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MIDORIMAMESORA
Illustrator Naoki Akamine
BULLET HELLION
The Gunslinging Demon Prince Crushes Another World with Modern Arms


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"Hey now, Sharmilia! I'm the one who called you here," Lusemia said.
"You can't just leave because you want to! Al, you're the one who's being rude.
Of course she's naked! Who takes a bath with their clothes on?"
"Ah, y-you're right. Sharmilia, it's okay. I don't mind if you get in."
I turned to glare at Sharmilia but was met with another shocking sight.
Sharmilia was standing there, completely naked.
"Wait, what?! Why are you naked too?! Oh...are you getting in?"
"Ah, yes, but I'll get out right away! I apologize for my rudeness!" Sharmilia said,
a blush blooming across her pale face. She quickly turned to leave the room.
Bathing together with lord and servant?!
BATH TIME in the Land of Demons!


At that moment, Sharmilla, Maquina, and Maria sprang into action. Maria leaped gracefully into the midst of nearly twenty soldiers, her movements fluid and precise. Her P320 and Beretta 92 roared to life, and the knights fell one by one, bullets carving fatal holes in their foreheads and temples.
A beautiful dance of death.
Shrouded in the smell of smoke and gunpowder,
they create blossoms of blood,
like flowers among the enemy.

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Prologue

The Land of Demons was a silver landscape, as far as the eye could see.

It had snowed every day since I arrived here two weeks ago. The temperature remained below freezing, and the snow piled up more and more each day. But it wasn't just this climate I had to get used to. My baby sister had been born on the ship from Gladrom, and she had been given a name by King Lusemia.

Aurora.

When I asked King Lusemia why she had chosen it, she said that she wanted the child to be "as beautiful and full of wonder as an aurora, in both mind and body."

"Aurora," I whispered to myself. It was a good name.

Aurora was in front of me, feeding from Iona's breast. She only had a thin layer of hair on her head, but it was the same beautiful golden hue as her mother's. She also had Iona's dark blue eyes. I was sure that she would grow up to be just as beautiful.

"Raul," Iona said, "she's so strong. Even her suckling."

"Strong...just like her father," I said, thinking of Gram. "If I had died, I would never have gotten to meet her."

"I'm so glad we could."

I truly believed that Aurora was strong. She had clung to life inside Iona through all the battles we had faced.

"And I'm thankful that I have lived to see you have your child and care for her," Maria said as she went to and fro, fussing over Iona.

"I was only able to make it here with your support, Maria," Iona said.

The fireplace crackled as it warmed everyone.

"It really is cold here," I said to Iona.

"Truly. I suppose this is the northernmost nation."

"Why do the demons want to live in a place like this?"

"Did you not learn that in your lessons with Magister Morris?"

"Learn what?"

"Humans and demons have never been able to coexist, not after the war between them two thousand years ago. No matter how strong the demons were, the humans won with the advantage of overwhelming numbers," Iona explained as she continued to feed Aurora, "On top of that, the humans had thoroughly researched the demons' magic and trained their swordsmen against it. The demons would be slain before they could even use their magic."

"Such monstrous humans, just like those knights we faced in Gladrom."

That included the ones that Sharmilia had used to make the high ghoul who now served me.

"As the situation grew worse, the demons asked for peace. But they were refused. There were human supremacists among the human leadership, particularly those from the church."

"Human supremacists?"

"They believe that a human's life is worth more than a demon's. With their faith in God, they see demons as inferior beings."

"I see. Discrimination..."

It seemed there would always be discrimination, no matter the world. Well, that explained why I had never seen a single demon when we lived in Eucrit. There had been Therians living in Sanaria, but that was due to Gram's love of all people and Iona's position as a daughter of high-ranking nobility, which afforded them more protection.

"The demons were persecuted and fled north, making this land their home. That's about all I know about that period of history."

"After hearing all that, I'm surprised King Lusemia allowed us to come here," I said.

"That's because your father is Galdzin. He has a lot of influence over her."

"I feel like I heard very little about demons when we lived in Sanaria."

"There's something more innocent about demons. Take the ogres for example. And King Lusemia—she's almost childlike."

"You're right. All of them live in a way that's simple yet true to themselves."

The image that we now held of the demons was quite different from how human history had painted them. What I had learned since meeting them was that they were almost innocent in nature, caring, and carried a deep kindness. And within that, I felt like I could understand how they had been defeated by humans. Humans were shrewd and would scheme their way to victory. It was human nature to do anything to win.

Iona continued. "Humans will not take in refugee demons. Instead, some even go out into remote areas to hunt them down. For the demons themselves, it must seem like they are being hunted for no reason at all."

But there was some sense in it. Humans saw demons as monsters, and many of them were scared of them instinctively. Even so, that was no reason to hunt them down and kill them indiscriminately.

"But in the war that engulfed Eucrit, humans were massacring other humans. Why?" I asked.

"That is something I don't know."

The world of my previous life had been through brutal wars and atrocities of its own. The war in Eucrit had been equally incomprehensible. By killing every noble and soldier, who would even be left to administer the conquered territory?

"Well, this isn't something we need to speak of now," Iona said, looking down at Aurora, who had fallen asleep.

"I suppose you're right."

Just then, there was a loud knock on the door.

"Come in," I called out.

The door opened to reveal Sharmilia. She closed it behind her as she entered.

"What do you need?" I asked her.

"The bath has been prepared, master."

"Oh, then I'll go last."

"No, Lord Galdzin requested that you come to bathe *with* him."

"He did? All right, I'll head there now."

I said goodbye to Iona and Maria, then followed Sharmilia to the bath.

"Is he already in there?"

"Yes, he's already gotten into the bath."

I took off my clothes and entered the bathroom. Though I couldn't see through the steam, I could sense that someone was already there.

"Is that you, Algarde?" said a voice from within the steam. "Come on in."

"Yes, father."

Galdzin was the one who had spoken, but there was also someone else with him. To my surprise, it was King Lusemia.

"U-Uh, Sharmilia?!" I said in a high pitch. "You didn't tell me Her Majesty was here too!"

I turned to glare at Sharmilia but was met with another shocking sight. Sharmilia was standing there, completely naked.

"Wait, what?! Why are you naked too?! Oh...are you getting in?"

"Ah, yes, but I'll get out right away! I apologize for my rudeness!" Sharmilia said, a blush blooming across her pale face. She quickly turned to leave the room.

"Hey now, Sharmilia! I'm the one who called you here," Lusemia said. "You can't just leave because you want to! Al, *you're* the one who's being rude. Of course she's naked! Who takes a bath with their clothes on?"

"Ah, y-you're right. Sharmilia, it's okay. I don't mind if you get in."

"Thank you, my master. Please forgive me for joining you."

"Sharmilia's taken with you, Algarde. Why not let her bathe with you?" Lusemia asked with a huff.

"It's not that I'm against it, Your Majesty. It's just..." I said, embarrassed.

So the four of us were bathing together. I supposed this was just another form of the demons' innocence, as Iona called it.

"No need to be shy, Algarde. I'm sure you've seen a naked body before," Galdzin said. Though he was blind, he seemed to be able to sense my embarrassment.

"I've bathed with Iona and Maria before...but it's not like I'm used

to it."

"Surely you must be seeing something wonderful right now."

"Yes... Yes, I certainly am..." I said, my face bright red.

Galdzin laughed. "Good, good!"

What's good?! Father, I'm still just a child! I'm only nine years old! Does he understand that?

I decided to change the direction of the conversation. "Father, how have you been feeling?"

"Hmm..."

It appeared that wasn't something he wished to talk about.

Lusemia spoke in his place. "As it stands, his eyesight may never return. As for his body, it will likely take quite some time to recover. Just leave that to me."

"Then his body can be healed?"

"It can, though I'll need to be with him at all times."

I see... It's not fair that she can't even take time off without his health deteriorating so significantly. How terrible, to have been poisoned like this! It's infuriating!

But Galdzin smiled. "Algarde... What a blessing that we've been able to reunite like this. Your mother must be smiling upon us from the afterlife."

"I wish I could've met her, even just once."

"I do too. She passed away right after giving birth to you."

"She died...because of me?"

"That is not so. It's a risk for a human to give birth to a demon child. If anything, the responsibility lies with me," Galdzin said sadly.

"It's just as Gald says. I would guess that your mother was happy just knowing that you were able to be born," Lusemia said.

"Do you really think so?"

"To bear the child of the man she loved... What could be more fulfilling? Just look at how happy Iona is."

She was right. Gram had passed away, but it seemed that Iona was happy having given birth to his child. Thinking of that, I felt I could understand what they were saying. Maybe for my mother, the fact that I had been born was enough. I couldn't thank those two enough for everything.

"Maybe you're right. I'm grateful for your kindness."

Galdzin smiled, but then his face became serious. "There was something I wanted to discuss with you. I...don't intend to be a burden on you."

"Father, I don't consider you a burden at all."

"No, let's speak plainly about it. I *have* become a burden, both for you and my followers."

"Do you really think they feel that way?"

"No, but this isn't about how *they* feel. I couldn't stand to be the one holding you back. You're a man now; surely you understand how I feel?"

"...I do."

I could understand what he was saying, but I would never think of him as a burden.

"I have decided that I will be with Lusemia."

"Are you saying you're getting married?"

"Yes. Algarde, will you give us your blessing?"

"Of course! Congratulations!"

"You will? Then will you also grant me one more wish?"

"What's that?"

"I want to entrust my subordinates to you. Until the day you die, let them serve under you as your loyal retainers."

"You want me to take them in as my retainers?"

"Yes. Gersham told me about his travels with you. And he told me that you're the Demon of Origin."

"Gersham said something like that to me too."

"Master, I was also there. I believe it to be true," Sharmilia added.

"If that is the case, then you should be king of this land," Lusemia said.

"That's too great of a responsibility for me."

"Well, you are still a child. But you have the potential, the capacity."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes... This is fate. You cannot escape your destiny."

"Destiny?" That didn't explain anything. What was I supposed to do?

"And now that Gald has agreed to stay by my side, I have no need for the kingdom anymore," Lusemia said with an expression of genuine happiness. "To tell the truth, I'm bored of it."

"You're *bored* of it?"

"Well, you don't need to take over right away. Just think of it as something for the future. If you truly are the Demon of Origin, your lifespan may be much longer than ours."

"Huh?! Longer than the two of you? W-Well...I think I get what you're saying."

It was a lot to take in all at once.

Sharmilia took hold of my arm, pulling me up out of the bath. "Master, I shall wash your body for you."

"I can wash myself."

"Algarde! You're her master! You have a responsibility to her!" Lusemia chastised me.

What is she talking about? I have a responsibility to be washed?

When we reached the washing area, I saw that Maquina was already there, waiting.

"Please relax and sit down. We'll take care of everything," she said.

Sharmilia and Maquina moved closer to me...

Uh, they're just going to wash me, right? Right?

Steam rose around the three of us, obscuring us from view. Thoroughly cleansed by the two beautiful vampires, I slept soundly that night.

Chapter One: Combat Training

I walked down a corridor of the Demon King's castle, the high ghoul that Sharmilia had created trailing behind me. I'd named him Phantom. I knew the name might come off as a bit edgy, but I liked it, so it stuck. I'd also had a custom coat made for Phantom, which made him look quite intimidating.



Gersham had been conducting combat training since morning. I was searching for him, but the castle was so vast that I had no idea where anything was. I occasionally passed by other demons, who would bow their heads in my presence. But just as I'd feared, I had gotten lost.

"Could you point me to the training grounds?" I asked a nearby demon, one who had the body of a snake and a human woman's upper torso.

"Oh, it's the prince! Allow me to show you the way," she said graciously.

"Thank you."

As I followed the snake-woman, I noticed a statue that was somewhat human in shape but devoid of any artistry.

"Right through here," the demon said, opening a heavy stone door. Inside was a large room resembling an arena. In the center, Galdzin's subordinates were engaged in a mock battle. I sat at the edge of the training area to observe.

Slash! Clang! Thud!

In the ring was a minotaur wielding a massive axe named Minos and a half lycan named Gog. Minos was big—even bigger than Phantom—standing over three meters tall.

"Hah!"

Gog leaped up and slashed downward with his clawed hand. Minos batted it aside with ease. Gog briefly landed on his opponent's arm before leaping back down to the floor and going in for a sweeping attack at Minos's feet.

Boom!

Minos jabbed the handle of his axe into the ground to stop Gog from upending him, then used it to knock Gog aside with a powerful upswing. Gog used both hands to grab onto the handle that was flying toward him faster than the eye could see and used its momentum to propel himself into the air, legs first. Minos used the opportunity to thrust the axe-head at Gog when he was in the air and couldn't dodge. Gog twisted in midair, deftly avoiding the axe's follow-up strike, but Minos then swung the handle down from above.

Thud!

Gog bounced off the stone floor, then stood up, wincing.

"Ouch! Damn, that hurt!"

"Ogres are as tough as ever, I see."

"Yeah, but it still hurts!"

"Same here," Minos said, pointing to the scratches he received from Gog's claws.

"Ah, sorry. Looks like I got you. You're bleeding."

"It's but a scratch," Minos replied with a nod. The scratches came from where Gog had used Minos's arm to dodge his side sweep.

It seemed the mock battle had ended.

"Lord Raul!" Gersham called out, waving me over.

I walked toward the group. "Sorry to interrupt your practice."

"Not at all! When Minos and Gog realized you were here, they nearly went into an all-out fight to the death."

It seemed they wanted to show me a real display of combat. I'd have to give them proper gratitude.

"Thank you, Minos and Gog. That was incredible."

"Thank you, my lord," they both replied, bowing their heads.

I nodded my head in return, then began speaking to everyone.

"I suppose you've already heard from my father about what's going to happen."

"Yes. All nine of us have been assigned as your subordinates."

"And you're okay with that?"

"That has nothing to do with it; this is a decision Lord Galdzin has made."

"But how do you feel about it?"

"What do our feelings matter?"

"Well, it's not like you chose to serve under me of your own free will, right?"

"On the contrary—our lord's will is our will as well."

Was it as simple as that? I didn't fully understand the demons' way of thinking, but if that's how they saw it, then I'd have to accept it. I wasn't expecting my own way of thinking would apply to everyone universally in the first place.

"Then, I have a request of you," I said.

"We're here to serve."

"Would you all be willing to help train me as well? I want to get stronger."

"You want us to train *you*?"

"I'm still a kid, and I'm weak. Up until now, I've managed thanks to my weapons, but if something really bad ever happened... If another one of those monstrous knights showed up, for instance, I'll need to develop my own combat skills to survive."

Gersham looked up at Phantom standing motionless behind me. He stared straight ahead, showing no sign of movement. He was the physical remains of those monstrous knights, but when they had been alive, none of us could stand toe to toe with them.

Gersham nodded. "Understood. In that case, we'll start by building your stamina."

"Thank you. I want you to push me to my limits."

"As you wish. However, this land is unforgiving. It wouldn't be an issue for you in your awakened form as the Demon of Origin, but as you are now in your half human form, it may prove to be too much."

"If I can't overcome at least that much, then I may as well give up on my dream to regain what I lost, right?"

"It's as you say. Very well then, let's start with the basics."

"I'm counting on you all!"

"Yes, my lord!" they all shouted.

Seeing them so fired up, I definitely had to give it my all!

It was the first day of training.

Whoooooosh!

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Lord Raul, this is only the beginning!" scolded Lars, the boar-headed orc.

Ice pellets whipped up by the fierce wind pelted me mercilessly. It hurt so much that I had reflexively begun to complain, but the snow trek continued. I had no choice but to endure since I was the one who had asked to undergo training, but this was much tougher than I had anticipated. My goggles let me see, but just barely. What about Lars's eyes? How was he able to handle it?

"Is there some purpose to this horrible march?"

"What are you saying? This is just basic endurance training."

"Basic endurance training?! How much farther are we going?"

"What do you mean? We've only just begun, haven't we?"

Lars was a kind man, yet he could be tough as a drill sergeant from hell. He plowed forward through the blizzard like a bulldozer. But...in these conditions, weren't we at risk of getting lost out here?

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"You'll just have to learn to work through these winds."

"I get it... I'll just keep walking..."

"Let's keep at it. I believe in you, my lord!"

All right... My stamina's still holding, and the coat Lusemia gave me is keeping out most of the cold. I can do this!

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Try to endure it!"

"My face! My face hurts!"

"Just use your spirit! Endure with sheer willpower!"

Fine! Use my spirit, huh? I can endure it! I've got this!

"O-Ow..."

Forget spirit! I can't *do this! No... I can! I have to endure this! Surely all the others have gone through this kind of training before!*

"H-Hey... How much farther do we have to go?" I asked.

"This is our shortest marching route, so it's only one day and night. We'll be back at the castle by tomorrow afternoon."

A full day and night?! You've got to be kidding... Will I even survive? What's the temperature right now—it has to be below freezing, right?

"Wait, isn't it nighttime already?"

"No! It's still afternoon!" Lars said.

"Then why is it already this dark?! And we still have a whole day left?"

"Don't worry, Lord Raul, I'm certain you can make it through!"

If I make it back alive tomorrow, I've got to take a break. No, wait—it's better not to think about that now, or else I'll get sleepy. If I fall asleep, I'm done for. I need to keep my eyes on Lars and just keep walking... Hang on, where did Lars go?

"Lars?!" I called.

"Over here."

"I can hear you but I can't tell which direction your voice is coming from!"

Suddenly, Lars's face appeared out of the swirling snow, startling me.

"Can you not sense my presence?"

"Sorry, Lars, but I can't do anything like that."

"Hmm, I see..."

"Here, could you hold on to this?" I asked.

I summoned a military strobe marker, the MS-2000. Its blinking light would make it impossible to lose sight of Lars.

Fixing my sight on the light, I kept walking. After about three hours, Lars called out to me.

"Hey, are you okay?" I could hear the concern in his voice.

"So... So cold..."

"It can't be helped, then. We'll turn back!"

"No! I'll keep...going..."

I wanted to speak normally, but my teeth wouldn't stop chattering.

"I don't think that's—"

"It's...fine..." I said.

"If you're sure..." He looked concerned, but I was too stubborn to stop at this point, even if I was shivering from head to toe.

What's the temperature out here? I asked myself again. My breath froze the instant it left my mouth. But I knew if I quit now, I'd never hear the end of it.

"Then let's take a break at least," Lars said. "I found a shallow cave that should work."

"Sounds good! Let's make a fire!"

"What?"

"It's freezing..." I said.

"I would, but we don't have any wood or anything else to burn."

"Huh?"

Apparently the heavy snowfall made gathering firewood impossible. I could summon something to help, but that would defeat the purpose of training like this. I'd just have to endure.

But I did summon the strobe light. No, I had no other option—hold on. Is that an angel coming down from the sky?

"I-I must be so tired that I'm seeing things! Lars, how about you?"

"No, I'm still good to go."

"Heaven has...forsaken us..." I mumbled.

"What? Hey! Lord Raul! Lord Raul!!!"

When I woke up, I found myself being warmed in a large tub of hot water.

"A-An angel?! No... Maria? How did I get here?"

Maria's face was right in front of mine. She was watching me with a worried expression.

"You left with Lars, but he came back carrying you half a day later. King Lusemia was able to heal your frostbitten limbs right away, but your body was still very cold and your face was pale. The king had us put you in the bath to warm you up. That's why you're here now."

"I... I see," I said, finally relaxing. "I thought I had died and that you were an angel."

"Oh, come now," Maria said, blushing. My head felt fuzzy, but what kind of situation was this?

Even as my mind remained hazy, I noticed someone at my feet within the steam. It was Misha.

"Um, Misha, what are you doing down there?"

"I was massaging your feet to try and get the blood running. I'm so relieved you've woken up."

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it."

Misha's smile showed genuine relief. As my head slowly began to clear, I began to better recognize the situation I was in. I was being cradled from behind by Maria in the bath. Her...*softness* was pressing against my back. Meanwhile, Misha had my feet on her thighs, diligently massaging them.

"Wh-Wh-What the—"

Wait! What on earth was happening here?!

"M-Misha, I'm fine now!"

"Understood."

"Maria, you don't need to worry anymore either."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Lusemia's healing magic worked wonders! I don't want to stay in the bath too long—the two of you can get out first!"

I was feeling better. In fact, I was feeling *much* better! Though I was still a child, my body had grown when I had come into my powers as a half demon...and this situation was making my body grow in a different way entirely!

"Why don't we help you get out first? I'll help you dry off."

"No, no, no! Nope! I'm just fine! I can dry myself off!"

"I see. Then let's get out first, Misha."

"Right."

With a splash, the two stood, bowed politely to me, and left the bathroom.

"Ah... Ahhh..."

Hey? Uh, guys? You know I could see everything, right?

Anyway, this land was just too harsh. It may have been even worse than the Arctic.

I waited for the two to leave completely before stepping out of the bath myself and heading back to my room. There, I found the vampires Sharmilia and Maquina waiting for me.

"Master!" Sharmilia cried when she saw me. "Oh, thank goodness you're safe!"

"My heart couldn't take seeing you in such a horrible condition!" Maquina said, wiping tears from her face.

Sharmilia took my hands as she teared up as well.

"Really, I wasn't in that bad of a state. I'm fine," I said.

"Honestly, that orc is all muscle and no brain!" Sharmilia was absolutely fuming.

"Wait, Sharmilia! I forced Lars to take me out there!"

"He should have known better. He clearly doesn't understand that you have human blood flowing through your veins."

"Well, to be fair, he hasn't tasted my blood like you two have."

The vampires blushed at that. Then Sharmilia turned her anger to

Phantom, who was standing to the side.

"A-Anyway! How could *you* let our master go through this? You're supposed to keep watch over him at all times!" she shouted at him, but he didn't seem to react whatsoever.

"Sharmilia! I left Phantom behind so I could train! It's not his fault."

"Master? To show such kindness even to a high ghoul like him..." she sighed. It looked like she was going to start crying again.

"It really was entirely my fault, so try not to blame him."

"As you say. We will be staying here until daybreak, so please tell us if you need anything."

As my conversation with Sharmilia wrapped up, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Gersham, Lars, and a third demon called Anamis entered and knelt before me.

"Lord Raul, we deeply apologize. We failed to properly look after you."

"No, Gersham! I was the one who asked, so there's no need to apologize!"

"Even so, I failed to properly explain your condition as the Demon of Origin."

As Gersham apologized again, Lars also bowed deeply. "I am truly sorry. I don't know how to make amends."

"No, really! It's fine! You don't need to dwell on it! I insisted that you take me out there," I said. This was beginning to get out of hand.

"I cannot simply leave it at that. Please allow me to take responsibility with my life!" he said, deadly serious.

"Absolutely not! There won't be any of that. In fact, if you all keep this up, I'll refuse to acknowledge you as my followers!"

"No! Anything but that!" Lars and Gersham cried out in unison.

"Did you honestly think that he would allow that?" Sharmilia asked with a sneer.

"You're right, Sharmilia. I'm sorry." Gersham bowed his head in contrition.

"Come on, Sharmilia, don't be so hard on them. This really was something I insisted on."

"If that is what you wish," she said.

Gersham gestured toward Anamis. "Lord Raul, this is Anamis, a succubus. Among her powers is the ability to give people pleasant dreams, even without the kind of sensual exchange her kind is known for. I would like for you to have a pleasant rest tonight. How does that sound?"

"Really? I think I might take you up on that offer."

"It would be my pleasure," Anamis said. "Now, please close your eyes."

I did so, and my consciousness drifted away.

And that was the last thing I remembered; I ended up sleeping soundly until morning.

I let out a yawn as I looked around the room. Phantom was watching me from the corner, and Iona was sitting next to my bed and holding my hand.

"Good morning. Thank you, mother," I said to Iona before turning to Phantom. "Were you watching over me too, big guy?"

Phantom remained silent as usual.

"Good morning. Are you feeling okay?" Iona asked me.

"Yeah. I'm sorry that I worried you. I hadn't imagined it would be *that* harsh out there."

"Honestly...you're always doing something to make me worry."

"I'm sorry."

Iona pulled me into a tight hug and kissed me on the forehead. After a moment, she let me go, but then she sniffed the air.

"Raul...it seems you're becoming a young man..."

"Well, I suppose a man does have to take risks sometimes."

"That's not what I mean. Have you not noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

Iona glanced toward the lower half of my body as I lay there.

"Well, there's a smell."

"Hm? Wait...what is this?"

I noticed that something was off about my underwear. Did I wet

the bed? No, wait... This musky smell...

"Ahhh! Th-This isn't—"

I'd had a wet dream.

Oh, right...Anamis. Oh god!

"N-No, mother, this isn't what you think!"

"It's *exactly* what I think. Raul, maybe you don't fully understand what's happening?" Iona said, concerned.

No! I do *understand! It's just that my body's been growing so fast that I hadn't been able to process it. But I've been through this before, back when I was a middle schooler in my past life!*



I was starting to panic.

"Uh... Uh..."

"It's okay. This is completely normal for boys," Iona said kindly.

"O-Oh. Is that so? Ha ha ha..."

Iona pulled me close again as I tried to laugh it off and hugged me tightly.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"O-Okay," I said, still embarrassed.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" I replied, accidentally raising my voice in a panic.

Maria entered, holding Aurora, followed by Misha and Misetta. They gathered around my bed.

No, no, no! You've got to be kidding me! Why are all the girls coming here now*?!*

"Master Raul! How are you feeling?"

"Is it okay for you to be up already?"

"I'm so glad you're okay!"

The three of them spoke one after the other, but I couldn't focus. Did they notice anything? I needed them to leave immediately! I felt sorry for Iona, but there was no way I could act like this wasn't something to be embarrassed about!

"I'm fine. I might've pushed myself too hard, though. Let's talk about it over breakfast later, all right?"

"Master Raul, you're still a child! Training with demons is far too dangerous!" Maria scolded me, completely ignoring what I had said.

"Maria's right. You should be treated as a child when you're this young!" Misha scolded me too.

I'm sorry, Misha, but something very not *childlike just happened to me!*

"Raul, you've finally been reunited with your birth father, but please don't overdo it," Misetta said. Somehow, I was even being lectured by her.

"Yeah, you're right. All of you."

They had a point. The journey here had been terrible. The constant running between horrific battles had left me feeling like a war veteran. I remembered hearing that soldiers returning from the

front lines often struggled to adjust to normal life. Maybe I was experiencing something similar, a kind of psychological trauma. I was still haunted by the sounds of battle and the faces of those who I had killed.

But! While I was currently a nine-year-old in this world, in my previous life I had been thirty-one. And *this* was far more embarrassing than any battlefield!

"Right now, I just need to clear my mind. So, let's talk later. I'll see you then!" I said, trying to make them take a hint.

"Oh, okay. Wait, what's that smell?" Maria asked, sniffing the air.

Misha and Misetta sniffed.

"What *is* that?" Misetta asked.

Oh no.

"You're right," Misetta said, "It's sort of musky... What is it?"

"I think my grandfather had a tree that smelled like this behind his house," Misha said.

The three of them sniffed around, trying to figure it out.

Ah...please...stop.

"Oh? Maybe it's the smell of leaves from outside," Iona said. "Anyway, everyone, Raul needs to change, so please go get breakfast started."

The three of them curtsied to Iona and left the room.

"Thank you," I said.

"For now, you should change and clean yourself up."

Iona fetched a bucket of warm water. I wiped myself down with a damp cloth and changed into a fresh set of clothes.

"What should I do with the dirty sheets and underwear?"

"I'll wash and hang them out to dry. Don't worry about it."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry. I'm always here for you."

Having your mother find out something like this is tough, no matter what world you live in.

"But still, Anamis's power as a succubus is scary. I never expected it to be so effective," I said to myself as I left the room. I didn't head to the dining hall immediately. I was still too embarrassed and

needed a distraction. I knocked on a nearby door.

"Enter."

It was Galdzin's voice. Once inside, I found Lusemia again sitting next to him and holding his hand.

"Sounds like you had a tough day yesterday," Galdzin said with a laugh.

"Galdzin! It was no laughing matter!" Lusemia scolded. "Algarde almost lost his limbs to frostbite. Your people are too loyal to a fault!"

"Still, he's walking around just fine now, isn't he?"

"Well, that's true," she said, turning to me, "but you're now my adopted child, so don't make me worry so much."

"My apologies," I said.

"So, Algarde, what brings you here?" Galdzin asked, getting to the point.

"I wanted to ask about my body, particularly its growth."

"What about it?"

"I feel I grow stronger with every battle. I was wondering if you knew anything about that."

"Ah, that. That's because you carry the blood of a demon."

"Was it the same for you, father?"

"No. I hated fighting, so my growth was much slower."

"I feel like I'm growing too quickly," I said with a sigh.

"Well, up to a certain point, your growth will exceed that of humans," Galdzin explained, noticing my concern. "But because of your heritage, you will stop aging at some point."

"I do wish that I hadn't stopped aging so soon," Lusemia added, "But that simply can't be helped."

"So that's how this works," I said, thinking.

"Your human heritage seems very prominent, so it might be different for you," she continued.

"Well, you've lived so long among the humans that it might take some time to adjust to the idea, but you'll get used to it," Galdzin said.

So that means I'll age differently from Iona, Maria, and the rest.

"How old *are* you, father?"

"About 160, give or take. I can't remember exactly."

He didn't look a day over forty!

"Though there is one among your subordinates who's younger than even you," Galdzin remarked.

"Really? Who?"

"Gog."

Gog was younger than me?

"How old is he?"

"Three."

"Three?!"

That was the biggest shock of the day.

Misetta and I were both nine. I bet she'd be just as shocked as I was to hear this. Demons clearly didn't conform to human logic. For now, I decided to keep this to myself.

One week had passed since the disastrous snow march. As soon as I could move again, I headed to the training grounds.

"I apologize once more for what happened," Lars said when he saw me, bowing his head in apology. But I still didn't hold what happened against him.

"Well, I guess it was too early for me to try that. Could you help set me up some training that's a bit more manageable?"

At that, Gersham made a suggestion. "There's a goblin unit here under King Lusemia's command. How about sparring with them?"

"You want me to spar with goblins?"

"Yes. Please, follow me."

Gersham led me out behind the training grounds and to a staircase leading underground. As we descended, a vast subterranean cavern opened before us.

"This is one of the King's army bases. The deeper you go, the stronger the inhabitants are. We'll conduct your training here in the first underground level—the goblins' territory."

"Okay. Let's do it."

Pheeew! Gersham whistled sharply, and five goblins emerged.

It was my first time seeing goblins. They looked...small. Smaller than me, even. Were they actually strong?

"You got the message from King Lusemia, right?" Gersham asked them.

"Yeah, we got it," one of the goblins answered curtly.

"I'm Algarde," I said, introducing myself.

