey, what kind of offer is it to cry together, only to start bawling your eyes out moments later!? You’ll make me cry too!”

“But, like… you wouldn’t cry anyway because you’re the king! So I’m crying for you!”

It was a rather selfish reason, but Al walked up to the sobbing Sharon and hugged her tightly.

“Jeez, why you always have to make me worry about you!?”

As Al said that, he realized that his own cheeks were getting moist. His tears could have been from frustration, grief, or genuine concern. Even Al didn’t understand the feelings whirling inside him, but at the very least, he was sorry for getting Sharon’s crimson hair wet.

“Hehehe, but you’re crying too!”

She slowly looked up at Al and smiled, tears running down her face.

“Hey, come on now! It’s common courtesy to not mention that. Jeez, you really don’t like to act cute, even at times like this.” The last part of his sentence was filled with all the gratitude he had for Sharon. Hearing that, she quickly wiped her face and put on a powerful grin.

“Of course! Hearing you call me cute would be—hic—so creepy!”

“Isn’t that going a bit too far!? Is that what you say to a man who’s weeping!?”

“Why, I thought I was being considerate! If I were to…”

“Okay, shut up! You don’t have to shout right into my ear!”

“No, you shut up!”

His tears stopped, and they were back to their usual banter, but his arms were still wrapped around Sharon’s body. He wouldn’t let go for anything in the world.

Sharon also made herself comfortable in Al’s arms, and as such, their bickering continued in a small corner of the quiet tent.

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“Now then, what should we do?”

People were getting up the next morning, stretching out and cracking their necks in the tent. Yesterday’s shock had subsided, leaving Al with sour feelings over his first lost battle and the entrapment of his sister, but he didn’t have time to mope over it. He couldn’t let his four thousand soldiers or the five hundred Lost Children starve to death on his watch.

“We bought all the supplies we could get our hands on from the surrounding villages, but they won’t last longer than three days. Even if we attack, they’d win as long as they stay holed up in the castle.”

We also burnt all of Freiya’s supplies… Mulling over such matters didn’t help his situation, but in retrospect, that move felt like a mistake for him.

“Labona in its current state can’t house all of our troops, our relationship with Freiya is in turmoil, and the Empire… They’re out of the question.”

Someone raised their hand to help the desperate king.

“Then come to Subdera.” The blue-haired Diva’s suggestion reminded Al of his last remaining ally.

“Feena, I’m really thankful for your proposal, but are you sure?”

He remembered when Feena told him about her relationship with her father, the king of Subdera. Althos hadn’t completely fallen out of Subdera’s graces yet, but the relationship was definitely rocky, which made her proposal all the more respectable.

“Don’t worry! It’s a wife’s job to help her husband in times of need!”

Feena excitedly slammed her hands on the desk and looked straight into Al's eyes. She didn't look like someone who would give up on the idea.

"All right. We'll ask for Subdera's help!"

With Feena's determination giving him the final push he needed, Al decided to visit her birthplace, Subdera, in search of help.

End.



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