Following my lead, the goblins introduced themselves as Netta, Teela, Tappy, Cray, and Macca.

Even their names were cute. Was this really going to work?

Clatter!

Teela threw a wooden stick on the ground and looked at me.

"Feel free to use this!" she said.

"Thank you."

I picked up the stick and pointed it toward her. I'd never practiced kendo, so this was new to me.

Teela just watched me quietly. Was it really okay for me to hit them with this?

Whoosh! Thud!

I had aimed at where Teela was standing, but I ended up smacking the ground hard instead.

"Ow..." I said, my hands tingling.

Huh? I swore I had struck right where Teela's head was.

"For now, I'll be your only opponent. Feel free to attack me with all your strength," Teela said, flashing a smile.

"So...I shouldn't hold back?"

"Of course. This time I'll come at you too. *I'll* hold back, of course."

This time, I raised the stick above my head and faced Teela directly. At first glance, she looked like she was just standing there.

Whoosh! Thud!

My hands... My hands were stinging!

"Ugh, ow..."

"Don't stop after one strike! You need to keep attacking!"

"G-Got it."

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

I swung wildly, trying to land a hit on Teela. But no matter what I did, I couldn't touch her. She dodged everything, swaying left and right like a boxer. It felt like she could always see me coming.

I realized I'd never be able to hit her if I was just swinging away! So instead, I tried an aimed thrust.

Whoosh!

I thrust the stick forward as hard as I could, but Teela deflected it sideways with her hand. As I stumbled forward, I felt a light bump against my chin. My legs gave out and I fell to the ground.

"—okay? Are...okay? Are you okay?"

Gersham's voice slowly cut through the fog in my head. He was holding me up and speaking to me slowly.

"Did I pass out?" I asked.

"Only for a moment."

"What happened?"

"Teela got you on the chin. It rattled you a bit."

When I got up, Teela gave me a look of apology.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine!" I said. "It makes it feel like we're really sparring! And we're just getting started, aren't we?"

Teela's face lit up with a big smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Now, let's keep going!"

"Oh, are you sure?" Teela asked, giving Gersham an unsure look.

He nodded. "Lord Raul desires to grow stronger. Teach him everything you can."

"Understood."

After that, I lost track of time trying to land a single hit on Teela. She always pulled her punches just short of hitting me so I wouldn't get knocked down again. It reminded me of when Gram would play pretend knights with me when I was little.

Haa... Haa... I was breathing heavily.

"Should we stop?" Teela asked, looking concerned.

"No way! I'm having too much fun! Let's keep going."

I kept swinging my stick wildly, but I just couldn't catch her.

"All right, let's take a break!" Gersham soon called out. "Lord Raul, come here for a second."

"What is it?" I asked.

Gersham had me stand still. He adjusted the placement of my

feet, the position of my hips, and how I gripped the stick.

"This is the basic stance. Try to stay in it as you fight. And you're putting too much of your weight into your swings. Oh, and one more thing—your hips are raised too high. Try to lower your center of gravity a bit more."

"Got it."

"All right! Break time is over!"

At Gersham's signal, Teela and the other goblins stood up. I faced Teela again, trying to maintain the stance that Gersham had shown me. Teela seemed to take this as a sign to get a bit more serious and took up her own stance.

"Go ahead," she told me.

I came at her swinging, already feeling noticeably faster.

My posture really had been the problem.

"Hah! Hup! Hyah!"

I kept swinging, determined to catch Teela. Before, she had been dodging my strikes effortlessly, but now she was using her hands to parry and deflect. Even so, I still couldn't actually land a hit on her. When I swung a little wide, Teela took the opportunity to counterattack, but I somehow managed to dodge just in time.

"Now, counter!" she yelled. She had started to give me instructions mid-fight.

Whoosh!

I tried to hit her with a thrust, but she swayed out of the way. She then trapped my stick between her hands—just like a sword catching technique. With a backflip, she wrested the stick from my grip.

I let out a deep breath. I had worked up a good sweat, and it felt like I had really pushed myself.

"We goblins are small and lack physical strength," Teela explained. "To make up for it, we use our opponent's strength against them to gain the upper hand."

"I see."

"Lord Raul, since you are still small yourself, I think you could benefit from fighting like us."

Ogres and orcs were powerful and physically robust, and

vampires possessed incredible speed and immortality. In contrast, goblins were weak, and so they relied on technique.

"And for the time being, I will come here to assist in your instruction," said Gersham.

"I'm grateful. In that case, to show you my appreciation..." I said, summoning cans of Salisbury steaks and tuna, as well as some hardtack.

The goblins were surprised, having never seen summoning magic before.

"Oh!"

"What's that!"

"I-It's magic."

"Huh?"

"So cool!"

"It's food," I said. "If we're going to be training together, we should eat together too."

I opened the cans and offered them to the goblins, along with the hardtack.

"It's good!"

"I've never had this before."

"How did it get into that metal?"

"Fish and meat! Fish and meat!"

"So cool!"

As we ate the combat rations together, I decided to learn more about the goblins.

"So, what kind of work do you usually do?" I asked them.

"We gather information and pass it along to our allies."

That made sense. Goblins were small, so they handled intelligence work, like a reconnaissance unit.

"Except..." Teela said, looking slightly uncomfortable.

I looked at her questioningly.

"Except we haven't really been able to do much of that recently. We've been at peace for a while now."

"I see. So, I suppose that means you wouldn't have much reason to leave the kingdom, would you?"

"Exactly."

I'd assumed that goblins would be happier being able to live in safety here. On the mainland, goblins were killed on sight, and adventurers hunted demons and magical beasts in human nations for their bounties. Military units would even be sent out to participate in the extermination when it was deemed necessary.

"What do you think of humans?" I asked.

"Well, I don't really feel one way or the other about them."

"I see."

Just as I thought—living here, in a place separated from humans, these goblins had a different perspective from others.

"Teela, would you ever want to leave this land?"

"I don't really know."

That made sense. If you've never known any other place, you wouldn't have any reason to want to leave.

"Gersham, would it be okay if I told them what I plan on doing?"

"I believe King Lusemia would allow it."

"All right, then."

I had been told that the will of a demon reflected the will of who they chose to follow. Since Lusemia had decided to throw her full support behind me, I could consider the demons under her command as my own allies.

"I originally lived on the mainland. I've heard tales that demons also lived there, over two thousand years ago."

"Oh?" the five goblins responded in unison, listening intently.

"Like those demons, I was driven from my homeland and fled all the way here."

"Yes, we've heard that," they said, all nodding.

"I plan to take back the mainland and return it to the demons."

"Is something like that even possible?"

"It's not about whether it's possible or not. It's something I *have* to do."

"I don't really understand what you mean," one of them admitted.

Well, of course, they wouldn't understand. Why would they think someone as weak as me could achieve something like that?

"My training here is the first step toward that goal. With everyone's help, I believe I can become strong enough to do it."

"Do you really think we can help?" Teela asked.

"It might be hard to believe, but big things always start with something small. What seems impossible now can be achieved with everyone's help. I truly believe that."

"I don't really get it. But, if you need our help, we'll gladly give it to you!"

I had to become stronger, no matter what. And to do that, I needed the demons' support.

"That's why I'm asking you to help by training me: so I can survive and protect everyone."

"Okay!"

I wasn't sure if they fully grasped everything I was saying, but I needed them to understand how significant their support was.

"My first step to retaking the mainland is to defeat Teela without getting hit."

"Let's do it!" Teela said, a bright smile on her green face.

***

Seven days had passed since I began training with the goblins, yet I still couldn't land a single hit on Teela. She was ridiculously agile—my eyes couldn't even keep up with her.

"If goblins are this strong and fast, why are they considered weak on the mainland?" I finally asked Gersham.

"These goblins are special, my lord. They've only become this strong because powerful demons have trained them."

"Oh, that makes sense."

"On the mainland, goblins operate in packs to attack or capture humans. They don't have kind hearts like these ones here."

"I guess that shows how important one's environment is."

"On the mainland, goblins are seen as lower than beasts."

"Well, humans will kill goblins whenever they see them. Those goblins must be desperately trying to survive. They're weak on their own, so they have no choice but to band together and strike back."

The goblins of the mainland were inherently vile creatures, but it was surely human persecution that had driven them to that point.

"You may be right. To live in human lands, they might not have any other choice."

I had lived in Japan for my entire past life, so I had only known a life of peace. Any knowledge I had about conflict zones came from the news. And even then, as a military enthusiast, my focus was always on the weapons being used in the conflicts. I never gave serious thought to the plight of refugees or the reasons behind retaliation. People were shaped by their environment and relationships, and in turn they formed civilizations and nations. There was no escaping that influence.

"Teela and these goblins have a natural innocence, and they don't hold any resentment toward the world," I said, "and that's because they believe so completely in the ways of the demon nation. It makes me wonder what kind of leader King Lusemia is to her people."

"Indeed. When you speak with King Lusemia, you can tell that she's a truly wonderful person, even if she can be a bit childish. The reason she sent people after you was so that you could live with Master Galdzin."

"If we had known that from the start, we wouldn't have had so much trouble getting here..."

"Indeed. Thanks to that misunderstanding, we were nearly killed by Sharmilia."

"That was a close call. But, still... Gersham, we ended up killing thousands of Sharmilia's people."

"I suppose we did. But there was no other choice."

Was that really true? It didn't seem so black-and-white to me. Sharmilia had every right to hate us. And yet she'd sworn loyalty to me without a second thought.

"Is what I'm doing—taking back the mainland—really the right thing to do?"

"I can't say. We are here only to follow you, Lord Raul."

"It'll be a tough path to walk."

"Yes, I suppose it will be."

"I wish I were stronger..."

"You're still young. There's no need to rush."

The march in the snow and my sparring today had made it clear that I was only slightly stronger than the average human. Without my weapons, I was useless. But I was beginning to understand what it would take to improve my physical capabilities.

"I think my demonic powers improve when I'm in life-or-death combat."

"Do they?"

"Especially when I'm fighting with summoned weapons, I feel a significant boost in my physical abilities."

"That did seem to be the case. When you awakened as the Demon of Origin, you were wielding your weapons against the vampires. In the forest of the red viper, you kept pace with us as you ran. And during the battle of Gladrom, you carried out assassinations with us. Those actions were beyond human limits."

"But I was unable to do anything against the knight that commanded the enemy."

"That's because you don't have the necessary physical endurance for that type of fighting."

"Then that's what I should focus on most. I must be prepared for when my powers do increase."

"That sounds like a sound strategy."

"First things first: I need to land a hit on Teela."

"Agreed. Shall we begin?"

After my break ended, I once again faced off against Teela. I had to remember that what goblins lacked in size they made up for in speed. I still had trouble even following their movements.

"Come at me," Teela said.

I started swinging my stick at her wildly, trying to catch her. I chased after her for the next two hours. Over the past seven days, I had been training like this for about ten hours a day, but I still hadn't managed to touch her. When I'd tried some underhanded tactics like stepping on her foot, she simply kicked me away. It felt like she was reading my every move.

Eventually, we took a break. Teela approached me as I was catching my breath.

"Lord Algarde?"

“What is it?”

“At this rate, I fear that this will take much more time. May I give you some advice?”

“Please do.”

“Well, you’ve started to move on instinct.”

“Really? I haven’t noticed that at all.”

“I told you before that goblins use their opponent’s strength against them, but there’s more to it.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“We also observe our opponent very closely.”

“You do?”

I was already trying to study her movements, but she always disappeared by the time I brought my stick down.

“We watch our opponent’s bodies, the movement of their eyes and muscles, and any habits they might have. We also listen closely to their breathing.”

“That’s right,” Gersham said. “Ogres and minotaurs can do even more than that. We not only watch their movement but also sense their presence. We also try to guess their intent to predict where they plan on moving.”

“Then...it’s impossible if I’m just using my eyes to watch you.”

I finally saw the problem. Every one of my movements really was being read. No wonder I couldn’t hit her—it was like losing at rock-paper-scissors by always playing the same hand.

“Why not try predicting my next move by watching my body’s movements?”

“Okay, I’ll give it a shot.”

And so our game of tag started once more. This time I watched her closely as I swung my stick. Even so, I was still completely missing her. But now I could tell that something was off!

“You’re doing great!” she said.

“Huh? What did I do?”

As far as I could tell, I was still failing miserably.

Gersham called out from the sidelines. “You may not be hitting her, but you’re limiting how much she can move.”

“Really?”

"He's right," Teela affirmed.

"You would even be able to hit her if you could swing faster," Gersham added.

So it really was my physical skills holding me back. Unless I strengthened my body, I wouldn't be able to swing fast enough. To Teela, my swings probably looked like they were in slow motion.

"If you can't swing any faster with that, maybe try using a shorter stick?" Teela suggested.

She went to the side, then returned with a stick less than forty centimeters long.

"Use this."

"Got it."

The shorter stick was much lighter and easier to swing. Once again, I focused on carefully observing Teela and striking rhythmically. If this were a real fight, I'd already have died a thousand times. Like my experiences with airsoft battles in my previous life, this could only work as training because it wasn't lethal. It was different from the sparring I'd seen between Minos and Gog, who had used real weapons.

I needed to treat this as a real fight!

Just imagine this stick is a combat knife!

"Hah!"

I focused as sharply as I could, observing Teela's every move as I struck, and— *Clack!*

I struck Teela on her left arm. I'd finally managed to hit her.

"Lord Algarde! You did it!" Teela beamed.

"Well done, Lord Raul!" Gersham exclaimed.

It kind of sounded like I was being patronized, but still...I had finally done it! This was a big step forward! Then and there, I decided that I would call Teela my teacher—at least, I would in my heart.

***

I was alone in a dark cavern. Utter silence enveloped me, as if I had become part of the darkness itself.

Drip.

Somewhere, a droplet of water fell. At that moment, I took a single step forward.

Whoosh!

Something swept past the back of my head. I jumped, but my movement carried no unnecessary motion.

Something darted through the space that my feet had just occupied. As I landed, I launched forward, thrusting out my palm.

Thud.

I made light contact with something.

Thump!

I heard the sound of someone collapsing. From behind the fallen figure, I sensed another presence.

Swoosh!

I swayed to avoid the attack and caught the object between my palms—a Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife. Without a moment's pause, I wrested it from my opponent and threw it faster than the eye could see.

Clang!

The sound of the blade embedding itself into the rocky surface echoed through the cavern. From my crouched position, I swung my left leg upward in a powerful sweep.

Thud!

I felt my foot connect with someone's body.

"Gah!"

Thump!

Again came the sound of someone tumbling to the ground. But no sooner had they fallen than knives stabbed at me from both sides. With my palms, I pushed them slightly upward to miss. I immediately went back into a crouch and swept my leg low in a spinning kick.

Thump! Thump!

Two bodies fell this time.

From behind me, I felt some faint malice and the sensation that something was coming directly toward the back of my head. I tilted my head to the left just in time, as a knife narrowly grazed my

cheek. I grabbed the arm holding the knife and, in a motion resembling a shoulder throw, slammed the assailant to the floor.

Thud!

I stood back up in the silent darkness as if nothing had happened.

"Well done!"

The voice wasn't flattery; it was genuine praise.

I summoned a military lantern and lit it, bringing light to the darkness. Around me lay five goblins geared for combat, each one sprawled on the ground.

"Sorry, everyone. Is anyone hurt?"

The goblins each gave their response.

"I'm fine."

"No problems here."

"I just scraped my elbow a bit."

"My butt hurts."

"My head's spinning a little."

"Teela!" I called out. "How did I do? Was I able to use my opponent's strength against them?"

"I'd say you did that and more."

"Then...I passed?"

"Yes."

It had been two years since my training with the goblins had begun. My body had grown—I now looked to be in my young teens and stood over 165 centimeters tall. In the beginning, I couldn't even hit Teela with a stick. Now, I could dominate five goblins in total darkness—even when I was unarmed and my opponents were equipped with fighting knives.

"After two years, I can finally graduate from fighting with you five."

"Then how about trying out the training you'd given up on before then?" Gersham suggested.

"Ah...the trek through the cold?"

"Precisely."

I wasn't too sure. That one had been really tough. I'd literally almost frozen to death.

"You should be able to make it now that you can better control your energy," Gersham assured me.

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"Well, all right. But before that, let's celebrate my graduation!"

Gersham and the goblins all tilted their heads with a look of confusion.

"A celebration?"

"Yes. Let's go up to the castle together!"

"Is that okay?" Teela asked anxiously.

"It's fine. I've already spoken with King Lusemia and my father."

"Are you sure that creatures like us should—"

"Of course! And I knew that you guys would be nervous, so I made sure that the King wouldn't be there."

"Okay," said Teela, though she still looked doubtful.

When we arrived at the castle's dining hall, Iona and the maids were moving about, making preparations.

"Hey, everyone. It's done, so I've brought the goblin squad with me," I said.

"Oh, Raul. Did you pass? Congratulations," Iona said.

"Yes. I've finally graduated."

Iona stepped forward and addressed the goblins.

"Hello. Thank you so much for taking my son under your wings."

"N-Not at all..."

"Mother, they're amazing!" I said. "At first, I wasn't a match for them at all!"

"Oh, is that so? You know, Raul was even calling Teela his teacher!"

"I'm not worthy of being called that..." Teela said, embarrassed.

"Thanks to you, he said he's been learning something new every day. You must have a gift for teaching."

Teela's green face flushed red. "B-But for him to handle all five of us so quickly... He's on a completely different level."

"What do you mean?" Iona asked curiously.

"It took *us* much longer to reach this point."

"How long?"

"Over a decade," she admitted.

"You worked so hard! That's incredible!" Iona said.

"It's nothing impressive..." Teela mumbled.

"Well, there's no reason to keep you waiting. Go ahead and sit down."

Iona guided everyone to their seats, and we all sat together.

"Maria and Misha's cooking is amazing! You're going to love it!" I said.

Once everyone was seated, the maids began bringing out the food.

"I've never seen food like this before!" Teela said, while the other goblins stared at the food with excitement.

"This is food that humans eat on the mainland," I explained. "I asked the King to bring in the ingredients from Gladrom."

"Is that so?"

Currently, Gladrom was under the control of the Holy Land of Fattoria. According to the information that Maria had gotten from diplomats, King Paul of Gladrom and Prime Minister David were both alive and well. Though they no longer held their royal titles, Paul had been named the Lord of Gladrom and David now served as his steward, and they seemed to be living a contented life. Because the Land of Demons was separated from the mainland by the harsh North Sea, the allied forces of Fattoria-Bargius hadn't launched any invasions. Gladrom, which served as the gateway to the Land of Demons, had become a base for those with anti-demon sentiments.

"They are quite wary of us, it seems," I said.

"None of their soldiers returned from the battle of Gladrom; they have good reason to be on guard. It's unlikely that they'll make a move soon," Maria replied.

"Everything went exactly as I planned," I said. "With not even one corpse left behind, it'd be strange if they didn't go on high alert."

As Maria and I continued to discuss Gladrom, mother joined in.

"King Paul is quite shrewd, isn't he? He's keeping Fattoria and Bargius in check by claiming that only Gladrom can stand against the

Demons."

"That's just like him." I laughed, remembering the man and his unique personality.

"Well, since the food is ready, mother, would you say grace?"

"Of course. 'Let us be thankful for this meal and the life it sustains.'"

With that, our small party began: me, Iona, Maria, Misha, Misetta, and the goblin squad—Teela, Macca, Netta, Tappy, and Cray.

The goblins were absolutely delighted with the meal.

"This is the most delicious food I've ever eaten!"

"It really is! I've never had anything like it!"

"They eat this kind of food on the mainland?"

"It's so good I could keep eating forever!"

"This fish pie... Such a nostalgic taste," Iona said softly.

"Yes, Misha and I made it with Selma in mind," Maria replied.

"Selma... Her cooking was truly exceptional," Iona said wistfully.

"Yes," Maria agreed, her voice trembling slightly. She and Misha nodded, their eyes glistening with tears.

"Father and I used to look forward to eating it," I added. My memories of Gram and our home came flooding back to me.

As we enjoyed this rare taste of Sanarian cuisine, we were overcome by nostalgia.

"What's wrong?" Teela asked, noticing the bittersweet atmosphere that had enveloped us.

"It's...nothing. This is delicious, isn't it?" I said, changing the subject.

"Yes! It's incredible!"

"Yeah, I think so too."

"Lord Algarde, are you...crying?" Teela asked gently.

"No, I'm not crying. I'm just feeling a little homesick, that's all."

The warm, homey flavor of Selma's recipe had been lightly seasoned by the faint salty taste of our tears.

"That's right. I haven't forgotten," I murmured. The strength that kept me moving forward had always remained within my heart.

Chapter Two: The Great Hunt

Whooosh!

The wind howled as a blizzard raged around us. I was dressed in snow camo winter gear, including a white helmet.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Despite the deep snow, I was able to keep pace with Lars.

"You've certainly grown, Lord Raul," he said.

"Yeah, I've even learned to control my magic a little."

"Well done."

Whooooooosh!

Even as the wind blew snow into my eyes, limiting my vision, I never lost sight of Lars. He was wearing the same winter gear and carrying a Norinco LG5 semiautomatic grenade launcher wrapped in white cloth. The grenade launcher was a monster—13 kilograms of raw power, capable of firing 40x53mm grenades. The recoil was no joke. Most grenade launchers had a max range of two hundred meters, but this bad boy could reach one to two thousand meters. Lars also carried an axe strapped to his back, as well as a snow camo backpack.

"I've started to acclimate to these new weapons," Lars called out over the roar of the wind.

"That one's pretty great, isn't it?" I said.

"It's incredible."

"So you've finally realized how cool it is?"

"I have!"

I was carrying a Barrett M82 anti-materiel rifle—also wrapped in white cloth—which had significantly less recoil than the LG5. I was also wearing a tactical backpack loaded with food, firewood, and a canteen. The last time we had done this training, I nearly ended up freezing to death because we had been unable to gather firewood. Thinking that it was just training, I hadn't bothered bringing any

equipment. I'd learned my lesson; this time, we were fully prepared.

"Do you think we'll actually find our target?"

"Hard to say. I've only seen it once myself."

"I hope we do," I grumbled. "We've been searching around for four days."

We weren't just marching through the blizzard this time; we were hunting a powerful mythical creature that lived in these mountains. It was a massive white beast—some said it looked like a mammoth, while others said it looked like a giant turtle. They described it as standing over a hundred meters tall, preying on other beasts with its countless tentacles.

"It's not the kind of thing you stumble upon easily," Lars said.

Over the past two years, I had honed the senses that came from my demonic heritage, yet we had already spent four days in the mountains without success.

"Be careful where you step. This place has crevices hidden under the snow," Lars warned.

"Got it."

Using our senses, we were able to detect the crevices and steer clear of danger.

"Great white bears should be hibernating at this time of year, right? If this thing preys on them, would it really be active now?"

"It most certainly is."

"What makes you so sure?"

"There have been occasional reports of our people being attacked in the mountains. When its usual prey is scarce, it will resort to feeding on demons."

"Then we can't just leave it be."

"I must admit, Lord Raul, I was surprised when you suggested that we hunt it down without telling anyone."

"I figured I needed to do something big to make up for the last time I came out here. I'm sorry for dragging you into it."

"Don't worry about it. I also feel responsible for that."

And so we'd settled on our plan: We would surprise everyone by hunting down this mythical beast, just the two of us.

Night had begun to fall.

“Let’s stay in that cave for the night,” I said when one came into view.

“Understood.”

Lars grew wary the moment we entered.

“Lord Raul, this appears to be a magical beast’s lair.”

“Yeah, I can feel a faint presence too.”

Lars concentrated for a moment, then said, “I believe it’s a great white bear.”

“Is it hibernating?”

“It seems so.”

“Then let’s keep quiet and avoid waking it.”

“Agreed. Be careful.”

We began to take our packs off, setting them near the cave wall.

The great white bear was related to the red bear I’d had the misfortune of encountering on the mainland. It was a massive creature that grew up to eight meters in height. Lars and I would remain in the front part of the cave and avoid venturing too far into its lair.

“Okay, then let’s skip building a fire or opening up food. We’ll take turns keeping watch,” I suggested.

“In that case, I’ll take the first watch.”

“Got it. I should wake up in three hours.”

“Understood.”

I fell asleep almost instantly. My body had gotten used to needing less sleep and could enter deep sleep quickly. Because of that, three hours would be plenty for me to get through the next day.

“Lars, your turn,” I told him after I awoke.

“Yes, sir!”

Lars sat down and closed his eyes. For the moment, it was quiet. We hadn’t lit a fire, so everything was dark, but the inside of the cave was somewhat warmer than the outside. I summoned ENVG-B night vision goggles and peered farther in—there were no signs of movement. The great white bear wasn’t our target, and I wanted to avoid killing it if we could.

About three hours later, I heard Lars begin to stir.

“Did anything happen?” he asked.

"Nothing important—"

I suddenly sensed something moving toward us from deeper within the cave. Lars seemed to have noticed it too. What emerged was a cub only about one meter tall and covered in white, fluffy hair.

"Oh, it's quite a cute one. I'm assuming he's a great white's cub?" I said.

"It's noticed us. What should we do?"

"I don't want to kill it. Let's just get out of here."

"Understood."

As we began to make our retreat, the cub started to run toward us, his curiosity piqued.

"Run!" I said.

The two of us ran toward the cave entrance, but the cub followed right after us.

"This is bad."

"I agree."

"We'll need to scare it off."

We turned to the playful cub who was trotting toward us.

Blam!

I fired a warning shot into the air with the Barrett M82. The cub froze in its tracks.

"*Raooowr!*" The cub let out a startled cry, frightened by the noise. Both sounds echoed through the cave, and moments later his mother emerged from deeper within.

"Not good! Hurry!" I shouted at Lars.

We bolted out of the cave just as a massive sound filled the air.

GBOOOOM!

The ground shook with the deafening, low-pitched sound.

"Wh-What is that?"

"It's *them*," Lars said grimly.

I could see something massive moving at the precipice of the blizzard...

"The mythical beast! Oh crap, it's huge!"

"Be careful!" Lars shouted.

Even with just the upper half of its body visible, the creature towered about fifty meters above the bears. Tentacles sprouted from

its back, each ending in what appeared to be jaws. Its body, resembling a horse, appeared to stretch at least 150 meters from head to tail.

ROOOAAAR!

The great white bear and its cub emerged from the cave behind us.

"Stay back! Don't come out here!" I shouted.

A colossal tentacle shot out and coiled around the mother bear in an instant, hoisting her high into the air.

"Damn it! Lars, shoot the tentacle!"

"Yes, sir!"

Lars and I aimed our weapons and fired at the tentacle's middle section.

Ratatatat! Blam! Blam! Blam!

GBOOOOOOM!

Parts of the tentacle were blasted and splattered away, but the massive beast refused to release the bear. I threw down my backpack and the Barrett M82, summoning a Russian RPG-32 rocket launcher and charging forward.

Boom! Kaboom!

GBOOOOOOM!!!

The beast's roar shook the air. The tentacle burst open from the rocket's impact, and the great white bear fell to the ground with a *thud*. Thankfully Lars had run under and cushioned its landing.

"They're coming!" Lars shouted.

Thick tentacles rushed at us from all directions, each nearly ten meters in diameter.

"I'll hold them off! Get her to safety!"

"Understood!"

I summoned an M61 Vulcan. It was a monstrous weapon, weighing 112 kilograms and firing 20x102mm rounds at a rate of six thousand rounds per minute. These were usually mounted on fighter jets, but I summoned it complete with a stand.

BRRRRRRRRRRRATATATATAT!!!

I unleashed a torrent of bullets. The tentacles burst and shredded under the barrage, but the beast didn't relent. Still, the power of the

M61 Vulcan kept it at bay.

GBOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The beast let out another earthshaking roar, and a sudden intense rumbling followed.

I looked up at the mountain. A massive amount of snow was breaking loose—an avalanche!

I abandoned the M61 Vulcan and bolted for the cave, but it was too late. I was caught in the avalanche.

"Gah! No!"

The force of the snow dragged me along, disorienting me completely. I couldn't tell which way was up or down.

This was bad—really bad!

The snow's movement eventually ceased, but I still couldn't see anything. I had no idea where I was either.

"I... I can't move."

Breathing was getting more and more difficult. I tried to calm down to reduce oxygen consumption, but I'd exerted myself so much from trying to sprint away from the avalanche. About seven minutes passed...

"Calm down," I told myself.

After ten minutes, I began to lose consciousness. My chest burned as I gasped for air. I began coughing violently, hacking up all the liquid that I'd breathed into my lungs.

I... I'm going to die...

Just as the thought crossed my mind—

Fwmp!

A hand grabbed me by my ankle and yanked me out of the snow.

"Cough! Cough! Haaah...haaah!" I gasped, taking in lungfuls of air.

"Lord Raul! Are you all right?"

It was Lars—he had found me and dug me out.

"Th-Thanks to you... You saved me! Wh-What happened to the beast?"

"It's gone."

"I see. Were we really trying to take out something that big?" I said, looking at Lars in disbelief.

“I guess it was a bit reckless,” Lars admitted.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha!”

The two of us burst into laughter, finally realizing the absurdity of our actions.

“By the way, what happened to the great white?”

“Well...”

I suddenly noticed the noise a short distance from us.

“Rwaooor, gwaoooh!”

When I turned toward it, I saw the cub crying out beside the motionless body of its mother.

“So she died...”

“Yes.”

“Then...maybe we should stay with the cub for a while.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Guilt weighed heavily on my chest. The mother bear wouldn’t have died if we hadn’t come to this cave.

After some time, the cub’s cries began to subside.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen,” I said to the cub.

“If we leave it here, it’ll probably wander off again,” Lars said.

“And that would mean its death, wouldn’t it?”

“Most likely.”

After thinking it over for a while, I reached a conclusion.

“We’ll take the mother’s body and the cub down the mountain,” I said.

“We’re taking it with us?”

“I don’t see any other choice, do you?”

“...I understand.”

I summoned a nylon tent and wrapped the mother bear’s body in it.

“Hey, I’m gonna summon you some tuna to eat,” I said to the cub.

I summoned canned tuna rations and opened them, setting them in front of the cub. It hungrily devoured the food and finally started to slow down after about twenty cans.


TUNA
TUNA
TUNA
TUNA
TUNA

"*Gwaooon...*" The cub let out a small sound.

Lars and I carried the mother's wrapped body out of the cave. We were greeted with a brilliant blue sky, as the blizzard had calmed and the sun had started to rise.

"All right, let's head back down the mountain," I said.

"Yes, sir," Lars replied.

The cub followed close by, toddling along as we dragged its mother's body behind us.

"Do you think the King will let me keep this great white as a pet?" I asked.

"I don't know. She might, if you ask nicely," he replied.

"I hope so." I sighed as I looked back at the cub trailing us.

When we arrived at the King's castle, I left Lars with the cub outside of the gate and went to King Lusemia's chambers.

"Oh! You've finally returned. You've been gone for six days. Iona and the others were worried sick," she said.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty."

"There's no reason to be so formal. I'm your family now."

"All right then. I'm sorry...mother."

"Wh-What?! You can't just say that so suddenly! Although...I don't dislike it. Actually, it's rather pleasant!" Lusemia seemed happy, her face lighting up.

"Well, mother, I have a request."

"Oh! What is it? Tell me whatever you want!"

"I'd like to have a pet."

"A...'pet'? What's that?"

"Oh, I mean I'd like to take care of an animal." It suddenly occurred to me that the concept of a *pet* might not exist in this kingdom.

"Is that all? Do whatever you like."

"Well, the thing is... Actually, would you mind coming with me?"

King Lusemia agreed, so I took her to where I had left Lars. When we arrived, he knelt before her.

"There's no need to be so stuffy," she told him.

As Lars stood, Lusemia noticed the great white bear cub behind him.

"Oh my! Is this the one? How adorable! Yes, you *must* keep it!"

"A-Are you sure?"

"It's remarkable that it followed you here. I've never heard of a great white bear taking to someone like this."

"Really?"

"Lars, have you ever heard of such a thing?" she asked.

"No, this's the first time I've seen anything like it. It's hard to believe."

"I'm not entirely sure how to care for it, but its diet is probably meat or fish, right?" I asked.

"I would think so," Lusemia said.

"Got it. Then tomorrow, I'll go find some food for it," I said.

"I like that you're taking responsibility, but don't overdo it. What are you going to name him?"

A name... I hadn't thought about that. What would be a good name for him? Well, he was white...

"Shiro," I murmured, saying the word for white in the language I used in my past life.

"Ha ha ha!" Lusemia laughed. "It's short and simple. I like it!"

And so the great white cub's name became Shiro.

"By the way, what's in that bag?" Lusemia asked, pointing to the large bundle behind Lars.

"Oh, that's Shiro's mother. She was killed by a beast."

"I see... What a pity."

"Lars and I tried to save her, but we weren't strong enough."

"Then we need to see her off properly!"

"How do we do that?"

"Leave it to me. You go and let Iona know you've returned safely."

"Yes, mother."

At Lusemia's urging, Lars and I headed to where Iona was waiting.

"Raul! Honestly, you should have told me if you were going to be gone for so long!" My other mother scolded me as soon as she saw me.

"I-I'm sorry."

“It wasn’t Lord Raul’s fault. It was my idea to go.” Lars quickly covered for me, going so far as to tell a ridiculous lie.

“You’re a terrible liar, Lars,” Iona gently chided. “Raul pressured you into going, didn’t he? You won’t lie to me again, will you?”

“I’m sorry!” he said, bowing deeply.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine, Lars. She knows me too well to fall for that. But, mother! Look at this!”

I went back into the hallway and ushered Shiro into the room.

“What?! What is this? He’s so cute! Why is he here?”

“I’m planning to keep him as a pet.”

“Is that a good idea? He looks like a magical beast to me.”

“He is—a great white bear. He may not be that big now, but adults can be over ten meters tall.”

Meanwhile, Shiro was licking my hand with aplomb, leaving it drenched. It reminded me of the griffins I had come across. It seemed this was how magical beasts expressed affection.

“He seems to be quite attached to you already.”

“He does, doesn’t he? King Lusemia told me that they don’t usually bond with people like this.”

“Is that right? Well, it’s nice to meet you, Shiro,” Iona said to him with a smile.

Shiro looked at her, then plopped down onto the floor.

I laughed. “He’s saying you can pet him too.”

“You can understand him?”

“Huh? I suppose I can. I wonder why...”

Iona knelt and began to pet Shiro.

“His fur is so soft. It feels wonderful. He’s still a cub, so it’s extra fluffy,” she said, smiling.

Shiro preened contentedly.

“He says it feels good!”

“Oh, does he now?”

“By the way, where are Maria, Misha, and Misetta?” I asked.

“I believe they’re in the kitchen.”

I led Lars and Shiro to the kitchen, where we found Misha.

“Misha!”

"Ah, Lord Raul, you're back! We were so worried about you!"

"I've already been scolded plenty by mother. I promise to be more careful from now on," I said.

"Maria! Misetta! Lord Raul is back!" Misha called out.

Maria and Misetta came rushing out from the back, only to scold me further.

"Lord Raul! Honestly! Don't make us worry like that!"

"Raul! We were so worried about you!"

"I get it, I get it," I said.

That's when Maria noticed Shiro.

"Uh...what is that wild animal behind you?"

"That's Shiro! I've decided to keep him as a pet! Be nice to him, okay?"

"Isn't he a magical beast?"

"Well, yes, but it's fine. He likes me, so I'm sure he won't cause any problems."

"If you say so..." Maria said hesitantly.

Misetta poked her head out from behind Maria, and Shiro once again got on his belly.

"Misetta, he says it's okay to come over."

"Really?!"

"Yeah."

Misetta ran over and threw her weight onto him. He stood up and began to walk around with her on his back.

"Guess he likes you too," I said.

"He does?!" she exclaimed, her voice full of wonder. "Let's be friends, Shiro!"

Shiro let out a little, happy-sounding yelp.

"He answered?!" Misetta asked. She seemed completely at ease on Shiro's back, perhaps due to her experience riding Gog.

"From now on, Shiro's one of us, so take good care of him! I'm going to introduce him to Gersham and the others," I said.

"They're probably down at the training ground, as usual," Maria said.

I headed to the training ground, Lars and Shiro in tow.

"Lord Raul!" Everyone cheered when they saw me and began to

gather at the entrance.

"Lars! Don't tell me you pushed him into doing something reckless again?" Gersham said, stepping toward him.

"Gersham, wait! *I* was the one who insisted on going," I said.

"Lord Raul, you can't go putting yourself in danger," Gersham said.

"You all worry too much..."

"I know what you mean," Gog said.

"Y-You do?"

"Gog, don't encourage him!" Gazzam said.

"Gazzam, please," I said. "I'm not a child anymore."

"Regardless, please don't overdo it, Lord Raul," Gersham insisted.

"I won't."

That's when everyone's attention shifted to Shiro.

"And...what is *that*?"

"This is a magical beast I've decided to take in."

"I can't believe it. You've tamed a great white bear?" Gersham asked.

"That's right. And he seems to have taken a liking to me," I said proudly.

"That's quite rare," he replied.

I noticed Phantom standing still in the middle of the training grounds, gazing into the distance.

"Oh, were you training with Phantom? I'm sorry, I must have interrupted."

"No, it's all right. We were just about to finish."

"Come here, Phantom!"

When I called for Phantom, he moved to me with a surprising quickness. His speed rivaled that of even Sharmilia's—though of course, he had been born from my and Sharmilia's blood, along with a thousand corpses of the Bargius Empire's finest.

"Phantom, this is Shiro. Shiro, meet Phantom!"

Shiro let out a loud growl and backed away. He looked absolutely terrified of Phantom.

"Shiro! I'm sorry. He's one of us, so try to get used to him."

Shiro licked my hand, but his eyes kept darting to Phantom,

looking ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

"Gersham, how's Phantom doing?" I asked.

"However he's doing, Sharmilia sure created something terrifying. Even with all eight of us working together, we couldn't take him down. He's a monster possessing incredible strength and speed, not to mention immortality."

"Sharmilia did call him her ultimate creation," I said.

"It's as you say, master," came a familiar voice from behind me.

"Whoa!" I yelped in surprise. Sharmilia was suddenly standing behind me. I hadn't heard her approaching at all.

"Oh! Master, my deepest apologies for startling you!"

Both Sharmilia and Maquina suddenly knelt before me, apparently horrified that they had caused me some kind of affront.

"No, no, it's fine, Sharmilia! I just need more training," I said, trying to reassure her.

"No, from now on, I will make sure to always announce my presence before approaching you."

"That'll only cause more problems, especially during a fight. Just keep doing things how you have been. Please..."

"As you wish, master," Sharmilia replied, bowing her head.

"By the way, I wanted to ask—does Phantom have any weaknesses?"

"Y-Yes... He does, master."

"What is it?"

"It's something I'd rather not say."

"You don't need to hold back any details for my sake."

"Master...it's your life."

"My life?"

"As long as you're alive, Phantom is immortal. He's even immune to holy magic."

What the heck?! So he couldn't be defeated unless I was dead!

"However, he has grown a little weaker over the last two years."

"Weaker? *This* is what you call weaker?!"

"Yes. It's come time for him to absorb more corpses for nutrients."

I suppose it made sense that a high ghoul created from corpses

would need to absorb more of them to sustain its power.

"If you'd allow it, I could bring in enemy soldiers stationed in Gladrom to replenish his power."

"Hold off on that for now."

"Understood."

I saw that Shiro was huddled next to me on the ground, covering his ears with his paws and shivering.

"Oh, right! Sharmilia and Maquina, let me introduce you to Shiro. He's a great white bear that I plan to keep."

"Oh, wow, how adorable! Master, please treat him as well as you do Phantom."

Sharmilia's bewitching smile seemed to unnerve Shiro even more. He appeared to be even more afraid of Sharmilia than of Phantom.

But, more importantly, why was she comparing fluffy little Shiro to Phantom? Was Phantom a pet now too?

Later that evening, the castle served an exquisite full-course meal of bear meat.

A few days after I'd brought Shiro home, I found myself at the edge of the freezing sea. I was preparing to fish with a siren named Seira. Sirens were demons known for using their song to lure humans out at sea and eat them. Her lower body was covered in shimmering scales, and she swam faster than any fish. She was the perfect partner for catching fish.

An ordinary human wouldn't survive for more than thirty seconds in these frigid waters. I had summoned a Navy SEALs-grade wet suit and oxygen tank for the dive.

"All right! Let's do this!" I said.

"As you wish," Seira replied.

"Shiro eats so much, it's ridiculous!"

"Then we'll look for a big fish!"

"Sounds good!"

We were here because I had asked Seira to help me find food for Shiro.

"The waves are rough today," I observed.

"They are. First, let's dive into the sea. Come over here."

Her lower half was undeniably fishlike, but her upper half was a healthy, beautiful woman. And her voice was incredible! Every word she said sounded like music. I went to her and she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"Here we go!" she said.

Standing on the rocky ledge, Seira held me tightly before leaping into the water.

Oh no. That soft, squishy sensation... No! Focus, Raul! Focus!

Then the cold hit me.

"Lord Raul, should we stop?" she asked as we floated on the surface.

I removed the mouthpiece of my oxygen tank to answer.

"No, I'm fine. But I won't last long out here."

"That device helps you breathe underwater?"

"Yeah, it's called an oxygen tank."

"You're amazing, you know that? It's almost like you're a god."

"I'm certainly no god," I said quickly. My followers revered me for some reason, but I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to it.

"All right, let's get started," I said, before diving below the surface. I summoned a Black Shadow 730 diver scooter, but I doubted even that would let me match Seira's swimming speed. Still, it would at least help me dive deep enough to get to the fish. I'd also borrowed a trident for spearfishing.

Seira swam to me and gestured downward.

Oh! There they were! The cold seemed to have made them slower.

I approached a large fish that resembled a sea bream, ready to strike. It was time to put my goblin combat training to the test.

Thwack!

I got it!

When I surfaced, Seira also emerged, holding a fish of her own.

"I caught one! It was quite the *saltwater experience*!" I said.

"I...suppose it would have been. Well done!"

Oh, right. I supposed that reference wouldn't work here.

We carried our fish toward the shore. A few meters up the cliff face was a cave-like hollow where we'd decided to store our fish for

the time being. Seira tossed them in expertly.

"All right, let's go for another round," I said.

"We'll catch as much as we can."

We dove and fished for the next two hours. At first, the cold water was unbearable, but my body gradually got used to it. After we caught plenty of fish, I suggested to Seira that we head home.

We were swimming back to our hollow when Seira suddenly grabbed me and started dragging me with her at incredible speed.

"Wh-What?!" I stammered out.

When I turned to look back, I saw it: A massive creature was closing in on us, despite how fast Seira was moving.

It's a dragon! It looks scary as hell! Was it drawn here by the scent of our fish's blood? We're going to be eaten!

I came up with a plan. Summoning a strobe marker light and some silicone tape, I attached them to the diver scooter and pushed it off to the side.

Let's see if this works...

The dragon turned its attention to the flashing lights of the diver scooter and began to chase after it.

"Got him!"

What's more, Seira was swimming faster. It seemed that holding on to the scooter had been slowing her down.

"*Hahhh... Hahhh...* Seira, what *was* that?" I asked, catching my breath.

"A sea serpent," she replied.

We reached the shoreline and scrambled onto solid ground. Just as we turned toward where we'd kept the fish— *Splash!*

The sea serpent burst out of the water, lifting its head a full fifty meters above the surface and glaring down at us.

"Wh-What do we do?!" I said.

"That's...a good question," Seira replied, equally unsettled.

Looking closer, I noticed that the sea serpent was holding my diver scooter in its jaws. It lowered its colossal head and dropped it right in front of me with a loud *thud*.

"Um... Lord Raul..." Seira said.

"Shhh! Don't provoke it!" I whispered.

"No...it seems it came here to meet you," she said.

"Huh? How can you tell?"

"I thought it had followed the scent of blood, but now I don't think that's the case."

"It's here to meet *me*?"

Why would a sea serpent want to meet me? What was I supposed to do? I had no idea what was going on.

"Uh...hi there?" I said, waving awkwardly.

Yes! When in doubt, start with a greeting! Greetings are universal!

"*Gwaoooh*," the sea serpent rumbled.

Oh! It responded! Good! I had no idea if it understood me, but it seemed to recognize that as a greeting. Encouraged, I began using gestures with my body to communicate further.

"I am! Not here! To hurt you! O great one! I'm just! Here to! Catch some fish to eat!" I said, miming the meaning of the words as best I could with each phrase. Even if it didn't understand words, surely this would get through!

"*Gwwrrrr*," the sea serpent rumbled. Apparently satisfied, it slipped back underwater.

"Did we just make it out of this alive?"

"It appears so," Seira replied, relieved.

"Was it really just here to say hello?"

"I don't know for certain, but I think we can safely say it was here to meet you," she said.

"Let's just grab the fish and head back," I said.

"Y-Yeah, let's do that. What about this?" she asked, gesturing at the lump that had once been a diver scooter.

"That? It looks broken, so we'll just leave it here."

"Got it. Then let's get going."

Splash!

"Huh?!"

We both turned to see the sea serpent once again raising its massive head out of the water, glaring at us.

"Uh, we're heading back now! You should go home too! Please?"

I repeated my exaggerated gestures, hoping to get through to it.

The serpent lowered its enormous head close to us and opened its mouth wide.

Oh, god! It's coming at us! This time we're really going to be eaten!

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Instead of devouring us, the sea serpent dropped three massive fish from its mouth right at our feet.

"Huh? Are you...giving these to us?"

"*Gwaorrrrr*," it rumbled.

Huh. It had apparently gone out of its way to fish out three massive tuna-like fish for us. But how were we supposed to carry them? They looked to weigh around three hundred kilograms each!

"Oh, okay! Thank you! Then we'll take these and head back!"

"*Kwaoooon!*" it rumbled.

Its tone sounded...sad.

"Hm? That's strange. That sounded kind of lonely, didn't it?"

"It did," Seira agreed.

"Oh, okay! We'll stay a little longer!" I called out to it.

"*Gwaoooh*," the sea serpent rumbled, clearly pleased.

But how was I able to understand its emotions so well?

"Seira, I don't think he's going to hurt us. We've got to figure out how to transport these huge fish, though. Can you go back and bring others to help?"

"Understood."

Seira left to gather reinforcements, leaving me alone with the sea serpent. Unsure what to do, I removed my oxygen tank, sat cross-legged on the ground, and looked up at the massive creature.

"*Gwaaaon?*"

"What do you mean 'what do I do now'? That's my line. What should *I* do?"

The sea serpent lowered its head, resting it beside me with a *thud*.

"Huh? What? You want me to climb on your head?"

"*Gwaoooh*," the sea serpent rumbled.

I summoned a second oxygen tank and strapped it on my back. Using the sea serpent's scales as footholds to climb up its neck, I

found a place that I could grab on to.

The serpent's neck began to rise, lifting me until I was about fifty meters above the water. It turned to face the sea, and I thought we were about to swim out into it, when it suddenly dove into the water with a massive splash.

"Whoa!"

It began swimming at a breakneck speed. The force of its movement was overwhelming—I could barely hold on. But it was incredible. It was so fast!

After an unforgettable ride, the sea serpent returned me to where we'd started and lifted its head out of the water.

Splash!

My subordinates stood in formation on the shore, weapons drawn and ready to fight.

"Lord Raul! Are you unharmed?!" Gersham shouted.

"Yeah, I'm fine! I just went on an underwater tour with the sea serpent," I shouted back.

"S-Sea serpent?! Underwater tour?!" Gersham stammered, completely lost.

"Don't worry about it! What's important is that this sea serpent doesn't mean us any harm!"

"Are you sure?"

The sea serpent lowered its head near the others, towering over them. I reached out and patted its nose.

"*Kwaooon.*"

"Thanks for the fish, buddy. I'll come back to see you again, so take care."

At that, the sea serpent raised its head.

"*Kwaooooooon!*"

It dove back into the water, disappearing beneath the waves.

We were now left to deal with the three massive fish. Lars, Minos, and Gersham each carried one.

Everyone will be thrilled with the fish we got! I never would have thought we'd get fish this big. They look like big tuna, but will they taste the same? And will I ever see that sea serpent again?

I dreamed of a second meeting as we all made our way back to

the castle.

"Oh, it's so fatty and delicious!" I said. I wished that we could have made sushi from these huge fish, but this world had neither rice nor soy sauce. Even so, this fatty tuna was exquisite.

"It's delicious!" Iona exclaimed.

Maria, Misha, and Misetta seemed equally moved by this amazing new dish. The rest of my subordinates seemed to be enjoying it as well.

"Shiro loved it too! He ate an entire fish by himself," I told them.

Hearing that, Gog's eyes lit up.



"You gave him a whole one of those massive fish? Are you really taming him, or is it the other way around?" he said, laughing. "We were all surprised when Seira came rushing back! She thought you were gonna get eaten!"

"It's true," Seira said.

"It seemed to take a liking to me for some reason," I said.

If we hadn't gone fishing, the sea serpent wouldn't have approached us. It was a good thing that we did.

"Raul, you really are always worrying us," Iona said with a sigh.

"Listen to her. Next time you go training, you're taking me along. I'll keep a close watch on you!" Maria added. Her tone made it clear I was in no position to argue.

Next, it was Misha's turn to scold me. "Master Raul, I understand that you value your freedom, but please show more restraint."

"Yes, please be more careful," Misetta added.

"I get it, I get it," I said, raising my hands in surrender.

I sighed. It wasn't like I was doing these things for fun, but here I was being scolded by them again. I appreciated their concern, but I was just doing all I could to fulfill my mission.

"I understand why everyone's worried," Gersham said, trying to ease tensions, "but we have Lord Raul to thank for this delicious meal. If we want him to stay safe during his training, how about we do more of it as a group?"

I appreciated what Gersham was saying, but this really wasn't a game. My training was too serious to just bring anyone along on a whim.

"Maria, maybe *you* could join us?" I suggested.

"Really? I'd love to! Please let me!" Maria replied. She looked really excited.

Now that I thought about it, Maria hadn't done any training at all since our shooting practice in the forests of Sanaria.

"How about some hand-to-hand combat training?" I proposed.

"I'm up for anything!" Maria declared, full of determination.

Her eagerness was admirable, but I couldn't help but wonder if turning combat training into a hobby might scare off potential suitors.

"Mother, is it really okay to bring her with us?"

"Sure, why not?" she replied with a smile.

And so it was decided that Maria would join us in future training sessions.

The next day, Maria and I went to the training grounds. My subordinates and the goblins had gathered, forming a circle around us.

"I have a request for all of you," I began.

"Yes, sir!" they responded in unison.

"Maria can use fire magic, but I've asked her to not use it while training."

"Yes, sir!"

"Unlike me, Maria doesn't have demonic blood, so she also probably doesn't have the same physical ability."

"Yes, sir!"

What was going on? Ever since I had emerged from the ocean on the sea serpent, everyone was looking at me differently.

I took Gersham aside and asked, "What's going on? I don't know how to interact with them if they're acting like this."

"It's just that we've never seen a human ride a sea serpent. Some of us are beginning to think it would not be appropriate to continue speaking to you so casually."

"What? Of course it's appropriate."

"Understood," he said, turning back to the group. "Everyone, relax!"

All at once, the stiffness in everyone's shoulders disappeared.

Between taming a great white bear and riding a sea serpent, my reputation among the demons had been skyrocketing to troublesome levels.

"All right, let's get back on track," I said, clearing my throat.

"Okay!" they answered.

"Maria is an ordinary human, but when she activates her magic she is able to reach superhuman levels of concentration. I think we could build a fighting style around that," I said. "Also, it would be ideal if she could somehow use that magic to enhance her physical

strength as well—to become as strong as a demon."

There were warriors of monstrous strength even among humans, like the Bargius commander and Gram. There had to be some sort of trick behind their strength. If we could reinforce our bodies with magic, we might be able to bridge the gap between us and them.

"Is it really possible for me to strengthen my body with magic?" Maria asked. She seemed fascinated by my proposal.

"Well...I'm not entirely sure. But your focus becomes sharper when you cast magic, right? I think that must already be some form of magical enhancement."

"True, it does give me a certain feeling of clarity."

"Hm? So you've thought the same thing?"

"Yes. I felt it when I took those long-range shots with my rifle."

Ah, those consecutive shots taken at two kilometers. I could never forget something so incredible.

I turned to the rest of the group. "Before we start, I wanted to tell everyone that I'm probably a crossbred hybridization of a human and a demon."

That caused a stir among them; they looked at each other, confused. Oops, it seemed that was a bit too scientific for them.

"Uh...what I mean to say is that I have traits from both humans *and* demons. For example, I can use human magic as well as the strength of a demon."

Gersham nodded first, and the others followed suit.

"Unlike the knights we faced in Gladrom, I can't use my energy to enhance my strength. However, I've noticed bursts of heightened physical abilities during fights," I said.

"Especially when you use summoned weapons or engage in fights to the death," Gersham pointed out.

"Exactly. I once heard from my teacher, Magister Morris, that demons' physical abilities are closely tied to the magic within their bodies. The stronger the magic, the greater their physical strength."

"Are you saying that we use magic?" Gersham asked, confused.

"Not exactly. You're not actively using magic, but it's like your magical power passively enhances your body."

"I see," Gersham said, deep in thought.

This was still only a hypothesis, but it aligned with my observations from spending so much time with demons. I needed everyone to understand this concept if we were going to develop new training methods. This was new to all of us, so I wasn't sure if a human like Maria could replicate it. Still, it was worth looking into.

"Humans, despite their magical limitations, have a long history of studying ways to enhance their physical bodies. This technique is called combat aura."

The demons nodded, transfixed.

"I believe that there are similarities between combat aura and the passive strengthening power within demons."

My subordinates didn't seem to fully grasp the concept. That wasn't surprising—their enhanced strength wasn't something they needed to consciously learn application for or study in detail. They simply wielded it instinctively.

"When I was living on the mainland, I'd never heard of magical beasts or demons who could wield this sort of power. Yet all of you are able to sense presences, right? That's something I've come to understand while training here," I said.

The way demons used magic and the way humans used combat aura was entirely different. It seemed that the reason behind demons never using magic was their lack of a system to teach them how to do so. In that case, if they *did* have a system for that, could they learn to tap into their magical power to become even stronger?

"Of all demons, only King Lusemia is able to use magic, right?"

"That's because she was born with the ability to do so," Gersham answered.

But I had a different theory.

"I don't know all the details, but I've heard that King Lusemia was born before the Great War between humans and demons. And then there's Sharmilia, whose necromancy is a type of magic. She, too, was born a long time ago."

"That's right."

"It makes me wonder...what if demons in the past *were* inherently able to use magic?"

"Our ancestors used magic?" one of the subordinates murmured.

Over time, demons must have stopped using magic, and perhaps their bodies had simply forgotten how to. On the other hand, humans—who rarely possessed magic—developed the ability to refine and harness combat aura as a survival mechanism, evolving their capabilities over generations. Of course, there were even those among humans who possessed greater levels of magical power.

"And perhaps humans refined their ability to use combat aura to fight against the overwhelming magical capabilities of demons, and eventually closed the gap."

"So, you believe that Maria can use magic to enhance her body?" Gersham asked me.

"That's right. I believe that any human who can use magic might be able to do so."

"Could I really do something like that?" Maria asked. She looked uncertain.

Her doubt was understandable. No human had used magical energy to enhance their body in the same way that a combat aura did. But *I* had done it.

"I...don't know," I admitted.

The group was silent. How would they go about trying something that's never even been attempted before? It was a daunting task for sure.

"I understand why you're all hesitant. I don't even know if it's actually possible."

"Where do we start?" Maria and Gersham asked in unison. They looked at each other, determined.

I didn't have a sure answer, but...

"Maria and I used to use magical image training to help raise our accuracy when shooting. And Maria's accuracy is better than mine—far better!"

"That's not—" Maria began in protest.

"It *is* true. You've pulled off long-range sniping feats that I could never dream of achieving."

If there was one thing in this world I had confidence in, it was Maria's accuracy.

"And so, I believe that Maria can use magical image training to

train her hand-to-hand combat too," I said.

Maria stood quietly.

"It's difficult for me to have the same belief in myself," she said. "But...if you say I can do it, I want to try."

I truly did believe in her.

I turned to the rest of the group. "Gog, you're the best at hand-to-hand combat among us. Teela, I want you to work with him to train Maria. What do you think?"

"I don't fully understand this concept yet, but I'll do my best to help you, Maria," Teela said sincerely.

"I'm not sure if I'll be of much use, but I'll try," Gog added.

"I'll do my best to learn whatever I can," Maria said.

With that, the training arrangements were settled.

As the training session started, I stayed to the side and kept quiet. I was having them do something that I didn't understand well, so it was best to let them figure it out for themselves. Maria sparred with Teela first, but it wasn't even close to a fair fight. Maria, who had never been taught the fundamentals of fighting, couldn't do anything against Teela.

I pulled Gog to the side.

"This might take some time, Gog, but Maria has extraordinary potential. Her talent for using my weapons is unmatched. I know she can apply that precision to hand-to-hand techniques too."

"I'll start teaching her the basics," Gog replied. "Though, to be honest, my techniques are a mix of what I learned from Gersham, Gazzam, and Minos, plus some things I developed on my own. I'm not sure how effective it'll be."

"That's fine," I said, then turned to Maria. "It's not going to be easy at first—progress will be slow, and you'll be frustrated at times. But I want you to trust me and keep trying."

"I won't give up," she said. "I've been tired of just staying at the castle doing nothing."

"That's what I like to hear."

After that, they went back to training. There was nothing for me to do, so I left the training ground, hoping that Maria working with the demons might change something in them too.

In the time I'd set aside for myself, I went to check on my new fluffy companion.

"Hey, Shiro! Have you been a good boy?"

Shiro had his own little shelter on the castle grounds. It was sturdy and well-built, and even had a comfy bed of straw.

I found Iona inside. She looked up, surprised.

"Oh, Raul. What brings you here?" she asked.

Iona often came by to bathe him, tidy up, and make sure everything was in order. She loved animals and enjoyed spending time with Shiro.

"I know I should be the one taking care of him since I brought him here. Sorry for making you do it instead," I said.

"It's no problem. You're busy as it is, and I wanted to have something to do. It's better than being bored," she replied with a warm smile.

"Is Shiro behaving himself?"

"He is. When we play, he's very gentle. He seems to know how much strength he can use without hurting me. He's such a good boy."

"That's a relief. That's nice, isn't it, Shiro?"

Shiro crooned. I gave his thick, soft fur a good ruffling.

"Mother, is it okay if I take Shiro out for a bit?"

"Of course. I was just about to clean up in here anyway."

Iona seemed to relish taking care of Shiro. It was a way for her to come outside and relax a bit while having to constantly take care of Aurora. That was one of the reasons why I'd suggested it in the first place.

"Thanks! Let's go, Shiro!"

Shiro followed me through the castle halls, his lumbering steps echoing softly. He stuck close as we made our way to the room I had in mind.

Click.

When I opened the door, the sound of small, rapid footsteps greeted me as Aurora dashed over.

"Raul!"

"Hey, Aurora! Have you been a good girl?"

"Yeah!" she said, hugging me tightly. She loved her big brother, and honestly, she was a huge source of comfort for me.

"Thanks for looking after her, Misha and Misetta," I said to the two maids in the room.

"Oh, it's no problem at all. We have fun too. Don't we, Aurora? Isn't it fun playing with us?" Misha said, leaning over to ruffle Aurora's hair.

"Yeah!" Aurora nodded enthusiastically.

Now two years old, Aurora was full of energy and curiosity, constantly waddling off to explore new places.

"I brought Shiro along today too," I said.

"Yay!"

Shiro padded into the room, and without hesitation, Aurora toddled over to him.

Boof!

She buried herself in Shiro's fluffy fur, almost disappearing into it. Shiro flopped onto the floor with a soft thud.

"Up you go," I said, gently lifting Aurora and setting her on Shiro's back.

"Yay!" Aurora cheered.

Shiro lumbered to his feet and carried Aurora on his back.

"All right then, I'm going to take Aurora with me," I said to Misha and Misetta. "I'll bring her back soon."

"Of course. Have fun, Aurora!" Misha said.

"See you soon," Misetta called after us.

Misetta, now eleven, had grown like a weed and was fast becoming a young woman. I had grown faster due to my demonic heritage, but she had also begun her journey to adulthood. She looked cuter every day. It was endearing to see her sitting next to Gog during meals, always making sure he had enough to eat.

"Then, we're off," I said.

"Off!" Aurora mimicked.

We set off to wander the castle. As we walked through the corridors, demons would bow their heads to us. I was still struggling to get used to that, but it couldn't be helped—I was King Lusemia's

adopted son, after all.

A demon with the upper half of a human woman growing from a spider's body greeted us with a smile.

"Lord Algarde, I'm glad to see you well."

"Hi, Kalara," I greeted her as we passed.

"Bye-bye!" Aurora waved.

The arachne demon smiled and waved back.

Seeing Kalara once more made me think about the role of nature versus nurture. If a human were to encounter an arachne demon like her on the mainland, they would need to run for their life, or end up caught and eaten. Arachnes were incredibly powerful. Magister Morris had taught me that they were national-level threats—when they appeared, entire kingdoms would come together to form hunter squads. The last recorded sighting of an arachne on the mainland was five hundred years ago, and it had nearly led to the destruction of a city.

"Over there!" Aurora called out, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Oh, all right. I'll go that way for you," I said.

With Aurora on Shiro's back, we continued down a corridor decorated with some crude stone statues.

From deeper inside the castle, I heard the voices of children. I turned and went toward them, Shiro trailing after me. Passing through a doorway, I found demon children playing. It seemed I had come across a demon day care.

"Good morning!" I greeted them.

"Lord Algarde? Welcome! And I see Aurora is with you today," a woman greeted me. I recognized her as the demon Echidna. She was a woman with the bottom half of a snake, while her upper half resembled a human with wings sprouting from her back.

"Hello, Echidna. Would it be okay if Aurora played here for a while?"

"Of course. Why don't we have her play in the goblin playroom?"

"Thank you."

It appeared that the goblin children, who were weaker than the other demons, had their own separate play area.

Echidna led us to a room farther inside. I felt a tug on my shirt

and looked down. Aurora was staring up at me.

"Can I play?" she asked.

"Go ahead," I said.

Aurora hopped off Shiro and bounded in to play with the goblins.

"I'm sorry for barging in on you," I said to Echidna.

"It's no problem. The children will be happy to have a new playmate," she replied with a smile. From what I'd heard, Echidna had many children and was great at taking care of them.

"Then I hope you don't mind if I stick around for a bit too," I said.

I watched Aurora playing with the goblin children. I had never considered how adorable little sisters could be before she was born, but seeing her play around was always a treat.

"I suppose I should've known. She is Iona's daughter, after all," I murmured to myself.

Shiro plunked down next to me and began to snore.

"Raul!" Aurora called out to me. Apparently she had gotten hungry after three hours of playing with the goblins. She hopped right back onto Shiro's back.

"Thank you, Echidna. I'm going to take her back to Iona now," I said.

"Please feel free to visit again anytime."

We left the day care and once again began wandering the corridors. Along the way, we came across three women having a chat. One was a demon with the wings and lower body of a bird. She was Lupia, the younger sister of the demon who had given her life to save mine after the fight in Gladrom.

"Lord Algarde! Good afternoon," she called out when she saw me.

"Lupia! You're looking well today!"

"And both you and Aurora appear well, my lord."

"Luppi!" Aurora yelled in delight when she saw Lupia.

She waved at Lupia, who returned the gesture with a smile. This was all part of an ongoing PR campaign I was waging—what one might call political maneuvering. By making rounds with Aurora, I was subtly establishing her presence and acceptance within the castle.

We said our goodbyes to Lupia and continued. I reached down and stroked Aurora's hair.

"Are you having fun, Aurora?"

"Yeah!"

"Good, good."

When I first came to this kingdom, King Lusemia had offered to abdicate and pass the throne to me. But I was a complete newcomer to this nation; handing the crown to me was unlikely to sit well with everyone. And Aurora, who wasn't even tied to me by blood, was in an even more precarious position. She was a mere human child, with no blood ties to the demonic lineage of this kingdom. I couldn't assume that she would be accepted so easily.

"Protect her well, Shiro," I said quietly, my voice serious.

He answered with a short, bark-like noise.

Placing Aurora on the back of the great white bear and parading her through the castle was a calculated move to project strength, to send a message that this fragile-looking girl was under the protection of one of the kingdom's mightiest beasts.

"We're back, mother!" I called out when we returned to Shiro's shelter.

"Perfect timing—I just finished here as well."

"Mommy!"

"Yes, yes. And where did you and your brother go today?"

"We played!"

"Oh, you played? That's wonderful," Iona said with a smile, lifting Aurora into her arms. "It's nearly lunchtime, Raul. Let's get everyone to the dining hall."

With that, we left Shiro's shelter and headed straight for the kitchen.

"My apologies for interrupting while you're preparing the meals," I said as I stepped inside.

"Lord Algarde! What brings you to a place like this?"

"Don't mind me, please continue with your work."

"Y-Yes, of course."

The kitchen was bustling, filled with demons busily preparing food.

“Have you all gotten the hang of cooking for humans?” I asked, surveying their efforts.

“We have! Maria, Misha, and Misetta have been so helpful in teaching us so much.”

“The fish pie you made the other day was delicious. Even Her Majesty Lusemia was pleased!” I said.

That got them talking.

“Really?!”

“That’s amazing!”

“Well, it was delicious,” someone muttered with pride.

Good. That would keep them motivated.

“Next, I’d like you to try making a pumpkin gratin. Ask Misha about it.”

“Pumpkin gratin? Never heard of it,” one of them said.

The demons exchanged confused glances. Just then, Misha and Misetta entered the kitchen.

“Oh, Master Raul,” Misha said, surprised at my presence.

“Raul, what are you doing here?” Misetta asked.

“Ah, perfect timing. Could you teach the fairies how to make pumpkin gratin?”

“I’ll be right on it,” Misha said, rolling up her sleeves.

“Her Majesty is looking forward to it too,” I added.

Hearing that, the demons swarmed around Misha and Misetta.

“Really?! The King is?”

“Misha, please teach us!”

“Misetta, I want to help too!”

By helping, the girls’ standing among the demons would rise accordingly. My goal was to have the demons recognize the usefulness of the humans and create a place here for Iona, Aurora, and the maids. This had become my daily routine, trying to find ways to raise the value of the humans I’d brought here from the mainland in the eyes of the demons. Along with this, I managed my schedule to include strengthening my own body, honing my combat skills, improving teamwork with the demons, and drafting military strategies. Then came the meticulous process of turning those strategies into actionable tactics. It was grueling work, but I couldn’t

deny how much fun I was having.

That night, I made time to visit Sharmilia.

"Sharmilia, how do the demons see the humans?" I asked her.

"They hold them in quite high regard, my master."

"But, I want to hear what they really think."

"You do?"

"Yes. Let me reword the question: Do you think that the demons have any grievances toward the humans here? Is there anything that they wish the humans would do? Is there something they can work on together? Those are the sorts of things I wish to know."

"Then I will look for an opportunity to speak with some of them, perhaps over a late-night meal."

Sharmilia had become something like a secretary to me, my hands within the kingdom. Maquina acted as my ears, working hard to gather information from wherever I needed it.

"What's happening with the assembly we talked about before? The one on the proper use of my summoned weapons?" I asked her.

"The time and place have been communicated to all who expressed interest in participating."

"Good. Have the targets been prepared?"

"The dwarves are preparing earthen dummies as we speak. They've assured us they will be ready no later than two days before the event. Adjustments can be made during the trial runs to suit your testing requirements."

It seemed that most of the tasks I'd delegated to Sharmilia were well underway. Their efficiency was impressive, as always.

"And regarding the mission to scout Gladrom, how would you like to choose who will accompany you?" she asked me.

"Ah, you can choose for me. Just make sure to keep a balanced party in mind. The only human I will be taking is Maria."

"As you command."

With that, Sharmilia stepped back into the shadows of the room and disappeared. Over time, we had developed a near-perfect understanding of each other. Thanks to our shared mental connection, we could read each other like the backs of our hands.

Now then...it was time for training, then a bath and bed.

Every night, my routine was to train and then take a bath before bed. I never missed a day.

My training partner changed daily, and tonight it was Minos. He had a bull's head and a body of pure, unrelenting strength. His speed and power were nothing short of monstrous.

As I headed toward the training grounds, I found Maria waiting for me in the corridor.

"Master Raul? If you don't mind, may I watch your training session with Minos?"

"If you're going to watch, why not join in? The two of us can take him on together."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

As the two of us entered the arena, Minos was already standing at its center, and beside him was Gersham.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said to Minos.

"No need to apologize, my lord. I can't wait to see how much you've grown!"

"Right, well... Today I'd like you to face both Maria and me. Is that all right?"

"I have no objections," Minos replied.

Minos held a long wooden staff instead of his usual axe. In contrast, Maria and I wielded real blades. Without this advantage, there would be no way we could match him.

"It's been a while since we've trained together, hasn't it?" I said to Maria.

"It has. The last time we trained together was back in Sanaria."

We faced Minos, our weapons at the ready.

"Come at me however you want," Minos said calmly.

At his signal, Maria and I attacked him from opposite sides. With a swift move, Minos stepped back, effortlessly evading both blades. In response, I leaned my body into Maria's to steady myself. Together, we launched a series of thrusts, splitting the strikes high and low. Minos deflected my upward thrust with his staff, and with a heavy stomp he forced Maria's blade downward. I spun with the

momentum of his block, my blade tracing a wide arc like a spinning top. My sword slashed toward Maria's back, but she bent at a sharp angle, dodging my strike and allowing my blade to hurtle up toward Minos's head.

"Oh!" Minos stepped back in surprise.

Seizing the opportunity, Maria was able to wrench her blade from under his foot and swing it up in an arc. Minos, with an agility that belied his massive frame, leaped in the opposite direction to avoid the strike. But as he landed, I launched a kick toward him.

Thunk!

My kick was easily absorbed by Minos's elbow. He treated my full-force attack like I was nothing more than a fly to swat away. With a casual sweep of his arm, he sent me reeling. As I stumbled, Maria extended a hand from where she was in the air above me, catching mine. Using her body as a fulcrum, I swung back around to a position in front of Minos. She tumbled to the ground, but I was able to use my momentum to spin and slash my blade at his flank.

Clang!

Minos parried with his staff, but Maria thrust her sword upward from below. The blade was aimed at Minos's throat, but he swayed back, narrowly avoiding it. However, the sudden movement caused him to lose his balance ever so slightly, and I rammed into him with my full weight.

Crash!

Even then, Minos didn't budge. My momentum stopped like I had run into a brick wall—but in that moment, his movement had been stopped too! Taking advantage, Maria swung her sword in a downward arc, aiming straight for the top of his head.

Crack!

Minos blocked with his staff, redirecting the blade, but the force split his weapon in half. Without hesitation, he dropped the broken staff and struck Maria's wrist with a precise hand chop. She gasped and released her sword in pain. At the same moment, Minos gripped my sword arm with his other hand, rendering me immobile. No matter how much I struggled, my arm refused to budge.

"I... I yield!" I called out.

Minos released his grip, and I shook my wrist vigorously, trying to regain feeling in my arm.

"Lord Raul, that was incredible! When did you and Maria practice that?" Minos asked.

I answered honestly. "That wasn't anything we've practiced recently. Long ago, Maria and I spent many years training together in the forest. Back then, we focused almost entirely on attacking as a duo. I suppose what you saw today is a result of that."

"I was nervous since it had been so long since then, Master Raul," Maria added, "but it looks like we can move as seamlessly as we used to. It's different from using guns, but I think we did pretty well!"

Even Gersham, who had been observing silently, was astonished.

"I've never seen you two fight together like this. It's hard to believe that it was really your first attempt with swords."

Both Minos and Gersham looked genuinely delighted. I could feel in their excitement a sense of pride and joy at seeing Maria and me grow.

Afterward, the four of us spent another three hours training hard.

"Thank you, Minos!" I said after we had finished.

"I had a good time too. Watching the two of you fight together was enlightening."

"It really was," Gersham added.

As we left the training area, Maria and I talked about the day's training.

"It brought back some good memories," Maria said.

"It did. I had a lot of fun!"

"I was reminded of when we spent our days hunting fang rabbits in the forests of Sanaria."

"Those were good days..."

"Indeed. I never thought things would turn out this way."

"Neither did I."

We continued walking, visions of Sanaria floating in our minds.

"I wish we could go back to those peaceful days," Maria murmured.

"I do too," I said quietly.

We walked on, step by step, as though retracing the familiar paths of our homeland.

"Master Raul?"

"Hm?"

I stopped, feeling Maria's arms gently embrace me from behind.

"Forgive my impertinence. But...thank you. Thank you for protecting us and bringing us this far."

"Maria?"

Her voice was trembling—she was crying. She held me silently, her arms tight around me.

"I love you, Lord Raul," she whispered.

I froze. Maria had been like a nanny to me, someone who had cared for me since I was young. The "love" she spoke of—it carried an unfamiliar weight, a nuance I couldn't decipher. Did she mean as family? Or something more?

"I love you too," I replied cautiously.

Maria hugged me tighter.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"Well...I'm going to take a bath," I said.

"Of course. Please go ahead."

What? What just happened? What kind of "love" had she meant? I couldn't make sense of it, but one thing was clear: I would need to keep this to myself.

Splash!

I dove into the bath to drown out my thoughts and wash away the confusion.

The second level in the caverns underneath the castle belonged to the dark elves, led by Captain Uld and Vice Captain Dal'Ambah. The dark elves had tan skin and pointy ears, beautiful with perfectly symmetrical faces. Though they all appeared to be young, I'd heard most of them were actually quite ancient.

"Greetings, Lord Algarde. I am Uld," the captain introduced himself.

"It's a pleasure," I replied.

Uld bowed deeply to me. "The pleasure is all mine."

"Now, don't go easy on me just because I'm King Lusemia's son. That would defeat the whole purpose of training."

"Understood. However, it would be problematic if you were to sustain serious injuries."

"It's fine. Her Majesty has arrangements in place to heal me if anything happens."

"Very well. Then I shall give it my all."

"By the way, may I ask something?"

"Of course, my lord."

"How exactly do dark elves differ from regular elves?"

At this, Uld flashed a sinister grin.

"Those pale, feeble sprouts cannot compare to us. While they dabble in minor nature magic, their physical capabilities and martial skills languish leagues behind ours."

"I see. Well, that's good to hear."

"I'd be happy to demonstrate our superiority for you," Uld said, smirking.

Did I just step on a land mine? Should I apologize? No, this is training—I'll grit my teeth and hold my ground.

"So, what should I do first?" I asked.

"Let's assess your strength. Would you engage in a sparring match?"

"Let's do it," I replied.

The moment we began sparring, I assessed the situation. The dark elves were on an entirely different level from goblins, that much was obvious. While they didn't match the sheer strength of Minos, Lars, or Gersham, their might far exceeded anything a human could muster. What truly stood out, however, was their speed. Unlike goblins, who relied on the illusion of speed through unpredictability, the dark elves were simply *fast*. Their movement was explosive.

"I... I yield," I panted, stepping back.

"My apologies, my lord. Perhaps I went too far in demonstrating the difference between us and the elves," Uld said, bowing slightly.

"No, it's fine! This is exactly what I need."

There was something about the dark elves' movement that felt attainable for me.

"Is there any specific training you're looking for?" Uld asked.

"Well, which weapons do you prefer?"

"Swords and bows, primarily," he replied.

"You use both?"

"Yes, our units incorporate members who use both weapons."

So the dark elves fought using teamwork! In that case, I wanted to train as a member of one of their units.

"I'd like to join your ranks for training," I said.

"Understood. Then perhaps you could accompany us on one of our hunts? That's part of our duty, after all."

"A hunt? That's perfect! Shiro needs fresh food, and I need the experience."

"Then let us begin as soon as possible, my lord. We'll leave today."

We began our hunt in the mountain range located in the southeastern part of the Land of Demons. This mountain range marked the farthest edge of Lusemia's kingdom and was home to an expanse of dense forest. Spring had arrived, but it was still as cold as winter was on the mainland. Still, the absence of snowstorms made it bearable and easier to operate.

I was armed with the typical weaponry of a dark elf: a spear, as well as a large composite longbow that no ordinary human could even draw.

A hunt, huh? I've hunted fang rabbits before, so maybe that experience will be useful here too.

Our target was a magical beast called the big-horned deer. These creatures were around five meters long with massive, sharp antlers that could easily impale an unwary hunter. We had been tasked with taking down five of them today.

Uld raised his hand to signal for us to stop, then pointed ahead.

Huh? There's nothing there.

I could sense something, but I couldn't see it. Where was it?

The dark elves moved quickly through the trees. They were going to flank whatever Uld had found. Within moments, they'd all disappeared from sight entirely, blending seamlessly into the forest

canopy.

A sharp whistle pierced the air, and the earth began to rumble.

From the depths of the forest, several massive deer came charging toward us. As they approached, the dark elves loosed their arrows. I raised my bow and attempted to fire as well, but the arrow barely made it halfway before falling uselessly to the ground. I lacked the strength to draw the bow properly. Just as I had thought—without my summoned weapons, I was no stronger than an ordinary human.

Thwack! Thud!

Arrows struck the deer, some bouncing harmlessly off its hardened skull, others embedding themselves shallowly into its thick neck. None of the hits seemed lethal. One beast, its neck bristling with arrows, began thrashing violently, trying to shake them loose.

I realized that the dark elves' bows lacked precision. They hit with immense power, but the placement of their shots was inconsistent. If they could target more effectively, they'd bring these creatures down far more efficiently.

"Forward!" Uld yelled from his position.

Several dark elves charged the thrashing big-horned deer, their spears poised. They surrounded the beast, thrusting their weapons into it with rhythmic precision. The deer swung its massive antlers in retaliation, trying to gore its attackers, but the dark elves were too swift, darting out of reach each time.

Gradually, the creature's movements became sluggish, its strength draining away.

Thud!

With a final desperate cry, the deer collapsed and its massive body hit the ground. Uld stepped forward, his blade flashing as he slashed an artery in its neck, delivering the killing blow. The beast's still-beating heart caused blood to spray forth in a pulsing rhythm, painting the snow red.

"Lord Algarde! Are you injured?" Uld asked, turning to me.

"No, but I couldn't even do anything," I replied, shaking my head.

"This is how we hunt the big-horned deer," Uld explained.

As we spoke, the dark elves swiftly moved to disembowel the

beast. They slit its belly open, expertly extracting its organs and setting them aside. With the cavity emptied, they packed snow on top of the carcass, piling it on until it resembled a snow hut.

"What are they doing?" I asked, watching the dark elves work.

"Draining the blood, removing the organs, and freezing the meat," Uld explained.

"You don't wait until after the hunt?"

"No. This ensures the meat doesn't develop a foul odor, and it prevents other beasts from being attracted to the scent."

Within moments, they had prepared the carcass. And once again, I hadn't been able to help.

"I want to be useful to you, but I can't even draw the bow properly," I said.

"In that case, let's try this."

Uld whistled sharply, and a smaller dark elf appeared.

"Yes?" the newcomer asked.

"Maris, I need you to lend your bow to Lord Algarde," Uld instructed.

"As you command."

Maris handed me their smaller bow.

"Are you sure?" I asked, glancing at Maris.

The young dark elf nodded, then reached back to retrieve another similar bow from their pack. It seemed they had brought a spare.

"Maris is still a child but has started participating in hunts as of this year," Uld explained.

"Pleased to meet you, Maris. I'm Algarde," I said.

"Hello," Maris replied simply.

I could draw the smaller bow without much difficulty, but I was worried that its shots wouldn't be nearly as powerful. For now, I'd have to treat it as a training tool.

Uld raised his hand, signaling the next move. The dark elves stationed in the trees advanced deeper into the forest canopy.

Thud-thud-thud-thud!

From the depths of the forest, two more big-horned deer came charging toward us.

This time I'll hit one!

I drew an arrow and held my position, focusing on my target. Instead of brute force, I concentrated on my magic and visualized the shot. Aiming for the head or body was pointless—my arrows wouldn't penetrate either way. Then...

Thwack! Squelch!

Amidst the hail of arrows, my shot struck true, burying itself into a deer's eye. The beast let out a guttural roar, thrashing violently to shake off the pain. As it tried to flee, more arrows rained down, striking its sides and legs.

"Move in!" Uld commanded.

Ten dark elves, spears in hand, closed the distance to the struggling creature. I followed, but as I approached, the sheer size and ferocity of the beast intimidated me. It was massive and utterly terrifying up close.

"Lord Algarde, watch out for the antlers and hind legs!"

"Got it!"

I joined the dark elves, thrusting my spear toward the beast. But the tip barely scratched its thick hide, failing to pierce through.

Damn it! I'm not strong enough!

The big-horned deer finally collapsed, its enormous frame hitting the ground with an earthshaking thud. Again Uld stepped forward and sliced through one of the creature's arteries with his blade. The team quickly set to work, slicing open the belly and extracting the organs, then burying the corpse under the snow to preserve it. I assisted in burying the inedible organs, setting the heart and liver aside.

I'm starting to understand.

Each hunt was a life-or-death struggle. The process of wearing down the big-horned deer's stamina with spear attacks was especially dangerous. That method only worked because of the dark elves' incredible agility. Against beasts of this size, even tranquilizers from my previous life wouldn't be reliable. For efficient hunting, this seemed like the only viable approach.

"How was the hunt, Lord Algarde?" Uld asked.

"It was fun, but it's clear how dangerous it is."

"Indeed. These hunts are what keep us sharp, though we occasionally lose our own as well."

"I'll be careful. But I want to accompany you when you hunt from now on."

"Understood, my lord."

Until I could stand and fight as one of them in these hunts, I would continue to participate and train.

Step one: get stronger.

Determined to overcome my weakness, I resolved to start every day with a strict regimen of running and strength training.

Aside from hunting with the dark elves and fishing with Seira, my routine rarely changed. Sparring with my subordinates, going around the castle on my PR campaign for the humans, and combat training made for a tight schedule, but I enjoyed each day to the fullest.

Was I trying to do too much?

In my previous life as a salaryman, I'd spent mornings and evenings running and weight training, all to prepare for military simulation games. On weekends, my time was completely dedicated to those games. That's what I dedicated my time off to. But in this world, every day felt like a military simulation. In a way, this life was like being on perpetual vacation—exactly the kind of life I'd always dreamed of.

My energy seemed boundless, and I'd started eating absurdly large meals to keep up with my activity level. After three months, I could see the changes in my body. My muscles were noticeably more developed, and I felt stronger by the day.

Chapter Three: Weapon Training

Maria and I walked down the castle corridors to the training area. When we arrived, we could hear the loud murmur of voices from within. The moment I stepped inside, the chatter abruptly ceased.

I was here to deliver a speech in preparation for the upcoming invasion of the mainland.

I felt a knot in my stomach. The turnout was far larger than I'd anticipated.

Just how many are in here?

I made my way toward the center of the room, where Sharmilia was waiting.

"Sharmilia, thanks for your hard work," I said with a smile.

"Thank you, master, but your kind words are more than I deserve," she replied with a bow.

She was excellent at her job, but far too humble for her own good.

"By the way, how many are here?" I asked.

"One hundred and nineteen."

"That's...quite the crowd," I said. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course," she said, giving me her attention.

I looked out into the crowd. "I see the captains of the goblins, dark elves, orcs, spriggans, ogres, draconians, lycans, and minotaurs. Does that mean all of the demon races under King Lusemia are represented?"

"Yes, my lord, but only the finest have been assembled. While sirens, harpies, succubi, slimes, and arachnes are not part of the military, representatives from those groups have also been invited."

"So arachnes and slimes aren't officially part of the army?" I asked, confused.

"That is correct. Though they are numerous, arachnes are classified as magical beasts rather than demons. The same goes for

slimes—Lufra is the only one we know who can speak. The reason harpies, succubi, and sirens have no units with the military is because their number is so few."

So, Lufra and Kalara were unique among their kind for their intelligence. And though the sirens were skilled in underwater combat, and harpies and succubi could serve as aerial units, each life was precious to their small populations. Still, they would be immensely powerful assets in political or psychological warfare—especially the succubi. If we were to participate in any diplomatic activities, their influence would be valuable.

"How about the dwarves?" I asked. "Do they not have their own unit?"

"No. As master artisans, dwarves are seldom seen on the battlefield."

"In that case, I'd like them to handle the maintenance of my weapons and perhaps even lend their craft to improving our manufacturing techniques."

"Understood. I'll arrange for that as well," she said. I could leave her to set up a meeting, but the matter would have to wait for another day.

"Then, let's begin."

I stepped forward, my gaze sweeping over the assembled warriors. The memory of a figure from my previous life—a man with a commanding presence from a company marked by an apple—shaped my approach.

"Thank you for gathering here tonight," I began, using my body and hands to emphasize my words. The crowd was silent as they waited for me to continue. "You've likely heard the news from King Lusemia: I now stand here as her son. Though I carry the blood of Galdzin, my physical strength is that of a human—no more, no less. Yet while I lack raw power, I have something far greater: the ability to elevate *you*. I can arm you with the weapons I summon. These 'guns' are instruments of destruction that render swords, spears, and bows powerless. Starting tomorrow, we will train with them."

"Yes, sir!"

One hundred and nineteen voices crashed together, a thunderous

roar that made the training area quake. This was the power of King Lusemia's leadership.

After the roar settled, I continued.

"And from this point forward, we will fight in ways you've never fought before. The method of combat you'll train for is one focused on avoiding death."

The demons began to murmur in confusion.

"A way of fighting to avoid death?"

"What do you mean?"

"Death is inseparable from battle, isn't it?"

"Silence! Master Algarde is speaking!" Sharmilia commanded.

"Since coming to this land and fighting alongside you, I've realized something: You are all far too eager to sacrifice yourselves in battle," I continued.

"With all due respect, Lord Raul, isn't that only natural?" Gersham, my most trusted subordinate, cut in.

Good, just as we planned.

Sharmilia, following along, let Gersham's outburst pass without comment.

"That's true, Gersham. You've risked your life to protect me before, haven't you? And I'm not saying that sacrifice isn't necessary," I said. "After all, it's a soldier's duty to protect their homeland. But even so, staying alive is important."

The demons fell silent once more, straining to catch every word.

"All of your weapons are designed for close combat. Swords, spears, axes, claws, teeth, fists—nearly all of them rely on melee tactics. The draconians' fire breath is an exception, but even that can't reach distant targets and is slow. You all inevitably expose yourselves to the enemy."

"With all due respect, my lord! We cannot wield magic, so of course that's the case!" Gazzam's reply carried the tone of rebuke, as if to say, *Are you seriously unaware of this?*

His performance was spot-on.

Gazzam's surprisingly good at this. He never seemed the type.

"And so, with the weapons I summon, I'll teach you how to fight from a safe distance!" I said.

"Whaaat? Is that really possible? If it is, that's incredible!" Gog shouted from the crowd.

Gog... Your acting is terrible*!*

I cleared my throat and continued. "Moving on... Starting today, I'll teach you how to kill your enemies without needing to get close to them!"

"Isn't that dishonorable for a warrior?" Minos chimed in. *Ah, he's quite the performer too.*

"No! It's not dishonorable! Humans set traps, and they even resort to torture when necessary," I explained. "Their armies are disciplined and far more coordinated than the chaotic movements of demons. That makes them significantly stronger."

"Are they really that strong?" someone called out.

"They say demons and humans can never coexist..."

"But why do humans kill our kind in the first place?"

"Doesn't that give us even more reason to risk our lives?"

The demons stirred uneasily. They couldn't imagine what war with humans would look like—after all, they'd never fought them before. They'd only ever fought other demons until now. Living in the Land of Demons, they wouldn't know anything about what humans were like. When I'd had Sharmilia investigate the Great War of two thousand years ago, she only found four demons who'd survived: King Lusemia, Sharmilia herself, Kalara the arachne, and Echidna from the nursery. And none of them had spoken to the other demons about humans.

"Silence." Sharmilia quieted the demons once more.

"I understand your doubts. But while we live in the Land of Demons now, there was a time when demons dwelled on the mainland," I said, spreading my arms. "There are descendants of those who stayed behind, but their lives are constantly threatened by humans."

"Our kin...living on the mainland..." Seira's voice caught as she spoke, trembling with emotion.

Perfect! And the Oscar goes to Seira.

"Unforgivable!" Lars declared with conviction.

Honestly, my subordinates seemed surprisingly able. I'd asked

Iona to coach them in acting, but how exactly *did* she train them? Iona's charisma left me feeling both admiration and a hint of unease.

"That's why we will begin to build diplomatic ties with human nations beyond Gladrom," I said, taking a step forward. "To that end, King Lusemia has appointed me as a special ambassador. If anyone objects to this, speak now."

What will they say? It may have all been an act, but will they go along with it?

I kept my composure as I waited with bated breath.

Tauros, the minotaur captain, stepped up. "If King Lusemia has approved, then there is no room for dissent. Our desire to save our kin will never change."

Hearing Tauros's words, Mog the lycan captain added, "He speaks the truth. King Lusemia has taught us that everyone in this world has the right to live equally. That includes our brethren on the mainland!"

Voices began to rise, one after another.

"We must help them!"

"They must be freed!"

"How can we do that?"

"Should we strike all at once?"

Yes! The momentum was building.

"Thank you, everyone! Yes, the demons of the mainland have just as much a right to live as anyone," I said. "But let's not rush in blindly. First, we need to understand what kind of power the humans possess. I'd wager most of you know very little about their magic."

"How do we begin to learn about them?" asked Anamis the succubus.

"We infiltrate their lands. We observe. We learn. I have been appointed as King Lusemia's special ambassador for this very purpose. Some of the team has already been chosen, but know that I cannot afford to weaken our lands by sending key leaders. Those who will join the mission have been selected with care. Sharmilia has prepared the roster, and I will need your full cooperation."

"Yes, sir!" The voices of those gathered rang out as one.

"Then, let me announce who has been chosen!" I said as

Sharmilia handed me a scroll. “First, from my own subordinates: Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Slaga, and Anamis. Next, the dark elf vice-captain Dal’ambah, lycan vice captain Zieg, spriggan vice captain Mazul, goblin captain Teela and her subordinate Tappy, Lufra the slime, Lupia the harpy, and Maria the human. Lastly, Sharmilia and Maquina. I’ll also bring Phantom as my personal guard, and a few others will join this mission in due course.”

“Yes, sir!”

“After crossing to the mainland, you will not be returning for some time. Details regarding dates and instructions will follow.”

“Yes, sir!”

“In the meantime, all demons gathered here will undergo special training until the day of departure.”

“Yes, sir!”

The criterion for selecting personnel was simple: They had to resemble humans closely enough to pass unnoticed, or at least be able to conceal their true forms with hoods or other disguises. This was to be a covert operation, so the ability to blend in was paramount.

“Tomorrow morning, at first light, shooting drills will commence. Assemble at the designated training grounds first thing,” I said.

“Yes, sir!”

Thus, the assembly successfully came to an end. The demons were already excited to see the modern weapons they had heard about from the ogres, Sharmilia, and Lars.

The demons gathered at the shooting range in the morning. In a wide, open expanse of wilderness where no trees or obstacles broke the horizon, dwarves had scattered earthen dummies and piled up sandbags to create a shooting range.

I began to address those assembled. “All right! Let’s start by demonstrating how to use a gun! Maria, step forward!”

“Yes.” Maria approached, still wearing her maid uniform as she had come straight from tidying up after breakfast in the kitchen. Despite her busy schedule, she had made time to join the training; I couldn’t help feeling bad for pulling her away from her other duties.

In her arms was a McMillan TAC-50 sniper rifle.

"This here is what we call a gun!" I said.

"A gun!" someone excitedly echoed.

"It looks like a thin rod. Is it some kind of spear?"

"*That's* a weapon? How does it work?"

The murmuring spread through the group, their confusion entirely understandable. It didn't look like any weapon they'd ever seen—just a slender rod of metal.

"True, it doesn't look like much, does it?" I said, walking around to the other side of Maria. "But trust me, this thing is incredible! For the first target: a bird!"

"Understood." Still in her maid uniform, Maria lay prone on the specially prepared platform and began scanning the open wilderness for a target.

"Master Raul, I see one."

Through my binoculars, I followed her gaze and spotted them—a flock of what looked like ducks gliding through the air about a kilometer away.

"Everyone, can you see the birds over there?"

"Yes!" they all shouted back in unison.

I blinked in surprise. They could see that far with the naked eye?

That's demons for you.

"We're going to take one of those birds down from here."

"What? From here?" someone asked.

"How would that even work?"

"Is that thin stick really capable of such a thing?"

Their skepticism was written all over their faces as they murmured among themselves.

"Show them, Maria."

"Of course."

Bang!

Maria fired the rifle without a moment's hesitation. One of the birds burst apart in midair, its feathers scattering as the rest of the flock flapped away in a flurry of panic.

"Incredible!"

"What just happened?"

"It can do that?!"

Their astonished voices rose together.

Of course they're surprised—who wouldn't *be when it comes to Maria's sharpshooting?*

I turned to them. "This is the power of a gun. Someone, go retrieve that bird."

"Yes, sir!" Lycan vice captain Zieg bounded off in the blink of an eye. In mere moments, he returned, holding the fallen bird. "Uh, there's not much left to eat," he observed, glancing at the mangled carcass.

He wasn't wrong.

"Well, the weapon's a bit...powerful," I said. "But this is how a gun works. It lets you attack from a distance."

The demons crowded around Maria's rifle, their curiosity evident as they examined it closely.

"Amazing!"

"Incredible! So this is the power of the Demon of Origin!"

"Can we use this too?"

I couldn't let them think that just anyone would get these same results. What Maria had done was entirely unique to her.

"Well, hitting such a small, distant target at that range is impossible even for me. That's all down to Maria's skill. But the weapon itself? Anyone can use it."

"Maria really is human, right?" a demon asked.

"Is she skilled with guns?"

Good, good.

Maria's reputation was climbing steadily. That was all part of the plan.

"All right! Let's get started, one at a time. Everyone, come this way!"

I clapped to bring attention back to me, and led the group to the earthen dummies.

"These will be your targets. We'll practice in groups of ten, so line up and take turns. I'll summon weapons and hand them out as we go!"

"Yes, sir!"

I summoned AK-47s and began distributing them, explaining the basics as I went. The first group included Tauros the minotaur, Mog the lycan, Nithra the spriggan, Dragg the draconian, Zaram the ogre, Gump the orc, Uld the dark elf, Teela the goblin, Kalara the arachne, and Lufra the slime.

The sight of all these demons holding modern firearms was surreal.

"Listen up! You can't use it as it is. I'll show you how to get it ready to fire," I began. "But first, understand this: These weapons are extremely dangerous. Never point the barrel—the hole at the end—at anyone around you!"

"Yes, sir!"

Maria, Gersham, and the others who had used guns before helped me explain the proper posture and precautions for handling them.

"All right, Maria. I'll leave the rest to you," I said.

"Understood."

Maria stepped forward and began teaching the group how to disengage the safety mechanism and properly aim. The demons stood in a line, each aiming their AK-47s at the earthen dummies. It really was an odd sight—minotaurs gripping assault rifles looked completely out of place. Even stranger were the draconians, their lizard-like forms holding guns. And for Kalara the arachne? Everything below her torso was spiderlike, making her pose with the rifle downright surreal.

Standing before them, Maria addressed the group. "Everyone, first of all, try to relax. Once you've aimed at the dummy as I showed you, prepare for the recoil by steadying your body. It's not a strong recoil, so don't be afraid."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"When I give the signal, point the gun at the target and pull the trigger."

The demons readied their rifles, aiming down the sights at their targets.

"Fire!"

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

The sound of gunfire erupted as dust and fragments flew. The earthen dummies shattered under the barrage, breaking into pieces and kicking up clouds of dirt.

"Cease fire!"

Everyone stopped shooting all at once, leaving a jarring silence.

What's going on? Why is everyone so quiet?

"Is that all it takes? Is it really this easy?" a demon asked.

"We can attack just by moving a finger?"

The captains were dumbfounded by how effortless it had been to use these new weapons.

"That's right," I said. "This is the power of the weapons I summon. With that attack just now, you could have killed or severely wounded a dozen enemies."

"Incredible!"

"We can do something like this?!"

"This is too easy!"

"It's like a miracle!"

Their murmurs grew into a rising buzz of excitement until it turned into a unified cheer.

"Ooooooooohhhh!"

They were clearly impressed, but at this point it was crucial to rein in their enthusiasm and bring them back to reality.

"Well? What do you think? It's simple, right?"

"Yes!" they answered.

"It feels like we've learned how to use magic!" called out one of the captains.

"I can see why you'd think that," I said, nodding. "But remember, you were only shooting at stationary targets. It's harder to hit an enemy on the move. And there's still a lot to learn if you want to pressure the enemy."

I hated to rain on their parade, but I needed them to learn quickly.

"Yes, sir," they replied in unison.

Good. Time to drive the lesson home with the next stage of training.

Maria stepped forward to give instructions. "All right, everyone!

Return to your positions!”

The demons took up their positions again, aiming their guns at the next set of targets.

“This time, aim for the head. Take your time, and fire when ready!”

“Fire!”

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

A few shots managed to strike their marks, but most either grazed the bodies or missed entirely.

“Cease fire!”

The demons tilted their heads in confusion. Making them aim at a specific body part had made it significantly harder to hit their targets.

“How is it? Tougher to land a hit when the target is smaller, isn’t it?” I asked.

The demons glanced between the earthen dummies and the guns in their hands, puzzled.

“It’s difficult.”

“Indeed, it is.”

“Can we really get the hang of this?”

They were starting to understand.

“It’ll be even more difficult when your target is moving,” I told them. “For now, many of you will find it easier to fight with swords, spears, or fists. But listen—just like with blades or martial arts, your accuracy with these firearms will improve through training. Until then, we’ll continue drills like this regularly!”

“Yes, sir!”

I was impressed. These were warriors who took pride in the martial prowess they’d honed over their lifetime, yet they responded with such humility.

“Okay then, watch closely. Maria! Show them how it’s done.”

“Yes, Master Raul!” Maria took an AK-47 from Tauros and leveled it at the earthen dummies.

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

Maria’s shots tore through the heads of ten earthen dummies with flawless precision, not a single round going astray.

“Ooooooooh!”

“Incredible!”

Cries of awe echoed from the demons. Of course, it would be impossible for them to do the same right away, but even just seeing it done would serve them well.



Half a day later, the firearms training session for the 119 recruits came to an end.

"That concludes today's shooting drills! You should now have a basic understanding of what firearms are capable of. But that's just a glimpse of the power in the weapons I summon. My goal is to teach you how to wield them *effectively*, in organized combat," I said, pacing before them. "That said, do not forget the martial skills you've cultivated up to this point—they will remain vital in battle. Use your physical prowess to complement these new tools of war. Know this: Guns are not all-powerful! Overreliance on their performance will lead to failure. Think for yourselves, and then act. I'm counting on you!"

"Yes, sir!"

With that done, I began the second part of my demonstration—the capabilities of Phantom and my subordinates.

"Please step forward," I called out to them.

Out from the crowd stepped Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Minos, Lars, Seira, Doran, Slaga, and Anamis.

"Before we break for lunch, there's something I want you all to see," I continued. "My subordinates will now demonstrate how to make better use of my weapons by employing squad tactics."

Phantom stood beyond the shooting range, gripping a massive club.

"Phantom over there is a monster that Sharmilia created for me, a high ghoul. He's immensely strong, immortal, and has unparalleled regenerative abilities—as you'll see today. While the others fight him, I want you to observe the situation well and keep in mind that you can't always win with sheer firepower alone."

I had ordered Phantom not to kill any of my subordinates, but I was still eager to see how far he would be able to push my troops.

The demons murmured among themselves, gauging my subordinates.

"Hmph. We'll see just how skilled those who come from the Land of Demons are."

"Don't forget they once served directly under the former king. We shouldn't underestimate them."

"But what can they do against *that*?"

I gestured for them to be quiet. "I want you all to understand that my weapons are not all-powerful. And I want you to sear Phantom's abilities into your minds—there's a chance you might face something like him someday."

They stared at Phantom, their eyes full of unease.

"What kind of monster is that?"

"It's unsettling. What is that thing?"

"Something about its presence feels...wrong."

The specially constructed training area was dotted with cover, obstacles, and makeshift buildings, with earthen dummies scattered in between. My subordinates stood before me, while Phantom waited on the other side of the barricades.

I never thought I'd witness a mock battle that resembled a military simulation game in this world. Yet here we were, preparing for a simulated skirmish featuring my elite demon warriors, wielding live ammunition and possessing monstrous strength.

This is going to be so much fun!

I spoke to the team gathered from my subordinates. "Listen up! You are to treat the earthen dummies as allies that must be protected. Your mission is to defend them!"

"Yes, sir!"

"This is only a mock battle, but don't underestimate Phantom. He's incredibly strong even when he's holding back. You'll need to be at the top of your game!"

"Yes, sir!"

The spectators fell silent, their gazes shifting back and forth between my team and their sole opponent.

"Phantom! Begin!" At my command, Phantom moved. Without a sound, it closed the distance to one of the earthen dummies. With a sudden blur of motion, the hand he held the club in vanished—only for the dummy to explode into dust, utterly obliterated.

"See that? One of your allies has been taken down! Everyone, move out!" I said.

"Yes, sir!"

My subordinates quickly raised their Howa Type 20 5.56mm

automatic rifles and advanced toward Phantom. These rifles were the latest Japanese-made firearms made for the Ground Self-Defense Force.

Damn, I'm tempted to join in myself. Though, with live ammunition in play, there's a serious chance that I'd die...

The troops spread out, utilizing the cover of obstacles as they advanced. Their movement may have seemed strange to the onlookers since Phantom didn't use a ranged weapon, but this was the result of training to counter human mages and archers.

Boom! Crash!

Phantom tore through the earthen dummies with reckless abandon.

From on top of a mock building, Gazzam, Seira, and Doran had gained line of sight. They unleashed a volley of bullets at Phantom, but...

Swoosh!

In the blink of an eye, Phantom vanished. He had gone from a standstill to maximum speed in an instant, dodging the bullets with impossible agility.

However, his escape route had been read. Gog, Lars, and Slaga were waiting right where he stopped.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

The trio fired in unison, their bullets striking Phantom's arms, abdomen, and legs.

Wham!

Unbothered by the bullets, Phantom swung his club at them. Lars attempted to parry the strike with his infamous strength, yet...

Crash! Crack-crack-crack!

The impact sent Gog, Lars, and Slaga flying in a single blow.

"What?! Not even Lars or Slaga could stop it?"

"Even with their monstrous strength?"

The demon spectators watched the battle unfold with expressions of shock.

Ah, Lars's arm is done for. I'll have to ask Lusemia to heal it when we're done.

Gog, on the other hand, had used the club's impact to launch

himself in an attempt to minimize the damage, but he ended up flying halfway across the battlefield. Slaga had stopped rolling but was too stunned to move. Lars managed to stay upright through sheer tenacity but was seriously injured. Worse, all of their rifles had been destroyed—Phantom had deliberately targeted their weapons.

But Phantom had no time to press his advantage. Gersham, Minos, and Anamis immediately seized the opportunity to flank him, firing at his back. They landed direct hits on his head, back and legs, but the high ghoul remained unfazed and immediately launched a counterattack at the three of them.

Swoosh!

Phantom instantly appeared in front of Minos, utilizing the technique for rapid movement once employed by the knight of Bargius.

"Whoa!" the demons in the crowd cried out.

Phantom's foot shot upward, delivering a powerful kick to Minos.

Minos crossed his arms to guard his torso, but Phantom's attack went right through his defense, striking his abdomen. Anamis had been attempting to escape through the air, but before she could reach safety, Phantom suddenly appeared *above* her. He clasped his hands together and swung down.

Boom!

Anamis plummeted toward the ground at high speed.

Thud!

Gersham caught her at the last moment, cushioning the impact. But Anamis had lost consciousness, her body limp in his arms. Before Gersham could even react, Phantom's heel came crashing down toward his head.

In that instant, Gazzam and Doran rushed in with dagger and spear to intercept the blow. Their feet sank into the ground from the force. Even combined, they struggled to stop him.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

From a distance, Seira unleashed a volley of bullets from her automatic rifle, aiming at Phantom's head. The rounds struck his face, but the wounds vanished almost instantly, erased by his rapid regeneration.

Swoosh!

Phantom launched a palm strike at Gazzam, only for him to disappear. At that moment, Gersham appeared, his sword slashing at Phantom. Simultaneously, Doran lunged with his spear, while a bloodied Minos attacked from behind, swinging his axe in a diagonal strike aimed at Phantom's shoulder. Gog charged forward, his claws aimed directly at Phantom's abdomen.

Shhk! Swish! Wham! Slash!

Phantom deflected Gersham's sword with his right forearm, halted Minos's axe with his left fist, and twisted his neck to catch Doran's spearhead with his teeth. Only Gog's claws managed to land a hit, embedding ten centimeters into the high ghoul's abdomen.

Wham!

With a violent motion, Phantom flung them all away. But Gazzam reappeared not a moment later, wrapping his legs around Phantom's neck and driving his daggers deep into both temples.

Even still, Phantom did not falter. He grabbed Gazzam by the scruff of his neck and hurled him away. Gazzam twisted in the air like a cat, landing on his feet. Behind him, Phantom's regeneration healed the new wounds, and the blades clattered uselessly to the ground.

I think that's enough for now. But damn, Phantom really is terrifying.

"All right! That's enough! Well done, everyone!" I called out.

Minos collapsed on the spot, clutching his stomach in pain.

I hope he's okay. I'll have to ask Lusemia to heal him.

"Quickly, everyone! Take Lars, Minos, Slaga, and Anamis to my mother!"

"Yes, sir!"

They were carried off by my other subordinates toward the castle. As they left, a sudden round of applause echoed through the training ground. It reminded me of a crowd cheering for a defeated boxer who'd given their all in the ring.

"Well done!"

"Lars, that was incredible!"

"You held your ground, Minos!"

"Slaga, you were brave to face it head-on!"

"Anamis, you did great!"

"Are you all right, Anamis?"

"Anamis, let me take care of you!"

"I love you, Anamis!"

I'm hearing a whole lot of support for Anamis... Well, look at her. I can't blame them.

Meanwhile, every demon present wore a look of disbelief at Phantom's overwhelming power.

I get it. I'm shocked too. What's with this monster? He is under my control, right? I have to trust Sharmilia on this one...

I spoke to the crowd again. "Do you understand now? No matter how powerful your weapons are, there will be times when they fail against an overwhelming opponent. While monsters like Phantom don't exactly grow on trees, we can never predict what kind of enemy we'll face. That's why it's crucial to always plan ahead and be prepared for the worst!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Phantom, come here!" At my command, Phantom appeared at my side in an instant, his movement as fast as Sharmilia's.

"Bow!"

Phantom turned to the assembled demons and gave a deep, formal bow.

"He was created to obey my commands."

The applause was overwhelming, but I knew that Phantom was the one they were really praising.

"Now, that concludes today's exercises. We'll conduct these regularly from here on out," I told them.

"Yes, sir!"

"Dismissed!"

The demons returned to their posts, likely still reeling from today's demonstrations. I expected it would take some time for them to adapt to using guns, but at least the exercise had ended without incident. As the training ground emptied, only Maria and the motionless Phantom remained with me.

"Maria? Thank you for coming despite being busy."

“It was no trouble. Today has been a special day.”

“It really has, hasn’t it?”

I found myself lost in thought. So many things had happened since we fled Sanaria. We had endured hardship, I was finally able to meet Galdzin, and we were saved by demons... I even ended up becoming the son of the Demon King.

I carried the memories of all those who we had lost: my father (Gram), Leonard, Selma, the maids, the two thousand soldiers, the chamberlain Jenos, the butler Stephen, the household staff and their families, the people of Sanaria. I now carried the weight of their hopes and dreams.

“Master Raul, your subordinates are truly extraordinary. To fight Phantom as they did—it’s remarkable.”

I let out a sigh. “I can hardly believe they’re my subordinates. I mean, I’m the weakest among them.”

“That may be so, but I believe no one can match the strength of your determination.”

“I’m not so sure about that...”

“No, I mean it,” Maria said. “It is your will that has brought us this far.”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t the only one who fought to get us here.”

I believed that there was always a way to win as long as you were alive, but I knew I never would have survived on my own. Even with my ability to summon weapons, I’d have died long ago if it weren’t for those around me.

“Maria, do you remember my father’s letter?” I asked.

“The letter that told you to seek out Lord Galdzin?”

“That’s right. It was stained with Leonard’s blood. He, my father, and so many others risked their lives to make sure I got that letter. It was delivered to me through the sacrifices made by the people of Sanaria. They guided us here, and remembering that helps keep me moving forward.”

“You’re right,” Maria said quietly.

“That’s why I’ve made my decision. For the sake of all those who died, for the people of Sanaria, I will fight. I will take back what was

taken from us. And I will make those who took their lives pay."

"We will," Maria said, looking me in the eyes.

I held her gaze. "I've been a burden on you from the very beginning. But stay with me. I'll need you on the path I'm taking."

"Always."

"Then...let's grab some lunch," I said, trying to break the tension.

"Of course. By the way, Lord Raul, there's something I'd like to show you. Do you have time this afternoon?"

"I'll make time."

"And...there's a specific weapon I'd like you to summon."

"Ah, I see. I can do that."

"Thank you very much."

A weapon she wants me to summon? What could it be? And what does she want to show me?

Intrigued, I headed to the dining hall with Maria, looking forward to what she had in store.

After lunch, Maria and I strolled down the corridor together.

"Are we going to the training ground?" I asked her.

"That's right."

Maria led me back to the training ground we had used earlier. It was empty now, save for the many earthen dummies left standing. The wind swept through the grassy field as Maria and I stood facing each other, alone. She gazed at me intently, as if preparing herself.

"Master Raul..."

"Yes?"

"Like I said before, there's something I'd like you to summon."

"Of course. What do you need?"

What could it be? It seemed Maria had a specific request, one she was hesitant to make.

"The two guns you gave me during our time on the run. Could you summon them for me again?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

I summoned the P320 and Beretta 92 handguns Maria had relied on during our escape.

"I've been training alongside your subordinates," Maria explained.

"It's been...difficult, but I think I've gained a decent level of skill in sparring and martial techniques."

"That's incredible," I said. "Actually, I've heard they've been impressed by how quickly you're improving."

"Thank you. Using what I've learned, I've developed my own combat style. Would you like to see it?"

"A new fighting style?! I'd love to!" I exclaimed.

"Very well."

She really came up with her own fighting style? Amazing!

Maria pointed to an obstacle that was slightly out of the way. "Could you climb up onto that obstacle and watch from above?"

"Yeah, of course."

I climbed on top of the obstacle and looked out across the shooting range. The earthen dummies were still scattered across the field. The dwarves had truly recreated the military simulation game arena to my exact specifications.

Maria signaled to me with a wave. "I'm going to begin now!"

"Go for it!" I waved back, eager to see what she had in store.

Standing near the center of the range, Maria exhaled slowly. Her movements were graceful, taking a stance like a martial artist. With a sharp motion, she thrust out one of the pistols and fired at a dummy directly in front of her.

Bang!

With that single shot, Maria began a beautiful dance. She spun around and around, gracefully shifting her weight as she crouched low and fired upward, aiming at a target's chin. She rolled backward, spreading her arms wide, and simultaneously landed shots on both sides. Then, using one-handed cartwheels, she continuously fired at her targets, never breaking rhythm.

In one moment, she arched into a backbend and fired; in the next, she twisted in a sideways tumble, her shots landing with pinpoint accuracy.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Without even glancing, she fired over her shoulder and struck a dummy behind her, then another as she rolled forward. She leaped onto a dummy's shoulders and fired directly downward into the

crown of its head.

Her movements were beautiful, blending break dancing with ballet as her maid uniform fluttered behind her.

With another deep breath, her rhythm shifted. Her movements became more simple and direct. She stepped into one dummy's reach and—*bang!*—fired into its abdomen, before circling around it to shoot another in the forehead. Without hesitation, she ducked beneath its legs, emerging on the other side to shoot the back of its head.

Bang!

She leaped sideways, shooting another dummy in the temple. Twisting around, she pressed her back against the one she'd just shot and fired a final bullet into its head before pivoting to shoot the dummy in front of her.

I found myself holding my breath as I watched her alternate between elegant, fluid motion and sharp, calculated bursts of motion. What stood out the most was that though her shots struck true each time, she rarely *looked* at her targets.

It was something out of the action movies I'd seen in my previous life—no, she surpassed even that.

What was truly shocking was that this was all being done by an honest-to-goodness maid. These moves weren't something a maid should be capable of. They were the result of long hours sparring and training with my subordinates. As she lacked raw strength or destructive power, she'd turned to firearms to compensate.

"Incredible," I murmured.

Maria, having finished her routine, waved at me.

"All done! Did you see that?"

"That was amazing! And you looked so cool! Did you come up with that on your own?" I asked.

"Yes! I thought I could be of some use to you."

"This is definitely useful. It's not something just anyone can pull off, but in the chaos of battle, this would be a real threat."

"I'm so glad to hear that!" Maria said, beaming with childlike joy.

To perform such maneuvers without even looking at her targets... She was a genius. There was no other word for it. If possible, I'd

love for her to teach it to the demons that specialized in hand-to-hand combat. It was also possible that she was making advancements in her ability to use magic to enhance her body.

"Do you think I could learn to do that?" I asked.

"If you'd like, why don't we train together like we used to?"

"That's a great idea," I said. "Let's work on turning it into something we can teach."

"Training with you sounds so nostalgic. I'd love to!"

"Then let's do it!"

With that, we'd decided to practice the gun-based martial arts together.

"Actually, isn't that outfit a bit difficult to move in?" I said hesitantly.

She looked down at her clothes.

"This is just my usual work uniform, so I'm used to it."

I scratched my head. "Well, uh...this is difficult to say..." I said, shifting my eyes away from her.

"What is?"

"I could see your underwear the whole time."

Maria's face turned beet red.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for showing you something so inappropriate, Master Raul!"



No, no, I didn't mind at all. In fact, I felt like I'd won the lottery.

"It's no big deal. I'm just glad that no one else was around to see it."

Maria glanced around the training ground, relieved to find it empty.

"As long as it's you, Lord Raul, I don't mind. After all, I used to bathe you when you were little," Maria said with a grin.

Well, I guess it's fine. Maria's always been more like a wet nurse to me, though I can't help but feel awkward now that my body's...growing up. The baths are getting difficult to handle. Back in my previous life, my hobbies and career meant that I had absolutely zero contact with women, so as a lifelong virgin I have no idea how to handle this situation.

After a moment of thinking, I said, "I'll summon some combat gear for you to wear at the next training session. We can use that while we develop your style."

"Understood."

This style of fighting could be a breakthrough in adapting guns to the unique traits of demons. But first, I'd need to master the basics myself before I could teach it effectively. And so, Maria and I began training in the art of firearm-based martial combat.

The next day, I once again set out to patrol the castle with Shiro and Aurora.

I found Iona brushing Shiro's fur at his kennel. She was using a specialized horsehair brush that King Lusemia had ordered from Gladrom.

"Thank you for your hard work as always, mother," I said.

Iona looked up and smiled at me. "I heard that yesterday's training demonstrations went well! Were they surprised by the guns?"

"Oh, they were absolutely stunned," I said with a smile.

"I knew they would be!"

I went over and patted Shiro on the head. "Hey, Shiro! Let's head out for today's patrol."

He crooned happily.

"He sure has gotten big, hasn't he?" I said to Iona. When I first

brought him here, he was only about a meter tall. Now he was pushing two meters. “And he’s still just a cub.”

Iona sized him up. “At this rate, I might not even be able to reach his back when he’s bending down. But he’s so well-behaved and listens to what I say.”

I was surprised by that. “Really? Do you think he’s getting smarter?”

“Much smarter, I’d say,” she said with a nod.

Maybe Shiro had a clear sense of the hierarchy here. He was fed well and seemed content. I’d heard magical beasts could become quite intelligent.

As I was pondering this, Iona suddenly began issuing commands to Shiro.

“Shake!”

Shiro straightened and made a grunt in response, before—*plop!*—Shiro gently placed his paw in Iona’s hand. He seemed to be doing his best to not hurt her.

You’ve got to be kidding me...

“Raise your paws!”

The massive white bear let out a huff and then stood on his hind legs, lifting his giant paws high into the air.

Whoa! He’s huge!

“Beg!”

Shiro clasped his paws together, moving his arms up and down like a bartender shaking a cocktail.

“That’s amazing, mother! It’s like he’s part of a circus!” I said, laughing.

“‘Circus’? What’s that?” she asked, confused.

“Oh, uh...it’s nothing,” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Raul, you say the strangest things sometimes, you know?”

“Ha ha...”

Still, the fact that Iona could train a magical beast like this... Was this a hidden talent of hers? Maybe she could rake in a tidy profit by taming magical beasts and putting on shows.

I spent the day daydreaming about ways to use this to get rich.

Chapter Four: The Hero of Gladrom

A few months later, we found ourselves aboard a ship on the North Sea.

Summer was nearly upon us, the air growing steadily warmer as we left the Land of Demons and approached Gladrom. I was now twelve, and my body was comparable in size to a third-year junior high school student.

"How close are we?" I asked.

Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Slaga, Anamis, Dal'ambah, Zieg, Mazul, Teela, Tappy, Lufra, Maria, Phantom, and I all stood on the deck, gazing out over the sea. Everyone was here, except for Sharmilia and Maquina, who were sleeping in the ship's hold. The sun beat down on our heads, but it was made bearable by the North Sea's still cold waters.

To avoid drawing unwanted attention in human lands, the demons wore hooded cloaks. They could pass for human mages if nobody looked too closely. Maria, as my attendant, wore a maid's uniform. Phantom, nearly three meters tall and mute, was impossible to disguise, but we would simply have to make it work.

I was wearing noble white garments befitting a demon royal. King Lusemia had insisted I wear this outfit, which had been painstakingly tailored by the dwarves.

"I almost didn't recognize you, Master Raul. You look far more splendid than I've ever seen in Eucrit's royalty," Maria remarked.

"Really?"

"Yes. I once went to a parade and saw a royal prince, but I think you're much more refined than him."

"The dwarves are really good at their craft, aren't they?"

"They are indeed."

At that moment, Lupia, who had been flying high above to keep watch, descended onto the deck.

"I see land, far on the horizon!"

"We're finally back... We've returned to the mainland," I said.

We were close now. After three years, I would finally set foot once more on human land. The moment I touched that soil, my fight would begin. The blood of those I'd loved had seeped into this land, but I would fight to reclaim them from the earth itself. And I would show no mercy to those who stood in my way.

I was ready.

I turned to the others on deck. "All right! We should reach Gladrom by nightfall. The plan remains as we've discussed. If you move as we've trained, you'll have no issues in combat. I will issue each of you a weapon I've summoned, but there's no need to leave behind your own weapons."

One by one, I summoned their weapons. Each received arms suited to their abilities. I was equipping them with only the minimum level of protective gear, to avoid giving away our intent to the enemy. Larger, specialized weapons would be summoned as needed. For now, I issued handguns to everyone, ensuring they carried holsters at their hips or thighs.

Because demons were more powerful than humans, they could easily wield large-caliber weapons. I handed a Pfeifer Zeliska to Gersham, Gazzam, and Zieg, each loaded with .600 Nitro Express rounds capable of felling an elephant. These massive revolvers could hold five shots and weighed six kilograms. No one in my previous life would have tried to holster such a beast, yet the three of them strapped the revolvers to their waists like they were nothing more than fencing swords. They were the very image of oni carrying iron clubs.

"How does it feel? Does it get in the way?" I asked.

"It's not a problem," Gersham replied on their behalf. The trio hefted the colossal firearms as easily as one would hold a compact.

To Dal'ambah the dark elf and the spriggans Slaga and Mazul, I handed Desert Eagles chambered with .50 AE rounds.

"How about these? Think you can use them?" I asked.

"Yes, we've practiced with these. We'll manage fine," Dal'ambah answered.

"Is the size an issue?"

"Not at all," he replied, the others echoing his sentiment.

To Gog, Anamis, and Lufra, I issued Glock 21s loaded with .45 ACP rounds.

"It's smaller than the one you gave to Gersham," Gog commented, a hint of dissatisfaction in his tone as he glanced at Gersham's monstrous weapon.

"True, but considering the size of your hands, this is the most practical choice," I explained. "Gersham's revolver only fires five shots per reload, but yours can hold thirteen. It's a tactical decision."

"Understood," Gog said, sounding resigned.

"How do they feel in your hands?"

"They're light and easy to handle," he admitted.

"Good to hear," I said with a nod.

To Teela and Tappy, the goblins, I handed Smith & Wesson M&P Shield pistols. Thin and lightweight at only 589 grams, the pistols were a perfect fit for their smaller hands.

"How do these guns feel?"

"Yes, they're light and easy to handle. We've trained with these, so we'll be fine," Teela replied confidently.

"Good," I said, nodding.

Maria looked delighted to see more of our companions looking confident with their guns.

"Everyone looks so happy! I'm so glad to have more people to share this with," she exclaimed, spinning her own pair of pistols—a P320 and a Beretta 92—in her hands with practiced ease.

"What about me?" Lupia asked.

"Oh, right. You, Sharmilia, and Maquina have a different set of weapons. They'll serve as our hidden trump cards, so I'll give them to you when the time comes. It's the one I've had you training with, so I don't think there will be much of an issue."

"Yes, my lord," she replied.

For Slaga and Mazul, I had plans to arm them with weapons after they transformed into their giant forms.

And with that, I had distributed weapons to all of them. As for Phantom, I would assign him weapons as the situation demanded. Since he was linked to my consciousness, he wouldn't have trouble wielding whatever I gave him.

Just as we finished, there was a giant splash as something massive emerged from the sea. It was the massive sea serpent that had become our frequent fishing companion.

"Oh, Penta! You've done well to stay with us this far," I said, turning toward the massive beast.

It roared in response. It had been overjoyed to be given the name Penta. Over weeks of fishing with us, Penta had grown fond of us and would help us bring in massive catches. Now, we could even communicate a little bit.

"I'll let you know when I need your help," I said to the massive creature. "But if you get hurt, there's no one here who can treat you. We aren't going to be fighting at sea either, so it'd be great if you could just stand by for now."

It made a deep, mournful sound.

"Don't be sad. I'm counting on you."

That seemed to brighten it up. It roared in approval.

"The wind's to our back, so take it easy as you swim, all right?"

It gave one more thunderous roar and then—*splash!*—it returned to the depths.

The demons on deck looked at me in awe. I was starting to think that they may never get used to the sight of me commanding a sea serpent. Our journey to Gladrom had been short so far because we had strapped the boat to Penta and let it carry us out to sea, cutting our travel time in half. Apparently not even King Lusemia was capable of something like this. I chalked it up to spending so much time with Penta, bonding as we fished.

I turned again to the demons gathered about me and gave them further instructions.

"Well then, if the letters were delivered as planned, Lord Paul and his butler David should be waiting for us. However, Gladrom may not be safe, and it's very possible that we will be most vulnerable when we disembark. Stay alert."

"*Yes, sir!*" they answered in unison.

"And remember, once we step off this ship, we won't return until autumn at the earliest."

"*Yes, sir!*"

There was one last thing I needed to hear from them. I decided to ask them then.

"This is my fight," I began. "And I'm dragging all of you into it, even though you have no obligation to involve yourselves. If anyone wants to return to the Land of Demons and live your life in peace, now is your last chance."

I looked at each of them, one by one.

"So, what will you do?" I asked.

"Lord Raul, surely you know that we're with you."

"It was never a question for us. We will walk beside you, always."

"I want to see what the world beyond the Land of Demons and Gladrom has to offer!"

"This is a journey to witness the future. I can't leave until I've seen it with my own eyes."

"I will serve you for eternity, Master Raul."

Not a single one of them wanted to return.

Gersham stepped forward and began to speak. "All of us wish to protect you, Lord Raul. Even those who stayed behind would have done anything to be here. We consider it an honor to have been chosen. We've decided to serve you until our last breath, if you'll have us."

"Gersham..." I whispered. His words brought the sting of tears to my eyes.

"Come now, Master Raul. Hold your head high," Maria said, taking my hand and squeezing it tightly. "I've been with you since the beginning. I won't let you leave me behind now."

I sniffed back the tears and raised my head high. "Very well. I've heard your feelings loud and clear. But let me make one thing clear in return—I don't want any talk of dying to protect me. Our aim is not to sacrifice, but to survive. We will carefully make plans to ensure that no one is lost, and we will retreat if the danger becomes too great. Let us show the world the power we have gained through

our hard work and training."

"*Yes, sir!*" came their united response.

The sinking sun that dyed the land stretching across the horizon drenched their faces in its orange light. In the evening sun, I saw the faces of those who had been lost. My father, Gram. His soldiers. The maids and loyal servants who had cared for me. They smiled at me as though they were welcoming my return.

Beside me, Maria watched the same horizon. I leaned to her and whispered, "I will reclaim our homeland, Maria. The soil of Eucrit, soaked with the blood of those we loved—it will be ours again. Whatever ruthlessness this requires of me, I will not hesitate. But you must ensure I do not lose sight of myself. Watch over me, Maria, and remind me of what truly matters."

"I will," she answered with a steady voice. "Even if you become the Demon of Origin and lose yourself, I will take responsibility. I will stop you with my own hands if I must. But I do not believe it will come to that. I believe in you, Master Raul. I will never give up on you, and I will protect you, always."

"You know me better than anyone," I said, my voice thick with emotion. "Your words carry a great weight."

"And they always will," she replied, a soft smile playing on her lips.

Our ship entered the harbor of Gladrom as the sun sank beneath the horizon. The town was aglow with the light of lanterns. I had last set foot in this place three years ago—this land where we had once clashed with the knights of the Bargius Empire.

In the distance, I could see lights moving on the dock. It appeared that we had people coming to greet us. Lanterns lined the path to the port illuminating the docks. As the ship was moored, the crew threw down the ropes, which were quickly secured to the mooring posts by those waiting below. When we lowered a ladder, several people began to ascend onto the ship.

To meet our hosts, I stood alongside Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, Lufra, Zieg, Slaga, and Phantom—an entourage chosen carefully for this occasion. Maria wore a maid's uniform, as did Sharmilia,

Maquina, and Lufra, presenting themselves as my attendants. Zieg, a lycan who looked human when not transformed, was dressed in a morning coat, posing as a butler. Slaga, though a spriggan, appeared to be nothing more than a diminutive man clad in a sharp suit, easily mistaken for a servant. To the untrained eye, we were all entirely human.

Phantom... Well, Phantom is another thing entirely. Best not to dwell on that.

A familiar voice greeted me as the group emerged onto the deck. "Welcome back to Gladrom, Lord Algarde!"

It was Paul, the former king of Gladrom and now its governor. His face was illuminated by the warm glow of a lantern. Behind him followed five others: David, the former steward who now acted as Paul's attendant; a gentlemanly figure in a fine suit; a man clad in a mantle resembling the attire of the church; and two armored guards.

"Good evening, Paul," I said with a slight smile. "We have good weather tonight. The moon is beautiful."

"Indeed, a truly fine evening," Paul replied.

David stepped forward and said, "It is good to see you well, Lord Algarde."

"Thank you, David. It's good to see you again."

Exchanging pleasantries with Paul and David, I noted how little they had changed since we had parted three years ago. However, there was a faint weariness in their expressions. Judging by the suspicious looks on the faces of those standing behind them, I could hazard a guess as to the source of their exhaustion.

"Lord Algarde," Paul said, gesturing to the man in the suit at his side, "allow me to introduce Baum Stein, an envoy from the Bargius Empire."

Baum Stein stepped forward. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Baum Stein, at your service."

"I am Algarde," I said, making sure to keep my speech formal. "It is an honor to meet you."

This man was no mere envoy. Beneath his suit, his frame hinted at a body packed with bulging muscle. His unkempt stubble and lecherous gaze lent him an air of unpleasantness, further

emphasized as his eyes roved over Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, and Lufra, appraising them as though they were merchandise.

They paid his scrutiny no mind, showing cool indifference.

"And this," Paul continued, gesturing to the other man at his side, "is Lord Lateus Norran, an envoy from the Holy Land of Fattoria."

"I am Lateus Norran," the man introduced himself, his voice clipped and formal. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

"I am Algarde," I replied, equally courteous. "The honor is mine."

Lateus Norran's gaze was different from Baum Stein's. His nervous eyes fixed on me as though attempting to confirm some suspicion. His expression was one of thinly veiled distrust.

His gaze did not escape the notice of the girls, who shot him pointed glares, their irritation plain.

"*Ahem!*"

I cleared my throat deliberately, snapping their attention back to me. Their faces returned to their blank expressions.

Just as I'd suspected, envoys from both Bargius and Fattoria had come. I now understood why Paul and David looked so downtrodden.

The two envoys' glances darted frequently toward Phantom, whose mere existence clearly unnerved them.

Well, I should've expected that. Phantom looks anything but human.

"Now then," Paul said, "let us now inspect the goods you've brought."

"Of course. Right this way," I said.

I led them down into the cargo hold, where the merchandise had been carefully stowed. Spread before them were the pelts and horns of big-horned deer, cured meats chilled with ice harvested from the ice sheets of the Land of Demons, magic stones extracted from magical beasts, and coal.

"These are exceptional goods. I'll see to it that we purchase them at a fair price," Paul remarked as his eyes swept over the cargo.

"Thank you. I am glad you find them pleasing," I replied.

"We'll begin unloading first thing in the morning."

"I appreciate your efforts. I'll personally oversee the process

when the time comes."

Having exchanged the required formalities with Paul, we prepared to disembark from the ship.

Aside from the subordinates I brought, there were other demons aboard who had manned the vessel during our journey. Their role would conclude after they unloaded our cargo and loaded the imports intended for the Land of Demons. Once their tasks were complete, they would set sail for home. For now, I assigned Gazzam, Gog, Dal'ambah, and Mazul to guard the ship. Each had been given a radio to allow for communication in case of emergencies. Meanwhile, under the cover of night, Gersham, Teela, Tappy, Lupia, Anamis, and Phantom would disperse into the shadows of Gladrom, scouting the town and keeping watch.

"Will it be seven of you disembarking, then?" David asked.

"Yes, that is correct," I replied with a nod.

The group disembarking consisted of myself, Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, Lufra, Slaga, and Zieg. The demons appeared indistinguishable from humans. Zieg, a lycan, could seamlessly maintain his human form; Lufra, though a slime, had molded herself into a convincing human shape. These six would act as my attendants.

"You must be weary after such a long journey," Paul said. "Please, take this opportunity to relax at the newly constructed guesthouse."

"Thank you for your hospitality," I replied.

But as we prepared to leave the cargo hold, David walked past me and discreetly slipped something into my pocket—a folded piece of paper, by the feel of it.

What could it be? I needed to find the opportunity to look at it.

"For now, would you please wait at the dock in front of the ship for us?" I suggested to Paul.

"Understood. We'll await you there."

I watched as the humans from Gladrom, Fattoria, and Bargius disembarked from the ship before us. Once they were out of sight, I reached into my pocket and withdrew the paper David had slipped me, unfolding it carefully.

It was a letter from Paul.

Dear Lord Raul,

Welcome, and thank you for coming to us. I must apologize that our greeting has been reduced to such a formal affair. Were it not for them*, we would have extended a far more heartfelt and genuine welcome. However, faced with their overwhelming military might, we had no choice but to bow to their dominion. I beg your understanding of the circumstances that led to this. The letters addressed to you in the Land of Demons were likewise constrained by their ever-watchful censors.*

But you are our hero, the one who saved us. On the day that you rise against your enemies, I ask that you allow us to stand by your side. Should you take action, please call upon us. Over these past three years, Gladrom has become infested with agents of the Holy Land of Fattoria and the Bargius Empire. Many of their agents seek to uncover the truth of what happened three years ago—the disappearance of one thousand of their soldiers.

They have yet to abandon the idea of revenge for that loss. Among their nations are those who claim that the demon race poses no true threat and urge an assault on your nation under the banner of their alliance. These sentiments can be seen in the vast numbers of soldiers they have brought to our lands. Their forces are not only concentrated in the capital of Gladrom but are also spread widely across the land, and they stay in constant communication.

We have been unable to ascertain the full extent of their plans, but one thing is clear: Even as they extend their hand in welcome, they harbor malicious intentions. I implore you to exercise the utmost caution.

Above all, Lord Raul, please ensure that you do not act alone.

Your most humble and obedient servant,

Paul

"This is most fortuitous, master," Sharmilia said. Her widening smile was one of a predator that had found its prey vulnerable.

"You're right. I never imagined the enemy would make things *easier* for us to move," I said.

"I'm not the same as I was three years ago!" Maria said, her eyes blazing with determination. She was itching for a fight.

All around me, my companions wore similar expressions, their excitement palpable.

"Good. We're changing the plan," I said. "Lufra, can you take *my* form?"

"Of course, my lord," she replied.

She began to shift, her amorphous body twisting and reconfiguring itself. In mere moments, she had perfectly replicated my appearance, clothing and all.

"Mimic my voice as well, if you can."

"My apologies," she said, her tone now an uncanny match to my own.

I nodded. "Perfect. Now, wear this."

I carefully fastened a microphone to her clothes and placed an earpiece into her ear.

"Can you hear my voice?" I asked.

"Yes," came the immediate reply.

"Good," I said, then turned to the rest. "You understand what to do if Maria is in danger, don't you?"

"*Yes!*" the group responded in unison, their voices resolute.

"Master Raul, you don't need to worry about me," Maria insisted.

Before I could respond, Sharmilia interjected. "You are precious to Lord Raul. Protecting you is our duty."

Maria hesitated, then nodded. "Understood. Then I leave myself in your care."

"All right. Let's move out," I commanded.

"*Yes, my lord!*"

As they filed out, I remained behind, watching in silence as Lufra —now in my guise—led the group, with Maria and the others following in formation. They descended the ladder to the dock and joined Paul and his entourage.

When they were out of sight, I closed my eyes and focused, linking my thoughts with Sharmilia's.

"Ah—ahh!"

A strange sound escaped Sharmilia, drawing the curious gazes of

those around her. Through our link, I could see their puzzled expressions; the reaction was the result of my successful synchronization with her senses. Keeping the connection steady, I walked down farther into the bowels of the ship.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said as I approached.

Gersham's head shot up to look at me. "Lord Raul! Are we already moving into action?"

"Yes," I replied, smiling. "It seems our adversaries are impatient. Thanks to that, our preparations will be considerably expedited."

"That is most fortunate," Gersham replied.

"Then let's begin executing the plan. I'll summon the weapons, so gather around."

I accessed the weapons database.

```
By Theatre:
Ground Weaponry LV 4
Aerial Weaponry LV 2
Naval Weaponry LV 3
Space Weaponry LV 0

By Purpose:
Offensive Weaponry LV 6
Defensive Weaponry LV 3

By Scale:
Weapons of Mass Destruction LV 2
Conventional Weaponry LV 6

By Type:
Nuclear Weaponry LV 0
Biological Weaponry LV 0
Chemical Weaponry LV 0
Optical Weaponry LV 0
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Acoustic Weaponry LV 2

By Target:

Antipersonnel Weaponry LV 7

Anti-Materiel Weaponry LV 5

By Effect:

Nonlethal Weaponry LV 2

Facilities:

Base Equipment LV 3

Utility:

Equipment LV 4

Augmentation LV 2

Over the past three years, the levels of the weapons in my database had risen significantly. Through trial and error, I had found that these levels rose through experiences related to what I could summon. For instance, riding in a carriage had unlocked the ability to summon armored personnel carriers. Flying on a griffin had expanded my repertoire of summonable aerial weaponry. Diving through the seas with Penta had enhanced my ability to summon naval equipment.

Additionally, my extensive training with the demons—using swords, spears, and bows—had bolstered the levels of conventional weaponry and antipersonnel weaponry.

A new category had also appeared in the database: *augmentation*. At Level 1, it allowed me to augment weapons with magic, enhancing their performance. A simple infusion of magic could amplify a handgun's bullets to the destructive force of a 12.7mm round.

At Level 2, my magic could flow into weapons held by my allies, further increasing their power. However, this advanced augmentation

came at a significant cost to my magical energy. It was a double-edged sword, one that required caution in its use.

"All right! Let's go and start a fire," I declared.

"*Yes, sir!*" came the resounding reply.

I was still receiving audio and visual information through my bond with Sharmilia. This power came from my lineage and allowed me to always be aware of what was happening with her group, no matter how far away she was.

Her group had been escorted to some opulent guesthouse. Our enemies were still unaware that I had stayed behind while Lufra was taking my place.

"This way, please," Paul said, gesturing for Lufra to take a seat on a luxurious sofa.

Behind her—no, behind "me"—Maria, Sharmilia, and Maquina stood in their roles as maids while Zieg and Slaga played the parts of dutiful servants.

The room, however, was far from welcoming. Twenty knights accompanied Lateus and Baum as guards, and alongside them were three mages.

That's an unreasonable number of guards. What are they planning?

"Lord Algarde, you seem quite young. Might I ask your age?" Lateus Norran suddenly asked.

What a rude question.

"Lord Norran!" Paul interjected sharply, reproaching him. "Such a question is hardly appropriate when addressing the Crown Prince of the Land of Demons!"

"Oh?" Lateus's lips curled into a sneer. "And who are you, Lord Paul? A provincial ruler, taking such liberties in addressing a count? Don't forget, Gladrom could always find itself in turmoil again..."

"That... I..." Paul faltered at the thinly veiled threat.

Hearing this exchange, I spoke softly to Lufra through her earpiece. Lufra, ever the capable mimic, echoed my words flawlessly.

"It's fine, Paul," Lufra said. "And to answer Lord Norran's question, I'm twelve years old."

Lateus chuckled. "Twelve? Why, you're still a child!"

Paul bristled. “This is outrageous! Lord Algarde wasn’t invited to the guesthouse simply to be mocked!”

“Oh, Lord Paul, are you so afraid of demons?” Lateus said, his voice laden with condescension.

This Lateus Norran had underestimated us from the start. Was he truly ignorant of how one thousand Bargian soldiers had vanished without a trace?

“Lord Norran, acting like that is sure to alarm our demon guests,” Baum Stein, the envoy from Bargius, interjected smoothly. “Look, they appear frozen in fear.”

“Come now, Lord Baum,” Norran replied with a dismissive wave. “Bargius may be rife with terrifying rumors about the demons, but surely you don’t believe such nonsense. A thousand soldiers vanishing in a single night? Preposterous.”

“Is it though?” Baum’s voice grew louder. “Over one thousand of our soldiers never returned to Bargius, and that is a fact. Surely this isn’t in dispute.”

Baum Stein spoke boldly, showing no sign of hesitation when addressing demons. Through my link with Sharmilia, I surveyed the reactions of my companions. Maria looked mildly irritated, while the rest regarded the two envoys with expressions akin to someone observing insignificant insects. Given the reality of the situation, it was a fair assessment—they truly posed no more danger than gnats.

“Lord Algarde,” Norran said, his voice steeped in condescension, “in the Holy Land of Fattoria, we do not treat nonhumans with the same respect as humans. You would do well to keep that in mind during our discussions, and speak carefully.”

Well, isn’t he *the perfect picture of arrogance...*

I instructed Lufra to answer what was clearly a threat toward me.

“Of course. I imagine each nation has its own point of view. We won’t take offense. Speak your mind, and we’ll speak ours.”

Baum leaned forward slightly, his gaze intent. “In that case, Lord Algarde, allow me to be direct. Regarding the story of the disappearance of a thousand Bargian soldiers—were demons truly involved?”

Feigning confusion, Lufra tilted her head. “Are you suggesting

that we were responsible for such a terrifying incident? I'm afraid I have no recollection of such events. What do you think?"

She turned toward Zieg, who stood dutifully behind her, playing the role of a butler.

"I, too, have heard no such rumors," Zieg replied.

"There you have it," Lufra concluded.

Lateus's face lit up as if to say, *I told you so!* He shot a smug glance at Baum, who, by contrast, stared at Lufra with lingering suspicion. Though it was unlikely that Lufra the slime was going to break under such scrutiny.

"Well, that's a relief," Baum finally said. "If our soldiers had been killed, we would undoubtedly be enemies. We would no longer be able to sit and talk as peacefully as we are now."

"Quite right," I replied through Lufra. "The Bargius Empire is a formidable nation, renowned for the strength of its knights. It's a relief, truly, that we find ourselves in a position to speak peacefully."

I kept probing Baum, wary of how much information he had gotten from the people of Gladrom.

"Frankly speaking," Norran began, "demons on this continent are regarded no differently than monsters, as targets for extermination. You should consider it a privilege that we're even speaking to you as equals. A little gratitude would be appropriate, don't you think?"

More of the same condescension.

Through Sharmilia's eyes, I noticed Maria's reaction—a vein seemed to pulse at her temple. The others remained stoic, their expressions unreadable as they fixed their gazes on Lateus.

Who could blame them? The man is insufferable.

"Count Norran! That is going too far!" Paul said, his voice shaking with indignation. "Lord Algarde is the son of the Demon King herself. I must insist that you show proper respect!"

Paul had finally snapped. While the rest of us remained silent and composed, he looked furious, his veins pulsing in his temple.

"Exactly!" David added, also losing his calm. "Lord Algarde is a valued trading partner who has graciously sent Gladrom only the finest of goods! To equate him with some common beast is beyond insulting!"

Well, this is awkward. They're so angry that I don't even have the chance to be mad.

Lateus sneered. "Oh? For a provincial lord and his butler to speak to an envoy of Fattoria in such a manner... How bold of you. But I won't be held accountable for what comes next."

"Grrr..." Paul, his face flushed crimson, clenched his teeth in silent frustration, unable to respond under the weight of the implied threat.

"Now, now, let's not get carried away," Baum interjected. "Count Lateus, we've already established that the disappearance of Bargius's soldiers was not the work of the demons. Surely there's no need to go so far as to insult the Demon King's son."

Baum's words had a tempering effect on Lateus. Still, the knights standing behind him were clearly on edge. Were they preparing to make a move?

Interesting...

I contemplated my next step. Perhaps it was time to fan the flames a bit.

"Well, let us leave it at that," I said through Lufra. "Though I must say, I can't help but notice that, from the beginning, Count Lateus, you seem to have been speaking to Paul, the former king of Gladrom, in a manner not befitting your own station."

The room fell silent.

"Ah, but forgive me," I continued. "We demons, being the uncultured savages that we are, lack the refinement to understand the subtleties of such social nuances. If my words offend you, I ask your forgiveness. It's been some time since I've visited Gladrom, and I fear I may have grown somewhat unfamiliar with the customs here."

The knights behind Baum and Lateus bristled, their hands twitching toward their weapons.

There it is. Will they take the bait? We only have some delicate maids, a humble butler, and a diminutive servant. You have seasoned knights, armed and ready. Surely, you can handle such feeble opposition? Go ahead, let's see what you've got.

"I see," remarked Baum. "Lord Algarde would be ignorant of the

intricacies of human nations, no doubt. Count Lateus is a prominent figure in the Holy Land of Fattoria and—perhaps understandably—irritated at being sent to such a remote outpost. Surely, it would be wise to avoid escalating matters unnecessarily?"

Baum was attempting to steer the conversation toward a peaceful resolution. Was he genuinely seeking to defuse the situation?

"Hmph!" Lateus scoffed, his lips curling in disdain. "Very well, then. Upon my return to Fattoria, I shall report this incident. I suppose that, for today, I will deign to treat you as guests of our nation."

With that, Lateus concluded his tirade.

"My apologies, Lord Algarde," Baum said. "Could you find it within yourself to overlook today's events?"

Baum was handling things maturely. I found myself curious about what he was truly after.

"It's no problem," I said through Lufra. "If anything, this has been a valuable opportunity to learn how demons are regarded on this continent. We'll take it to heart and act carefully from here on out."

Baum slightly lowered his head. "I appreciate your composed response, Lord Algarde."

With a subtle gesture from Baum, the knights behind him relaxed and moved their hands away from their weapons. Still, there was something fishy about the exchange.

For our first contact with the enemy, I had expected more open hostility.

"Anyways, we've prepared a selection of Gladrom's finest dishes for you!" Paul interjected, his tone bright and eager as he tried to dispel the lingering tension. "Please, allow me to escort you to the dining hall!"

As Paul stood to guide the group, Baum raised a hand to stop him.

"Actually, Lord Paul, I have an idea. Surely our demon guests would find city cuisine more novel than the traditional fare of Gladrom? With that in mind, I took the liberty of borrowing your kitchen and brought chefs from Bargius to prepare something special."

Paul's face twisted in surprise as he stumbled over his response. "I-I wasn't informed of this! My household has already prepared everything!"

"It was meant to be a surprise," Baum said. "I apologize for keeping you in the dark, but I've already arranged for my chefs to use your kitchen."

"I-I see," Paul stammered, his frustration poorly concealed. "Still, you could have mentioned this earlier!"

"If I had, it wouldn't have been a surprise, would it?" Baum replied.

"Well...I suppose that's true," Paul muttered, clearly flustered. "And what sort of dishes have you prepared?"

"I've brought the finest chefs from Bargius. You can rest assured it will be something quite special."

"Very well. Let us proceed to the dining hall," Paul said, regaining his composure as he ushered everyone into the hallway.

The group moved through the hallway, the sound of footsteps echoing faintly off the walls. Slaga leaned in close to Lufra, speaking in a low voice so that the others couldn't hear.

"Lord Raul, it's the same smell again."

"What smell?" I had Lufra ask.

"The same scent from when we were captured by the Bargius soldiers."

Ah, so that's it.

The scent Slaga had picked up was of the neurotoxin that Bargius had used during the ambush on Galdzin three years ago.

Of course. This had all seemed far too easy. So, this is their play.

I reached out to Sharmilia through our shared connection.

Sharmilia, can you identify the source of the scent?

Yes, master. It's an airborne toxin called Rugan incense. It won't affect myself, Maquina, Lufra, or Maria, but for Zieg and Slaga, it's highly toxic.

I see. Tell Zieg and Slaga to excuse themselves to the restroom. If they can, have them leave the building entirely.

Understood, I'll relay the message.

As I spoke to Sharmilia through telepathy, I received a

transmission from Gazzam through the radio. “Lord Raul, the ship is surrounded. I count roughly a hundred knights.”

“Only a hundred?” I asked. “It seems we’re being underestimated. Still, don’t be careless—there are mages among them. If they initiate combat, execute a search-and-destroy strategy. Assign ten crew members to man the Vulcan cannons.”

“Yes, my lord!”

At this point, I had already slipped into town with Gersham, Teela, Tappy, Lupia, Anamis, and Phantom. I observed the movements below from my perch on a rooftop overlooking the guesthouse. Phantom loomed beside me, acting as a silent bodyguard, while Lupia crouched nearby.

“Gersham, can you hear me?” I said, connecting to him through the radio.

“Yes, Lord Raul,” came his reply.

“The guesthouse is surrounded by enemy soldiers. I can see them from here. What about your position?”

“We’ve confirmed their presence as well,” he answered.

“Good. Stay sharp. We don’t know what kind of knights or mages we’re dealing with yet.”

“Understood,” he said, then suddenly exclaimed, “Lord Raul, the guesthouse is starting to glow!”

“So it is,” I replied, my tone low. “I can see it too.”

The mages had begun erecting a barrier around the building. As the barrier took shape, my shared link with Sharmilia was severed abruptly. If this was light-based magic, Sharmilia and Maquina were in serious danger. Behind me, Phantom continued to watch silently.

I raised my Barrett M82 sniper rifle to my shoulder and peered through the attached night vision scope.

“I’m going to eliminate the mages maintaining the barrier around the guesthouse. Once I give the signal, move in,” I said into the radio.

“Understood,” Gersham said.

Using my night vision goggles, I scanned the barrier. I used my magic to augment my FWS-I scope with the night vision overlay of my ENVG-B night vision goggles, linking the visuals seamlessly.

I zeroed in on the figures around the barrier. Five mages. The distance between us was roughly ninety meters—well within range. Through the scope, I could see them clearly.

"Well then," I murmured. "Which one of you should go first?"

"There are three mages on this side," I said before turning to the figure who crouched nearby. "Lupia! Take this and fly to the opposite side. Be on high alert for any attacks from the mages."

"Understood," Lupia replied.

I summoned an M240 medium machine gun and a backpack loaded with ammunition, then strapped the heavy weaponry securely onto her back.

"Go!"

Lupia hefted the M240 and launched herself into the night. Her form would be invisible to the human eye, but through the ENVG-B night vision scope, I tracked her movements clearly as she soared into position. From the guesthouse where my link with Sharmilia had been severed, Maria's voice crackled over the radio.

"Master Raul?" she said quietly. It seemed she was trying to avoid alerting the guards. "Something is wrong with Sharmilia and Maquina. They're acting like everything is fine, but it's plain on their face that they're in pain."

"I know the cause," I replied. "I'll resolve it shortly."

Maria continued, her tone growing more urgent. "The knights are starting to surround us as well."

"My connection to Sharmilia was severed, so I can't see the situation inside. I need you to keep reporting, Maria."

"Understood. No one has attacked us yet, but the tension is rising. Lufra is standing in front of me."

Good. The radio connection is still stable enough for communication. I won't be able to see who is talking, but I'll try to speak through Lufra.

"What is the meaning of this?" I had Lufra ask.

"Eh? I've no idea what you're on about."

The voice belonged to Baum, but gone was the smooth, courteous tone from earlier. He sounded like a completely different person.

"What have you done? Lord Baum, I will not tolerate such actions in my guesthouse!" Paul's voice cut through the air, sharp with outrage and tinged with panic. Apparently even he had not anticipated this turn of events.

"I suggest everyone step outside for a moment," came David's voice. He was trying to usher my allies out of harm's way.

"Hah! I won't allow it!" Baum shouted, his voice triumphant. "Do you think I'd let the son of the Demon King waltz in here and just let him go? Huh? Not a chance!"

The triumphant sneer in Baum's voice was unmistakable. His earlier façade had completely shattered.

"Lord Baum!" Paul protested, his voice rising in alarm. "The demons aboard the ship will not stand idly by!"

"Bwah ha ha ha! My soldiers are already on their way to the ship!" Baum roared, his tone dripping with mockery.

Another voice joined him, this one cold and calculated. It was Lateus of Fattoria. "This estate is sealed under the barrier of the Fattoria Holy Land's Magic Corps. No one will escape!"

A cry rang out—Paul's voice, filled with shock and pain, before abruptly cutting off.

"Maria, what's happening?" I asked.

"Lord Paul has been struck by Baum. He's unconscious."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes, but incapacitated. What are your orders?"

"What about the knights?"

"They've drawn their swords. They're pointing them at us," she reported calmly, though I could sense her urgency.

So, they made the first move. That's all I need to hear. Paul's our ally, and if our allies are attacked, then we respond in kind.

Just then, the radio crackled with another transmission.

"Lord Raul! Permission to speak?"

It was Gazzam, stationed aboard the ship.

"What is it?"

"The ship is surrounded," he said, his voice grim. "The enemy is armed with fire arrows, and there are mages among them."

"Understood. If the enemy initiates an attack, you have

permission to retaliate."

"Yes, my lord."

How convenient.

A straightforward enemy was far easier to deal with. If they had approached us with feigned diplomacy, it would have been more troublesome to stoke the fires. But now, they had handed me justification for retribution. Self-defense, after all, left no room for them to cry foul.

"Listen carefully," I said. "Everyone will synchronize their attacks."

"*Yes, sir!*" came the immediate responses from Maria, Gersham, Gazzam, and Lupia.

Before the fighting erupted, there was still an opportunity to extract as much information as possible. Through Maria, I would push Baum and Lateus further, gathering information even as the tension escalated.

Maria's voice suddenly cut through the radio. "Baum has drawn his sword!"

"They've fired the arrows!" Gazzam's voice came through.

"Enemy soldiers are entering the guesthouse!" Gersham reported from his surveillance point within the city.

"Copy that. All units, initiate the attack!"

"*Yes!*" came the collective response, as though they had been waiting for this very moment.

The fight had begun.

From the Ship

Fire arrows streaked through the night, raining down toward the ship. Gazzam, Gog, and Dal'ambah moved about, cutting each one from the air before they could land.

Moments later, five M61 Vulcan cannons emerged on the deck, each manned by a pair of dark elves.

Whirrrrr!

The cannons spun, and a storm of 20x102mm rounds poured down on the enemy.

A cacophony of screams erupted from the surrounding knights. Their magic barriers and the walls of the buildings they tried to hide behind were obliterated in an instant. The knights' bodies were shredded, leaving little more than red mist and their little pieces.

For the mages, there was no opportunity to counterattack. Their chants were cut short as they were torn apart, their bodies bursting like overripe fruit.

As if the cannons firing on them weren't enough, Gazzam, Gog, and Dal'ambah opened fire with M32 Multi-Shot Grenade Launchers. Fire swept across the docks and smoke billowed into the night sky.

"Cease fire!" Gazzam commanded. The cannons and grenade launchers fell silent, like the calm in the eye of a storm. The harbor had become unrecognizable, a field of carnage where it would have been difficult to find even a trace of the knights.

Gazzam issued the next orders. "The dark elf squad will hold the ship. Defend it at all costs! Gog, Dal'ambah, Mazul, with me. Our objective is the cave system beneath the city. Lord Raul's orders are clear: Eliminate any enemy soldiers we encounter. Stay sharp!"

"*Understood!*" they replied in unison.

On the deck, Mazul began to transform into his giant form. He let out a horrible scream as his body swelled and contorted. In moments, he stood eight meters tall. His lower half was covered in coarse, apelike hair, obscuring his unmentionables from view. He reached down and grabbed an M134 Minigun with each hand. These were massive guns that could fire four thousand 7.62x51mm rounds per minute. The twin Miniguns spun with a metallic whir as he leaped from the deck to the shore, landing with a ground-shaking thud. Gazzam, Gog, and Dal'ambah jumped down after him, their FN SCAR assault rifles at the ready. The four of them began running toward the caves.

From the Sky—Lupia

I was engaged in battle against humans for the first time. I flew through the night, scanning the ground below with my ENVG-B night

vision scope. It was surprising how vividly I could see the glowing outlines of mages and knights against the darkness.

"It's like they're right next to me," I whispered, marveling at the scope.

I aimed the M240 medium machine gun at the mages below. Lord Algarde's instructions had been simple: *Just aim for the targets and fire.* From my vantage point in the sky, hitting them shouldn't be a problem.

I was no soldier and had little experience with combat. Yet Lord Raul had told me something peculiar: *You're probably the one who uses my weapons most effectively.*

I didn't really understand what he meant...but loyalty demanded obedience. So I did as he had instructed.

Rat-a-tat-tat!

From the backpack-fed ammunition, the M240 unleashed a relentless torrent of bullets.

The bodies of the mages and knights crumpled below me.

"I'm scared," I muttered. "But...!"

I wanted to please Lord Raul. So I kept firing, raining bullets over the knights below.

I need to be thorough.

The knights and mages panicked, unable to understand how they were dying one after another. I could hear their panic.

"What's happening? Where's it coming from?"

"He's dead!"

"Run!"

"Where?"

"The mage is dead!"

"This will make Lord Raul happy!" I murmured. A smile came to my face as I continued to exterminate the enemy.

From the City—Gersham

I moved as one with Teela and Tappy, slipping from shadow to shadow. The guesthouse was now right in front of us, and we could

see the knights gathering and filing into the building. In my hands was an FN SCAR automatic rifle. Teela and Tappy were too small for rifles, so instead they carried H&K VP9 subcompact handguns.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

From the rooftop, Lord Raul dispatched a mage.

"He never misses his mark nor risks hitting an ally. Wreak havoc to your heart's content," I told my two goblin companions.

"Yes, sir!" they replied dutifully.

The two were brimming with excitement, eager to put their skills to use. A group of knights stood outside the guesthouse. The gunfire would have alerted them to the incoming attack.

Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

I neutralized several knights with my FN SCAR, then hurled an M26 grenade before slipping into cover. Peering briefly from behind the wall, I saw several knights writhing on the ground.

"Good! Let's move!" I called to the goblins crouching beside me.

"Yes, sir!"

We advanced to the front of the guesthouse. Any surviving knights were swiftly executed. I turned to the goblins and held up three fingers before counting down.

Three...

Two...

One...

We kicked the doors open and stormed inside. Teela immediately shot out the room's lamps, plunging the interior into darkness.

The knights inside immediately began to panic.

"What's happening?"

"The lights are out!"

"Light them up, quickly!"

Their confusion was short-lived as my bullets silenced them one by one. Teela and Tappy employed the hand-to-hand combat techniques taught to them by Maria, blending them seamlessly with their marksmanship. They dealt with the enemies scattered in the room and on the staircase.

I gave them final instructions. "Remember that Maria is human! If fighting breaks out, we don't know how long she'll last! Let's go!"

“Yes, sir!”

With that, the three of us pressed deeper into the mansion.

The sounds of battle echoed in my ears—the clash of my subordinates engaging the enemy. Their assault had begun in full, and I continued picking off mages with my rifle. Amidst the chaos, I noticed something strange happening to my body.

“The marks are appearing again.”

Tattoo-like patterns began to glow faintly across my skin. It was the same phenomenon I had experienced three years ago during the battle with the vampires.

“My weapons have gotten a taste of blood. The power is surging through me.”

As I murmured these words, Phantom stood silently at my side.

“All right, it’s our turn. You’ll be taking a weapon too.”

I summoned an M61 Vulcan for Phantom—a monstrous rotary cannon that, with its ammunition system, easily exceeded 300 kilograms. Yet Phantom hoisted it effortlessly as if it weighed nothing. Ordinarily, this kind of firepower was reserved for naval ships or fighter jets, but Phantom could carry it like an ordinary rifle.



I leaped to the roof of the next building. Phantom followed with the massive Vulcan cannon slung across his back. His strength was so absurd it felt like he was cheating. I decided to keep in mind that Phantom deserved a reward. Well, he was about to get the perfect one: He needed to consume human corpses, and we were about to create a ton of them.

"That will kill two birds with one stone, disposing of evidence and keeping his power levels up."

As the two of us moved through the shadows, our silhouettes were cast against the moonlit sky—the shadows of a boy with his monster. The hunt was just beginning.

From the Guesthouse

On the first floor of the guesthouse, the reception room was filled with soldiers from both the Holy Land of Fattoria and the Bargius Empire, surrounding Lateus and Baum. Lufra stood before them, while Maria, Sharmilia, and Maquina stood behind her. Sharmilia and Maquina looked visibly strained, suffering under the oppressive force of the barrier of light encasing the manor.

At their feet lay Paul, unconscious and sprawled on the floor. David crouched beside him, shielding his fallen master. The situation was far from favorable.

"No matter how powerful demons may be, within this chamber saturated with Rugan incense, you are utterly powerless," Baum shouted triumphantly, sneering at the group of demons. "Moreover, the entire mansion is enveloped in a barrier of light. You will not be escaping!"

"Wait, where have those men gone?" Lateus said, noticing the absence of Zieg and Slaga. "No matter. You're all trapped like rats in a cage now. How disgusting it is to see demons mimic human behavior. It makes me want to vomit."

It was clear Lateus would never allow demons to even exist.

Baum turned to a knight standing at the ready beside him. "Bring me my sword."

At Baum's command, the knight handed him a greatsword. Just as he gripped it, the sound of gunfire and explosions echoed from outside.

Rat-a-tat-tat! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Baum was the first to notice, stilling his hand as he listened closely.

"What's that? Magic?"

Lateus paused to listen carefully.

"Yes, something is happening outside. It must be our Magic Corps attacking the demons," Lateus said, a smug grin spreading across his face.

"Ha ha ha! Within this very building are not only myself, a former commander, but three elite captains each leading their own squads of seasoned warriors!" Baum preened, puffing out his chest, assured of his victory. "Beyond the city of Gladrom, a thousand soldiers lie in wait. Resistance is pointless! You have nowhere to run!"

Lateus nodded in agreement, adding with smug certainty, "And do not forget—outside the city walls stand the Holy Land's Magic Corps and Holy Knights, each one thousand strong. Against such overwhelming odds, what could a mere ten demons hope to achieve?"

While Baum and Lateus bellowed their threats at my subordinates within the guesthouse, Lupia and I were busy turning the surrounding soldiers and mages outside into corpses. Lupia in particular was relentless in her work, carrying out the slaughter with tireless zeal.

When the mages outside were dispatched, the barrier of light dissolved, allowing Sharmilia and Maquina to recover. Their return also restored my shared sight and hearing with Sharmilia, and through her vision, I caught sight of Baum's and Lateus's faces. Just then, something I heard over the radio stopped me cold—not the mention of the two thousand soldiers nor the overwhelming number of mages, but a single phrase Baum had let slip.

Baum had claimed to have brought along *three* captains.

I remembered all too well how those captains had pushed us to

the brink during the battle of Gladrom three years ago, yet I sensed no such power emanating from Baum. When I first met him, I could tell he wasn't ordinary, but I hadn't pegged him as someone who was a commander-level threat. Was someone stronger hiding among their soldiers?

"Captains? Magic Corps? Are they truly so formidable?"

Through Lufra's mimicry of my voice and form, I posed the question directly to Baum.

"Indeed! You demons are nothing to fear!" Baum roared his arrogant reply.

"Did those soldiers who came here three years ago also have captains among them?" Lufra asked.

"What?" Baum looked stunned momentarily before his face twisted in rage. "What do you know about what happened?!"

"I recall about a thousand soldiers back then. I'm asking if any captains were among them."

"Damn you! So you demons *were* the ones behind that!" Baum roared.

His grip on his sword tightened. In a flash, his blade struck, slicing through Lufra's torso in a single horizontal slash.

Through Sharmilia's shared vision, I watched as "I" was cleaved in two. The upper half crashed to the floor with a wet thud. But since Lufra was a slime, she was unfazed. The attack had no effect on her whatsoever, and I was perched safely on the roof of a neighboring house.

Lufra watched Baum from where her severed upper half lay on the floor. Lufra spoke again, her imitation of my voice eerily calm.

"Once more, I ask—were there any commanders among the soldiers back then?"

"What madness is this?! Even after being cut in half, you still speak?! Monster!" Baum said in disgust as he stared in disbelief at the impossible sight before him.

At that moment, Sharmilia, Maquina, and Maria sprang into action. Maria leaped gracefully into the midst of nearly twenty soldiers, her movements fluid and precise. Her P320 and Beretta 92 roared to life, and the knights fell one by one, bullets carving fatal

holes in their foreheads and temples.

Maquina followed, wielding her Desert Eagle with deadly efficiency, firing at point-blank range and tearing through heads and torsos alike. In an instant, all the knights and mages were eliminated, their bodies crumpling lifelessly to the floor.

Sharmilia appeared behind Baum, immobilizing him with an arm lock and pressing her razor-sharp claws against his neck. "When my master asks you a question, you will answer promptly."

"Guh! You... What are you?" Baum grunted out in pain.

Schk.

Sharmilia's claws pierced slightly into Baum's neck, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Ow! Wait! I'll talk! Yes, there was a captain! He was my friend—Gruis, the commander of the Fourth Battalion!"

As Baum stammered his response, Lufra's upper and lower halves reattached seamlessly. Rising to her feet, Lufra—still mimicking me—pressed further.

"I see. And what about *you*? How strong are you, really?"

"How are you—"

Schk.

Sharmilia's claws sank another five millimeters deeper.

"Gruis was Fourth Battalion!" Baum gasped. "The battalion rankings are based on strength! My battalion—the Eighth—is far below his!"

So, Phantom's original form was this Gruis, a captain ranked highly even among their forces. He must have been extraordinarily powerful. Still, Baum's words confirmed something unsettling: Bargius had stronger fighters that they had yet to reveal. I'd have to remain cautious.

"And there are only a thousand knights here from Bargius this time?"

"Yes! I'm not lying! But our soldiers are spread all throughout this country. You won't be safe anywhere!" he said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. "Even now, an elite squad headed by a captain is taking control of your ship!"

"I see. Understood," Lufra said. "That's all I needed, Sharmilia."

"Yes, master," she answered.

Thud.

Baum's head hit the floor, severed cleanly. A fountain of blood erupted from the stump of his neck.

"Ugh—aaahhh! No! Nooo!" Lateus shrieked in panic, stumbling as he tried to flee. But there was no one left to protect him. The soldiers meant to guard him were already gone.

"Lateus, I have questions for you as well. You'll answer, won't you?"

The words came from Lufra, still wearing my guise. Lateus nodded furiously, his face deathly pale.

"How many of the soldiers here from Fattoria are members of the Magic Corps?"

"Th-That is..."

Sharmilia fixed him with a cold glare.

"Eek! A-All right, just don't kill me! Three hundred! There are three hundred members of the Magic Corps!"

"I see. And how strong are the Holy Knights?"

"They aren't on par with Bargius's captains, but there are strong ones among them! A-And they'll be here soon! If you harm me, they won't let you escape!"

"Are there others stationed here?"

"Yes! Our allies are spread throughout the country! There's nowhere to run...but I-I can negotiate for you! If you spare me, I'll make sure they show you mercy! Your positions, your lives, they'll all be guaranteed!"

It seemed there was no further useful information to extract.

"Sharmilia, that's enough."

Thud.

Lateus's head rolled to the floor, his lifeless body collapsing in a pool of blood.

Baum, you bastard! I hadn't expected him to strike out at "me" so suddenly. Poor Lufra, I'll need to apologize to her later...not that this even fazed her.

From the rooftop where Phantom and I were perched, I could see Lupia overhead, raining machine-gun fire from above. For now, I'd

leave the area around the guesthouse to her. Baum had proven to be underwhelming, and Lateus had just been some petty noble from Fattoria.

Was this really the extent of their strength? Something isn't right...

"All right! The situation in the guesthouse has been cleared up, but it'll be troublesome if the building catches fire. Let's go to its roof!"

I leaped first, landing on top of the guesthouse. Phantom followed closely, springing into the air with his massive frame.

Crash!

A thunderous impact echoed as Phantom's landing punched a hole straight through the roof, sending him crashing into the interior. I tried to balance myself but ended up tumbling through the hole after him.

The two of us plummeted through to the second floor, cracks snaking out through the floor as Phantom made impact. I landed on top of him. It was no surprise that he had smashed through the ceiling—he was carrying the M61 Vulcan, complete with its mount, battery, and ammo cases strapped to his back. The combined weight was several hundred kilograms. The neighboring room had been some distance away, so the force of his landing had been enough for the roof to give way.

"I heard a loud noise over here!" a voice called out.

The sound of pounding footsteps was fast approaching.

I looked around the room, taking in our current situation, then pointed at one of the walls. "Phantom, break through that wall."

Phantom charged at a full sprint. With a deafening *crash*, the wall gave way, leaving a gaping hole. I followed through the opening, only to see soldiers rushing at us from both ends of the hallway.

"Phantom, kill them."

A high-pitched whine filled the air as the M61 Vulcan began to spin.

Ratatatatatatatata!

The Vulcan roared to life, unleashing a torrent of destruction. The soldiers were shredded in an instant, their bodies obliterated into

clouds of blood and smoke. The rounds tore through walls, blasting a straight path through the hallway and piercing all the way through to the outside.

"Carrying an M61 Vulcan by hand... Only Phantom could pull that off," I muttered to myself. Even if I already knew what he was capable of, it was still impressive to see.

I turned to the soldiers rushing from the opposite direction and opened fire with my Barrett M82 rifle.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Bang, bang, bang!

Each shot obliterated its target, smashing the soldiers' heads down to their collarbones.

"All right! Let's head down," I called to Phantom.

The sound of gunfire had drawn reinforcements, and soldiers began storming up the staircase. Phantom turned the M61 Vulcan on them, and its heavy rounds ripped through the oncoming troops. They erupted into a bloody fog.

"My body feels like it's on fire," I said.

As all of my subordinates wielded their summoned weapons, a massive surge of magical energy flowed back into me. My muscles felt as if they were expanding, and strength was coursing through me.

When we reached the first floor, I saw Gersham, Teela, and Tappy rushing toward us.

"Lord Raul! The first floor has already been secured. Only servants and other noncombatants remain," Gersham reported.

"That was quick work," I said, impressed.

I flung open the doors to the dining hall with a resounding *bang!* The room was littered with enemy corpses. Standing amidst the carnage were Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, and Lufra. The air was thick with a cloyingly sweet scent.

"Gersham!" I said, alarmed. "There's poison in here! Get Teela and Tappy outside immediately!"

"Yes, sir!" he answered before quickly turning and ushering them outside.

The room reeked of Rugan incense. Slaga and Zieg poked their heads out from a nearby bathroom.

"You two need to get out too!" I told them.

"Yes, sir!"

With that, all demons had been safely removed from the incense's danger.

I quickly walked into the room the rest of my companions were in, and took in the situation. "David, are you all right?"

He looked up in surprise from where he was hovering over Paul's unconscious form. "Y-Yes, but...Lord Raul? There are two of you?"

"Ah, that's right. You can return to normal now, Lufra."

"Yes, Lord Algarde."

With a soft *plop*, Lufra shifted back into her original form: an adorable young woman with light blue hair.

"What...is this?" David's eyes widened at the sight of Lufra's transformation.

"She's my body double," I replied.

"I am constantly astounded by the things that happen around you, Lord Raul," David muttered.

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness struck me, and I nearly collapsed.

"Master Raul!"

"Master!"

"Lord Algarde!"

Maria, Sharmilia, and Lufra all called out at once, rushing to support me as I swayed unsteadily. Their arms caught me before I could fall.

"This smell...it's too much for me. I think I'm being affected by the poison," I said, shaking my head.

"We need to get you out, quickly!" Maria exclaimed.

"Yes, lingering here any longer would be unwise," agreed Sharmilia, holding me steady.

"Agreed," I said.

But before that, I had to wake Paul.

"Sharmilia, wake him up!"

"At once."

Sharmilia lifted Paul's limp body and gave him a gentle shake.

"Ugh... Hmmm?" he mumbled groggily.

"Paul!" I called to him. "Are you all right?"

He looked up at me and his eyes widened. “Ah, Lord Raul! Please forgive me! This is all such a mess!”

I offered him a reassuring smile to calm him.

“Paul, are there any servants or maids still in the building?”

He looked around, still trying to gain his bearings. “Yes, they should be in the kitchen or the waiting rooms.”

I looked at my companions. “Sharmilia, Maquina, Lufra, bring everyone still inside this building to the entrance, and have them bring out the food that was prepared for today.”

“Yes, master,” they replied in unison, swiftly moving to carry out my orders.

Shortly afterward, all the servants and staff in the guesthouse were gathered in the entrance hall.

“Paul, please sort the locals of Gladrom from those of other nations.”

“Yes, of course. This one, and this one...” he said, pointing out which individuals were from Gladrom.

Paul methodically sorted the groups—fifteen from Gladrom, and twenty from Bargius and Fattoria. The foreign servants ranged in age from a boy of about fourteen to a man well into his sixties. They wore a variety of uniforms, from maid dresses to formal suits.

It was time for me to begin my part.

“Lord Paul and Minister David, please take Gladrom’s citizens and evacuate them to somewhere safe.”

“Y-Yes!” Paul stammered.

I turned to the Gladrom servants. “I deeply regret the suffering you’ve endured. Please, get to safety.”

“Thank you!” the citizens replied in unison, relieved.

I turned to my companions. “Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, and Phantom, you four stay with me. Everyone else, escort the citizens of Gladrom and ensure they reach their destination safely!”

“Yes, sir!” they answered in unison.

Gersham, Zieg, Slaga, Teela, Tappy, and Lufra left the guesthouse, accompanying Paul, David, and the citizens to safety.

That left me, the twenty servants from Bargius and Fattoria, and my selected group behind. I stepped forward and began to speak

calmly.

"Well, then, citizens of the Bargius Empire and the Holy Land of Fattoria, you've done your jobs well."

The remaining servants erupted into a cacophony of confusion, their voices rising in panic and uncertainty.

"Wh-What is this?"

"Who are you?"

"What happened to Lord Baum?"

"What's going on here?"

"Ah, I apologize for the abruptness," I said, offering them a smile. "You see, the meal prepared here is no longer needed. So, please, go ahead and enjoy it yourselves...as a thank-you for your hard work."

At my words, a moment of stunned silence filled the room.

"What's the matter?" I asked, still smiling. "This is a rare feast—enjoy it while it's still warm! I'm sure the ingredients used here are of the finest quality. You might not get another chance to taste something like it."

A nervous murmuring spread among the Bargian servants, their unease growing as they exchanged glances.

"Well, this food was meant for important guests..."

"We're just humble servants. It wouldn't be right for us to eat it."

"Yes, it was prepared for the demon guests who were expected today."

"I see, I see. That's fair. This meal was prepared for someone important, after all. But it would be such a waste to throw it away," I said, gesturing to the food. I glanced over the group and pointed to a girl who looked to be the youngest among them. "You there, with the braids. How old are you?"

"Fourteen," she answered.

"And what sort of work do you do?"

"My job is to carry the prepared dishes and clear away the plates."

"Then I suppose fine cuisine like this isn't something you get to enjoy often, is it? How about you try some? Just a little taste. You've never eaten such an expensive meal, have you? There's no need to

hold back. Go ahead and have some."

"Are you sure it's all right?" she asked hesitantly.

"Please, by all means."

"Th-Thank you. Then...I will."

The girl picked up a fork and reached out, preparing to take a bite. And just as the fork neared her lips— A butler with a white beard, appearing to be around sixty years old, struck the young girl's hand, making her drop the fork in surprise. "Don't touch that!"

"Ah!" The girl gasped, her wide eyes darting between the butler and me.

"Hm? Why stop her? I gave her permission. She can eat if she wants," I said.

"N-No! This food was meant for the young heir of the demon kingdom!" said the butler in a panic.

"Oh," I said, letting the pause linger for a moment. "I suppose I didn't mention it, did I? That would be *me*."

The room froze, the servant's faces turning pale as they began to tremble. Only the fourteen-year-old girl remained unaffected, her expression one of innocent confusion as she blinked at me, wide-eyed.

"Well, you're free to go, then," I said, addressing the girl. "Run and catch up with the others who left earlier. It's a shame you won't get to taste this meal, but I'm sure another chance will come."

"Y-Yes, sir," she stuttered. She cast a regretful glance at the untouched food; then, with a quick bow, she turned and ran out of the guesthouse.

"Now then," I said, turning my attention back to the remaining group. "Is there anyone here who's not from Bargius or Fattoria?"

"N-No," the elderly servant stammered. "We're all from Bargius or Fattoria."

"Really? That girl who just left—she seemed to have an accent."

"Ah, yes. She's originally from Eucrit," the butler admitted nervously.

I had thought so. Her accent and facial features had immediately brought Eucrit to mind.

"Strange. Why is there a single servant from Eucrit among you?" I

asked.

"I'm not sure. She just ended up being added to the group at some point," the butler replied.

"Fine. It doesn't matter anyway. Now, *you* eat the food," I said, pointing directly at him.

"I... I cannot."

"Yes, you can. Come here and eat."

The old man, dressed in a morning coat, approached hesitantly, trembling as he walked.

"U-Uh..."

"Now, eat."

Reluctantly, he picked up a fork. But the moment he gripped it, his demeanor shifted. The fork suddenly turned toward me in a sharp, calculated thrust—an attempt to stab me!

Bang!

The next moment, the old man collapsed backward, a hole punched cleanly through his forehead. Maria stood with her Beretta 92 raised, smoke curling from the barrel.

"Why try to kill me with a fork?" I said in faux confusion, glancing down at the lifeless body.

The remaining servants screamed in terror, their cries filling the room.

"Well, I guess there's no helping it. Next." I turned to a woman who carried herself with an air of self-importance. "You there! Yes, you."

"Y-Yes!" she said, stepping forward.

"Eat."

"O-Of course! Right away!"

Her hands quaked as she picked up a fork, stabbing it into the food. But even as she lifted it toward her mouth, she hesitated, her whole body frozen in fear. I took out a pistol and calmly pressed it to her forehead, right between her brows. She gasped sharply, then, with no other choice, shoved the food into her mouth. Her jaw worked furiously as she chewed and finally swallowed.

"G-Gah... Urghhhh!"

The woman suddenly convulsed, blood and vomit pouring from

her mouth as she collapsed to the floor. Blood sprayed from her eyes and ears, her body writhing violently in agony. Moments later, she went still, her lifeless form sprawled in a growing pool of crimson that seeped from her lower body as well.

I watched with disgust.

What kind of poison is *this? Such a grotesque way to die.*

"And what's the meaning of this?" I demanded, narrowing my eyes at the remaining servants.

"We— We had no choice!" one of them cried out, their voice quaking with fear. "It was our job!"

"Your job? To serve this poison?"

"Yes! We were ordered to prepare and serve it. I heard that this same poison was brought to Gladrom by the soldiers sent three years ago."

So, this was it—the same poison that had wreaked havoc on Galdzin's body. I was thankful that we had caught on before any of us had taken a bite.

"You were ordered to serve this to us?" I asked.

"By Lord Baum! We were ordered to do it!"

The response came from a sharp-featured man who looked like a servant. He spoke with an air of desperation.

"Oh? You say it was your job..." I let the words hang in the air, stepping closer. "Yes, I suppose it was a job. I suppose, then, if it's your *job*, that makes it fine to kill my family, doesn't it?"

"That's not—"

Bang!

Maria's gun fired before the man could finish, and he crumpled to the floor, lifeless.

That should make the point clear enough. After witnessing this, the rest wouldn't dare try something like this again.

"Well then, I suppose the rest of you don't have to eat it," I said.

The remaining servants let out audible sighs of relief, their tension melting away as they slumped slightly.

"We're deeply sorry for what we've done," one said.

"Sharmilia! Maquina! Help Phantom clean up the guesthouse. Make it spotless."

"As you wish," they responded in unison.

"Oh, one more thing—would the corpse of one who's been poisoned still be safe for Phantom to absorb?"

"Poison has no effect on him at all," Sharmilia answered.

"Is that so? Good."

"Thank you," the vampires said in unison. Smiles formed on their faces as they took Phantom and disappeared deeper into the guesthouse to begin disposing of any evidence.

As Maria and I stepped out of the guesthouse, Lupia descended from the sky to meet us.

"Lord Raul! I've gotten much better at killing!" she announced with an angelic smile.

"Incredible work, Lupia!"

"Thank you!" she said, giving a little fist pump in her excitement.

In a world without aerial combat, the combination of a flying demon and firearms was a devastating force. Even a weaker demon like a harpy, when armed with a gun, could become an overwhelmingly powerful asset.

"All right, let's rendezvous with the units that disembarked from the ship," I said to her.

"Yes, master!"

Just as we prepared to move, my radio crackled to life.

"This is Gazzam."

"What's the situation?"

"Mazul has been injured."

"What do you mean? What happened?" I asked.

"Their Magic Corps launched a full-scale attack at us. His injuries are serious," he added in a grim tone.

The news hit me hard. I hadn't been fully prepared for the sheer number of Fattoria's Magic Corps, and that meant I had left Mazul open to their assault. A giant's body was an easy target for their spells. Mazul had paid the price for *my* oversight.

Gazzam interrupted my thoughts. "They're still focusing their magical attacks on us. If you're coming, be careful!"

"Where are you?"

“We’re pinned down at the rock wall beyond the square, past the port,” Gazzam replied, his voice tense.

I’d ordered Gazzam to regroup with us at the cave after his group had fended off attacks on the ship. There was a reason for this—three years ago, when we had been forced to flee Gladrom, I left something behind in that cave. Though I had planned to retrieve it, it seemed the magic corps had set up an ambush.

The items I had hidden there were the fangs and scales of a Red Venom Viper, along with a massive magic stone. When I mentioned this to King Lusemia, she’d said that such dangerous artifacts couldn’t be left unattended, and tasked me with recovering them.

“Gazzam, can you retreat from your position?”

“We could, but only if we’re prepared to take heavy fire.”

“Then stay put.”

“Yes, sir.”

Switching frequencies, I contacted Anamis, who had been sent to the main gate alone.

“Anamis, I’m sorry for sending you off on your own.”

Her response came soon after. “No need to apologize, Lord Raul. I’ve taken care of things here without any issues.”

“What’s your status?”

“The two hundred soldiers stationed near the main gate have all been put to sleep.”

The sheer power of a succubus was undeniable. While their allies had been slaughtered in the guesthouse, the soldiers outside were left to dream sweet dreams.

“Understood. I’ll send reinforcements your way shortly. Any other movements?”

“None so far,” she answered, then added, “but there is one thing...”

“What is it?”

“May I take some essence from the sleeping soldiers?”

“Of course. Take as much as you like.”

“Thank you.”

It had been some time since Anamis had been in human lands, and it seemed she had been eagerly awaiting this opportunity.

Sharmilia and Maquina had also been in high spirits, and Phantom finally had the chance to replenish his energy as well.

Just then, I got a message over my connection to Sharmilia.

Speak of the devil...

"Master, Phantom has finished feeding," Sharmilia reported.

"That was fast!" I exclaimed. "Already done? I thought there were enough in the guesthouse to keep you busy for a while!"

"Yes, and there's no one left to stand against you."

I should have expected as much. I hadn't given specific orders about sparing anyone, after all. No point dwelling on it—it was time to move to the next task.

"Sharmilia, I have another task for you. Could you raise the bodies outside as zombies and send them to the main gate?"

"As you command."

A low, guttural sound filled the air around us as the lifeless knights and mages began to twitch and move.

Uuugh... Ahh... A-Ahh...

One by one, the corpses rose as zombies, staggering to their feet and shuffling toward the main gate. That seemed like enough as far as reinforcements went, for the time being.

I connected to my radio again and contacted Gersham, who was escorting Paul and the others.

"Gersham? What's the status over there?"

"We're about to arrive at Lord Paul's estate."

"Before you enter, have Zieg, Teela, and Tappy sweep the building to make sure it's secure. Only let Paul and the servants inside once it's safe."

"Understood."

Next, I summoned a McMillan TAC-50 sniper rifle and attached an FWS-S night vision scope to it.

"Use this, Maria."

I connected the scope with her ENVG-B night vision goggles using my magical augmentation. "It will be easier to see with these augmented."

"Got it," Maria replied, taking the rifle and fitting the goggles securely over her eyes.

I then summoned a military-grade emergency stretcher.

"Sharmilia, Maquina—can you carry Maria on this as you're flying?"

"Yes, master," they replied.

"Good. Position her above the battlefield for sniping," I instructed them. "Gazzam's team is pinned at the rock wall near the southern square. We need to neutralize the Fattoria Magic Corps to rescue them."

I turned to Maria. "Take out the mages one by one. Make sure you're out of range of their magic."

"Yes, master," Maria responded.

"Lupia, take off your backpack and swap it with this one. It has full ammo," I said, summoning a new backpack and replacing Lupia's nearly empty one.

I turned back to Maria. "Maria, eliminate the Magic Corps!"

"Yes!"

"A word of warning: The mages Gazzam is facing are likely a diversion. I suspect that the enemy's main force is positioned above the cliff. If you see soldiers stationed on the cliff, prioritize taking them out first. Breaking their formation will allow us to neutralize the ground forces. Once the enemies on the cliff are cleared, Lupia will sweep through the remaining ground units with the M240 machine gun. Any questions?"

"None," Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina, and Lupia replied in unison.

I contacted Gazzam over the radio again.

"What's the situation now?"

"The attacks have ceased. They appear to be waiting for us to make a move."

"Hold your position until we silence the Magic Corps."

"Understood!"

As I ended the call, a report from Gersham came through.

"We found four enemy sentries at Lord Paul's estate and swiftly eliminated them. Everyone has been escorted safely inside. What are your next orders?"

"Good. Stay hidden in the shadows of the easternmost house until we've finished our attack. Once the area is secure, retrieve the

wounded Mazul and bring him to Paul's estate. Is Paul nearby?"

"Yes."

"Put him on."

"Lord Raul!" Paul's voice came over the radio, full of relief. "We've made it safely! Thank you for your help!"

"There's no need to thank me. I'm glad you're safe. But I have a favor to ask of you—one of my men has been injured. We'll rescue him shortly and bring him to your estate. Can we count on you to provide treatment?"

"Of course! I'll arrange everything. Should I bring a priest from the church as well?"

"Do that," I said, and waited for Gersham to be put back on. "Gersham, you and Zieg escort Paul to the church and bring back a priest."

"Yes, sir!"

I switched the radio so I was now speaking to all of my comrades. "Now, we begin the operation!"

"Yes, sir!"

I took off running at full speed. The weapons I'd summoned had tasted the blood of many enemies. My strength and speed had now reached their full potential. I sprinted at incredible speed, covering the distance to the southern cliffs in moments.

I clicked my radio on again. "Maria, move to start firing on the enemies on the cliff!"

From the Sky—Maria

I lay prone on a stretcher suspended in the night sky, carried by Sharmilia and Maquina. A belt tied around my waist kept me steady to the floating craft.

Soon, Lord Raul's orders came over the radio. "Maria, move to start firing on the enemies on the cliff!"

"Sharmilia, lower the front a little," I asked.

"Like this?"

The angle shifted, and suddenly the entire battlefield below came

into view.

"Perfect. I can see the soldiers along the cliff, just as Master Raul predicted."

"Then we'll hold this position," Sharmilia replied.

"Thank you, Sharmilia. Time to begin. Hold me steady."

From my position on the stretcher, I steadied the McMillan TAC-50 sniper rifle and fired.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!

Even from this unstable perch in the dark sky, I had no intention of missing a single shot. One after the other, each bullet found its mark, piercing through the heads of mages who had erected the barrier. Their fireballs and lightning bolts died with them, crumpling before they could unleash their magic.

I switched my radio on. "Lupia, the mages have been silenced. Commence your machine-gun sweep."

"Understood."

With my order, Lupia descended farther, angling her M240 medium machine gun toward the ground. Through the ENVG-B night vision goggles, I watched as the glowing silhouettes of soldiers scattered like panicked spiders. But there was nowhere to hide from death coming from above.

Ratatatatatatatata!

The M240 roared to life, and the bullets tore through the fleeing soldiers.

The knights and mages were in disarray, their voices shaking with panic as they died without even knowing the source of the attack.

"What's happening?!"

"They're all dead!"

"We're being slaughtered!"

"Run for your lives!"

The echoes of Maria's and Lupia's attacks filled the air as Phantom and I reached our designated position. Ahead of us, the mages were visibly shaken, their movements hurried and clumsy as they struggled to respond to the chaos.

"Maria?" I called into the radio. "Can you see the ones hiding

behind the rocks?”

“Yes. I can see them clearly,” came her reply.

“Take care of them.”

“Understood.”

Another mage fell, their head pierced cleanly by Maria’s shot. The body crumpled without so much as a sound.

“What’s happening?!”

“They’re dead!”

“Hey, someone’s attacking us!”

“This... This is magic! Fight *back* with magic!”

“Where’s it coming from?!”

“Raise a barrier!”

As the remaining mages scrambled to cast defensive spells, Maria’s rifle fired again and again, cutting them down before their magic could materialize.

“All right,” I muttered. “Time for me to join the fray.”

The mages were huddled behind a narrow rock formation, hoping the terrain would shield them. But their fear and confusion had left them paralyzed. With their positions identified, I summoned an M224 60mm mortar.

“Let’s see... At that range, this angle should do it,” I murmured, adjusting the mortar.

I loaded a shell and fired.

Shwoop! Boom!

The round arced through the air, landing with a resounding explosion.

“Missed by five meters,” I said to myself. “Let’s adjust that.”

I fired again.

Shwoop! Boom!

A direct hit.

“Perfect.”

I reloaded the mortar.

Shwoop! Boom! Shwoop! Boom!

The shells rained down in quick succession. Flames and smoke engulfed the enemy’s position until I could no longer see them.

“Master Raul!” Maria’s voice came through the radio. “The smoke

is too thick. I can't tell where they are anymore."

"Ah, sorry. That's my fault."

"What are your orders?"

"Hold for now," I said, switching the channel to Teela, Tappy, and Slaga.

"Teela, report your location."

"We're in position, my lord," Teela answered.

"Good. There's no sign of a magical counterattack. Get to Gazzam's location with Slaga and regroup there."

"Understood!"

I turned my attention to rescuing Mazul.

"Maria, Sharmilia, Maquina—descend on my position."

"Yes, master!" they replied in unison, and arrived moments later.

"Maquina, go with Phantom. Locate the enemy's position and confirm if there are any survivors."

"Understood."

"Be cautious," I warned. "Immediately kill anything that moves."

"Yes, master."

Maquina and Phantom advanced into the smoldering remnants of the enemy's position. Not long after, Gazzam's voice came over the radio.

"Teela and Tappy have arrived. We don't see any signs of incoming attacks."

"Good. Teela, Tappy—escort Mazul to Paul's estate immediately."

"Yes, my lord!"

"Gazzam, Gog, Dal'ambah," I continued, "join Maquina and Phantom at the enemy's position."

"Yes, sir!"

Maquina's voice came through again.

"Master Raul, reinforcements are unnecessary."

"What's the situation?"

"The mages are no longer a threat," Maquina replied. "Most are dead. Their bodies are unrecognizable."

"Understood. Gazzam, Gog, Dal'ambah, Slaga—rendezvous at my position."

"Yes, my lord."

And so the operation to safely extract Mazul ended in resounding success.

Chapter Five: Something Strange

"Sharmilia, doesn't this all feel a bit too easy?" I asked. "I thought that there'd be more to it."

"I agree, my lord. Compared to the trap laid by the Bargius Empire three years ago, this situation does feel too simple. With the Fattoria Magic Corps involved this time, it stands to reason that we should be facing far greater resistance."

I contemplated that for a moment. "There's something I've been worried about. Can you take me up into the sky?"

"As you wish."

Sharmilia wrapped her arms around me, and we ascended into the night sky. It was when we had reached a vantage point high above Gladrom that I saw it.

What... What is that?

"A magic circle..." I murmured.

An enormous magic circle spanned the entirety of Gladrom, faintly glowing with magical energy.

"It's glowing, yet there are no mages around it," I said, bewildered.

And the size—was this not *too* big for a magic circle?

"What could this possibly...?" Sharmilia asked.

It was likely some sort of trap. But what exactly would happen when it triggered? My instincts screamed that we were standing on the precipice of something catastrophic.

"Sharmilia! Take me down to Paul now!"

"Understood!"

We plunged back toward Gladrom, slicing through the ink-black sky.

When we landed, I quickly called for my subordinates to gather.

"Listen up, everyone! We need to rendezvous with Gersham and Zieg immediately!"

"Yes, my lord!"

I contacted the two of them, who were escorting the priests from the church.

"Where are you now?"

"En route to Lord Paul's manor with the priests in tow!" answered Gersham's voice over the radio.

"Don't return to the manor!" I ordered.

"What?"

"Hold your position where you are!"

"Understood!"

Next, I contacted Teela and Tappy.

"Teela! What's the situation?"

"We're headed to Paul's manor with Mazul."

"Don't go there! Take Mazul back to the ship!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Teela and Tappy pivoted, guiding Mazul to the ship. I then switched channels and reached out to Lufra.

"Lufra, stop watching Paul's manor and join Gersham!"

"What about the manor's servants?" came Lufra's voice.

"I'm more concerned about you! Just get moving!"

"Understood!"

Lufra, who had been stationed outside the manor with a machine gun, began sprinting in my direction.

I switched channels again, this time to contact Anamis at the gate.

"Anamis! Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

"Abandon your post. Enter Gladrom and join Gersham!"

"Understood. But what about the knights here? Some might awaken."

"Leave them to Sharmilia's zombies! Now hurry!"

"Yes!"

Finally, I contacted the dark elves aboard the ship.

"Teela and Tappy will arrive shortly with Mazul. Be ready for them!"

"As you command!"

"Once Mazul is aboard, set sail immediately. Head as far out to sea as possible!"

"Understood!" they answered without hesitation.

By the time I completed my commands, Sharmilia and I had descended to where Paul awaited. Gersham and Zieg stood guard over three priests, whose expressions betrayed their shock at our sudden arrival. Paul, too, hurried toward us.

"Lord Raul! What's happened?"

"There's no time. I have questions for you, Paul."

"Ask me anything, my lord."

"While I was in the Land of Demons, was Gladrom at peace?"

Paul blanched at the question.

"No, my lord. Far from it. I failed to protect this land. Beautiful women, strong men, even innocent children—they were all taken away by Fattoria or Bargius."

His face flushed with anger and his fists clenched tightly, tears threatening to spill from his eyes.

"I see. Then what of this letter?"

I reached into my pocket and produced a folded parchment, the one David had slipped to me aboard the ship.

"Where did you get this?" Paul asked in shock.

"David gave it to me."

"But, this... This isn't my handwriting. I didn't write this."

I sighed. "As I suspected."

"David gave this to you?"

"He did," I answered. "And the more I observed Lateus and Baum, the more I could feel that something was off."

Paul fell silent, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Lord Raul, Gladrom has suffered unspeakable oppression. Those taken have never returned, and those who remained have lived in torment. I've sent letters to the Land of Demons in secret, smuggling them aboard ships. Did you never receive them?"

"No, I haven't. I'd been led to believe that Gladrom was thriving under our protection."

Paul's eyes widened. "Thriving? Nothing could be further from the truth."

One of the priests, pale and trembling, stepped forward.

"Lord Paul, what does this mean?"

"I... I don't know, Father Cruz," Paul replied, his voice strained.

"Greetings, Lord Raul," the priest said, bowing. "I am Callisto Cruz, formerly of the Kingdom of Rashtal."

"Please, speak," I said.

He lifted his face. "Rashtal is now under the control of Fattoria and Bargius. The royal family and soldiers were slaughtered, and it now suffers under a tyrannical dictatorship. But because Gladrom serves as a gateway to the Land of Demons, Lord Paul was allowed to live."

"So Rashtal fell too..."

"Yes," the priest continued. "And since then, we've never known peace. I escaped to Gladrom and have served as a priest under Lord Paul's protection."

I stood silently, taking in the information.

Then, I asked, "And what of the Kingdom of Schladen?"

"Likely the same, I fear. Its lands were engulfed in war when last I heard. I fled before I learned of its fate."

So David has been intercepting Paul's letters? But why? Why would the man who administered Gladrom do such a thing?

I turned to the former king. "Paul, were you planning to rise up with us against our enemies?"

"I wouldn't have decided without consulting you. But this letter—it reads as though rebellion was imminent."

I smiled bitterly. "The writing was clever. Even I was fooled at first. But something about it...just didn't sit right."

Paul looked distraught. "But why would David do this?"

There was no time to untangle the mystery further.

I put the letter away. "More importantly, we're facing an emergency."

"What should we—" Paul began, but was cut off as reinforcements began to arrive.

From the west came Anamis. From the east, Gazzam, Gog, and Dal'ambah, along with the towering figure of Slaga in his giant form. Lufra approached from Paul's manor, while Maria, atop Phantom's

shoulders, came with Maquina from the southern walls. Above, Lupia descended gracefully from the skies.

"Looks like everyone made it. That's good..."

The demons stood at attention, awaiting my orders.

"Sharmilia, Maquina, and I will head to Paul's manor to confront David. The rest of you, arm yourselves and leave through the city gates. If enemy soldiers approach, kill them."

"Yes, my lord!"

"Carry me there, Sharmilia!" I said.

"A-At once," Sharmilia stuttered.

Moments later, Sharmilia, Maquina, and I arrived at Paul's manor. There, collapsed at the entrance, lay a young girl—the one from Eucrit who I had allowed to escape.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" I asked, approaching her.

"Young master..." she said. She looked dazed as I helped her sit up. "I-I got separated from the others and lost my way. I finally found Lord Paul's manor, but they wouldn't let me inside."

"What happened?"

"I-I'm not sure... Something struck me, and when I woke up, I was here."

Was she turned away because she wasn't from Fattoria or Bargius?

When I pushed open the grand doors of Paul's manor, a pungent scent—*Rugan incense*—immediately assaulted my senses.

"Master! This is—" Sharmilia gasped.

Sharmilia, Maquina, and I froze in place, caught off guard by the unexpected development. Before we could react, a brilliant light flared, encircling the entire manor.

"Damn it!"

The smell of Rugan incense filled the air, forcing me to my knees. Sharmilia and Maquina looked like they were suffering from the barrier of light, their breathing labored.

A booby trap...

"What's wrong, my lord?!" asked the girl in a panic.

"Gah!" I gasped in pain as the poisonous air thickened, filling the space within the barrier.

"Wh-What should I do?! I'll fetch someone immediately!" the girl stammered, her voice trembling.

I grabbed her arm. "W-Wait! You're not affected?"

"Yes, I'm fine!"

"Then...could you search the manor for us?"

"O-Of course, right away." The girl nodded and disappeared inside. I struggled to reach for my radio to relay the situation, but a message from Maria came through first.

"Lord Raul! A massive enemy force is advancing on the city from outside! Countless torches light the night!"

"Damn it!"

The timing was perfect. This must have been their plan all along.

"They have mages among their ranks!" Maria reported.

The gears in my mind spun at full speed.

"Pull everyone inside the walls for now! Tell Slaga to stay out of sight—don't let him be targeted in his giant form! Lupia, you're not to take flight either!"

Under these circumstances, Maria's sniper rifle will be invaluable.

"Maria, get to the top of the walls and start picking them off!" I continued. "Hold them back as long as you can! Gah—"

I coughed violently, blood spilling from my mouth.

"Lord Raul! What's happening?!" Maria asked.

"It's nothing!" I forced out. "Just hold them off until I get there! Do you understand?!"

"Yes, master!"

I coughed again, bringing up more blood. The poison was spreading through my body, clawing at me from within.

This poison even took out Galdzin and his subordinates. I shouldn't be surprised it's this strong.

That's when I noticed something strange: The central square of the city was starting to glow red. Turning toward the source, I saw a massive *magic stone* floating above Gladrom, its energy pouring into the giant magic circle that encompassed the city.

They can even be used like this? Now I understand why King Lusemia calls them dangerous.

Gladrom was completely bathed in an eerie crimson glow.

I coughed again, violently.

"Master! Master!" Sharmilia cried out.

"Sharmilia," I said, trying to remain calm, "it seems the poison has gotten to me."

She walked toward me slowly, like she was in great pain. "I will save you! Even if it costs me my very existence!"

"W-Wait! Don't you dare!"

"But master!" Her voice quivered as she clung to me. I needed her to calm down.

I coughed again, spewing blood.

"Master!" Sharmilia cried.

Maquina spoke up. "If anyone must perish, it will be me! As long as Lady Sharmilia lives—"

"No! Absolutely not!" I barked, my voice hoarse. "I need you both. Calm down... Just give me a moment to think!"

Another cough brought up more blood, but my mind remained sharp. The poison seemed to target my demonic half, rapidly draining my magical energy. If I were fully demon, I likely wouldn't even be conscious now. It was only my human half that kept me moving.

I silently gave thanks for my hybrid body.

"You two need to escape the barrier immediately!" I commanded.

"I care not for myself! As long as you survive, master, nothing else matters!"

"Enough, both of you! Stay calm. I'll be fine!"

Sharmilia and Maquina were clearly struggling; the barrier's light was sapping their strength, leaving them nearly immobilized.

Are they turning to ash?

Just then, the braided girl returned, panting.

"No one is inside!" she exclaimed.

That stopped me cold. "No one? At all?"

"Yes, the entire manor is empty."

I narrowed my eyes. "Y-You... What's your name?"

"Catherine," she replied.

"Catherine, tell me the real reason they wouldn't let you into the manor earlier."

Catherine hesitated. “P-Perhaps because...they realized I’m actually a noble,” she said quietly.

“A noble?”

“Yes. To avoid being killed, someone helped me hide my identity. I’ve been living among the townspeople as an ordinary girl,” she said, lowering her gaze. “I was even able to disguise myself and join a group of servants headed for Gladrom.”

“And you think they found out?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly. “I’d told a few other servants who I trusted.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then why are you being so honest with *me*?”

She looked down. “I-I don’t know. I just feel like I can trust you.”

I sighed. “Well, we can discuss this more later.”

The immediate priority was to get out of this trap and regroup with the others.

I spoke into the radio again. “Maria! Do you read me?”

“Yes, loud and clear!”

Fortunately, the magical barrier didn’t interfere with our communications.

“It seems they’ve been waiting for this moment all along,” I began.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a perfect trap, and we walked right into it. Is Paul still with you?”

“Yes.”

Paul’s voice came through, frantic and urgent. “Can you see it?! That red light in the center of the city!”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“What in the world is going on?!”

“The city itself has become a trap,” I replied grimly. “But listen—David and the other servants have disappeared. Do you know anything about that?”

“David? No, he should still be at the manor.”

“He’s not. It’s been completely abandoned.”

My mind raced. *Is Paul an ally or an enemy?*

My strength was draining fast. If I didn't leave soon, things could get ugly. Sharmilia and Maquina were already on the ground, barely able to move.

"Then...where could they have possibly gone to?" Paul asked, confused.

"I don't know."

Before I could say more, a thunderous explosion echoed over the radio, followed by panicked shouts.

"What's happening?" I asked quickly.

"Th-The enemy's Magic Corps are attacking us!"

This was the worst-case scenario. The enemy's main force had begun its advance.

I switched the frequency and gave orders to all of my subordinates.

"All units, prepare for battle! Hold them off—I'm coming!"

"Yes, my lord!" came the answer.

But before doing that, I needed to confirm our ship's status. If it had been sunk, we would have lost our only escape route.

"Teela! Report on the ship!"

"We're...heading offshore..."

Her voice crackled, the connection faltering under interference.

"Get as far out as possible!"

"Underst—"

The connection went dead.

Sharmilia and Maquina were barely hanging on. I didn't have much strength left myself, but there was still one thing I could try.

Damn it... Come on, body! Don't fail me now!

With a roar of exertion, I summoned a massive hunk of metal.

Thunk! Clang!

Before me loomed a behemoth of steel.

"Hah... Hah... It worked," I gasped, blood trickling from the corner of my mouth.

"Master! Are you all right?" Sharmilia cried from the ground, her eyes wide with worry.

"I'll manage," I rasped. "You two are in far worse shape."

"Never mind us," she gasped out, putting on a brave face, but I

could tell that she was at her limit.

"Come on, get in," I said, gesturing to the massive machine I had summoned—a BMPT Terminator combat vehicle. "Sharmilia, give me your hand!"

Reaching down, I pulled her up to the open hatch on top of the vehicle. Her body was slowly turning to ash, and it was a small relief that her fingers didn't come off.

Once she was inside, I turned to Maquina.

"Maquina! Your hand, now!"

She reached out to me, and I hauled her in as well. Finally, I noticed Catherine standing nearby, her face a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

"You too! Get in!"

She hesitated but finally reached up to me. I pulled her up to the hatch and she clambered in. I climbed in last, slamming the hatch shut behind me.

It had taken secret practice in the mountains of the Land of Demons to learn how to operate the Terminator. The controls were unlike anything I'd ever encountered. But with time, I'd mastered it.

Cough! Cough!

Blood dripped from my mouth as I struggled to steady myself.

"Master!" Sharmilia and Maquina exclaimed, worry etched on their faces.

I forced a grin and gave them a shaky thumbs-up.

Vroom!

The engine roared to life, the metallic beast shuddering as it came alive beneath us.

It moved.

The BMPT Terminator surged forward, shattering the glowing barrier like fragile glass. The light gave way before the vehicle's sheer power, unable to stop its advance.

"Master!" Sharmilia called out.

"Quickly, we need to heal him!" Maquina said.

As we cleared the barrier, they had immediately begun to recover and were now worrying over me as if they hadn't just been on the brink of death. Vampires truly were remarkable creatures.

"I'm fine," I assured them. "I can still move."

The massive magic stone still loomed in my thoughts. That was the source of power for the glowing barrier around Paul's manor. I didn't know that it could even be used that way. But what purpose did it serve beyond that? Seeing as how Sharmilia and Maquina were now able to move freely, I could assume that it wasn't light magic.

So what is it?

The answer eluded me, but there was no time to dwell on it. My allies were waiting, and I was determined to reach them before it was too late.

Gladrom's Main Gate—Maria

"Prepare to meet them head-on!"

Having been given Master Raul's command to engage, I issued the order to the demons.

Ahead of the Magic Corps, knights had formed a defensive line with shields raised. Behind them, mages threw spells of fire, ice, lightning, and rock. The stone walls encircling the city absorbed the brunt of the attacks.

"Their magic won't breach the walls," Gersham shouted to the others. "They're using it to cover the knights' advance!"

Under no circumstances could the main gate fall. That had been Master Raul's command.

My hands gripped the McMillan TAC-50 sniper rifle Lord Raul had summoned for me.

"I'll take out the mages," I shouted. "Everyone else, focus on the knights!"

"Understood!"

I steadied the rifle and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

One mage crumpled to the ground, blood spraying from their head.

"Next."

Bang!

The rifle roared again, its shot striking another mage dead in the center of his forehead. But the enemy did not falter. They continued casting their spells, walking over their fallen comrades, while the knights advanced without fear.

"What are they doing? Even mages from the Holy Land will run out of magical power if they keep casting like that," I said.

Pushing my doubts aside, I fired again, taking out another mage. Still, the knights pressed forward fearlessly with their shields raised.

As they drew closer, Lupia fired her M240 medium machine gun.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Her gunfire signaled the others to attack. Slaga opened fire with an M134 Minigun, while Lufra and Anamis joined the assault with their own weapons.

Whirrrrr! Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat!

The knights fell like dominoes under the barrage. With nowhere to hide, they could only die where they stood.

Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Dal'ambah, and Zieg moved in as well, firing their FN SCAR assault rifles at the knights whose shields had been blown apart by machine gun fire. The final blow came from Phantom, who wielded an M61 Vulcan cannon like a monstrous titan. Carrying its massive base, battery, and ammo cases as if they weighed nothing, Phantom fired on the knights, blowing them apart like clay dolls smashed by a sledgehammer.

The battlefield was in a state of constant chaos, guns blazing—leaving thousands of enemy soldiers dead in a matter of moments. Knights and mages alike were powerless before the onslaught, their archaic weapons and spells meaningless against the destructive violence of Lord Raul's weaponry.

But amidst the carnage, a strange unease crept over me.

"What's...going on?" Gersham muttered.

"They're not retreating," Gazzam observed, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"This is strange," I said. "Even knowing they face annihilation, they refuse to stop advancing."

Their suicidal march made no sense. No matter how much firepower they were met with, they refused to stop.

Then we heard a low rumble.

Everyone ceased fire and turned toward the sound. From within the city emerged a vehicle unlike anything else in this world, something only one person could produce. It was bristling with weapons: dual 30mm autocannons, twin anti-tank missile launchers, a 7.62mm machine gun, and dual 30mm automatic grenade launchers.

It was no tank, but a vehicle specialized in taking out enemy personnel. For our enemies, it must have seemed like a terrifying monster. But to us, it was a symbol of hope.

As we approached the main gate, I opened the top hatch and stuck my head out.

"Lord Raul!" Maria called out to me. "Something's wrong! The enemy isn't retreating! There must be some reason!"

"What?"

Paul ran up beside me, still visibly shaken by the chaos.

"Lord Raul!" he exclaimed. "Even under your subordinates' assault, the enemy won't stop their advance! It's as if they're on a suicide mission!"

My mind went into overdrive.

"What are they planning? Are they coordinating something with the timing of the magic circle?" I muttered as I tried to get a view of the battlefield.

The three priests had accompanied Paul when he'd come running. Two of them were trembling violently.

Father Callisto Cruz turned to them with a look of confusion.

"What's the matter with you?"

I looked over. "What's happening?"

The two priests recoiled, their faces pale. One of them let out a strangled cry. Father Cruz stepped toward them.

"Stay back!"

"What are you talking about?" Father Cruz demanded.

"You hypocrite!" one of the priests shouted, his voice breaking. "Claiming these demons are our allies! Monsters with this kind of

terrifying power could never side with humanity!”

The two priests began shouting hysterically, their voices filled with fear and anger.

“Enough!” Father Cruz snapped. “Lord Raul and his forces are fighting for Gladrom at the risk of their own lives!”

“It was obvious from the start that David was useless!” one of the priests yelled. “He couldn’t even capture the source of all this evil!”

Paul’s eyes widened in shock. “*What* about David? What did he do?”

“Soon, judgment will be passed on this land! And because we’ve delayed you here, the Holy Land will rescue us!”

“Answer me!” Paul roared, his composure breaking. “What’s going on with David?!”

“You’re a fool of a king,” one of the priests sneered. “Trusting your servants so blindly!”

“What are you saying?!” Paul yelled in shock.

Even with the enemy at our gates, the humans were turning on each other. I acted swiftly.

“Anamis!”

Anamis stepped forward, releasing a crimson mist that enveloped the two priests. They collapsed to the ground.

“Who are you?” Anamis asked, leaning in close to the entranced priests.

“We are priests of the Holy Land of Fattoria,” one of them murmured.

Callisto reeled in shock. “Fattoria priests? But...I thought you were fugitives from Schladen!”

I ignored Callisto’s outburst and asked, “What ‘judgment’ are you talking about?”

“Gladrom will be cleansed by the flames of God,” one priest muttered.

“Cleansed?” I pressed.

“For years, *his* magic has gone unnoticed, hidden from all eyes.”

“Magic? What kind of magic?” I demanded.

“It is the magic of purification. A spell to cleanse all evil.”

Their words led nowhere—an endless circle of fanaticism. My

patience was thinning.

"Why did David betray us?"

"By *his* command. He promised salvation for all of Gladrom's people if we captured or killed the demon prince and his followers."

"Whose command?" I asked, increasingly frustrated.

"High Priest Abdul Yudel."

"The High Priest?" Father Cruz interjected, confusion etched across his face. "But isn't the head of the Fattorian church the Lord Divine?"

"The Lord Divine has fallen to darkness. Only High Priest Abdul is a true servant of God," the priest declared.

Who was this Abdul Yudel?

"What did Abdul command you to do?" I demanded.

"To use our lives to destroy the demon prince and his followers."

"Use your lives," I asked, my blood running cold.

"Our lives will be the foundations for Abdul's peace," the priest replied with fervent conviction.

It was blind faith, or worse—complete indoctrination.

"Anamis, put them to sleep."

"As you command."

Thud!

The two priests collapsed to the ground, unconscious under Anamis's spell.

"This is...unbelievable," Paul muttered, staring at the fallen priests with a mixture of shock and disbelief. His face was pale.

It was clear to me now that Paul had been a pawn in someone else's game. The true orchestrator had been David all along. I felt a pang of guilt for having doubted him.

"Lord Raul! The enemy is closing in!" Gersham called out to me.

"I know!"

I returned to the Terminator combat vehicle and called to Sharmilia and Maquina.

In the blink of an eye, the two emerged, dropping to their knees before me.

"Equip these, you two!"

I summoned two M240 medium machine guns and backpacks full

of ammunition, handing them to the pair. Then, switching to my radio, I issued my next orders.

"Lupia! Bring Maria down from the wall!"

"Yes, master!"

Lupia descended gracefully, carrying Maria in her arms.

"Maria, you'll ride with me in the Terminator. Lupia and Anamis, get aboard as well!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Lupia and Anamis, being among the least durable of my subordinates, were better off staying in the relative safety of the vehicle.

"Lufra, take this!"

For the slime Lufra, I summoned an AK-47 assault rifle and handed it over. A moment later, communications from Gersham, Dal'ambah, and Gog crackled through the receiver.

"Lord Raul! We're out of ammo!"

"Our reserves are nearly depleted!"

"Phantom's done firing as well!"

I gave out my orders. "Phantom, come to me! Sharmilia and Maquina, take the M240s to the wall and take out the enemy from above!"

"Yes!"

"Lufra, cover the main gate with your assault rifle! Be wary of any magic attacks!"

"Understood!"

With that, I could start replenishing everyone's ammunition.

"When you're out of ammo, come to me!"

Phantom was the first to arrive. He loomed silently at my side, looking off into the distance. I replaced the ammo cases and battery for his M61 Vulcan cannon.

"There. Attack from the front gate. Protect the others."

Without a word, Phantom disappeared, his monstrous weapon balanced effortlessly on his shoulder. One by one, the others came to me to replenish their ammo, each returning to their positions fully armed and ready to fight.

Once everyone was reequipped, I once again turned to Paul.

"Paul, I doubted you earlier. For that, I apologize."

"No... It's I who must apologize," he said quietly. "I failed to see the betrayal brewing right under my nose. I am sorry that I've failed you."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "For now, we need to find a way to break the spell that has trapped Gladrom."

"Understood. Please, I beg of you—save this city and its people. I will focus on evacuating the remaining citizens."

"Take this," I said, summoning an LRAD. Though it was designed to suppress sound, it functioned well as a powerful loudspeaker. After a brief explanation, I handed it to him.

Paul's voice boomed through the city. "Citizens of Gladrom, this is Paul. Hear me! Lord Raul has come to free us from our chains, and I will stand with him!"

One by one, people emerged cautiously from their homes.

"But first, listen well! The accursed priests of Fattoria have set a trap upon this city. Look to the skies—see the bloodred glow of the stone above us!"

Heads turned skyward, eyes widening at the sight of the ominous red light spilling from the floating magic stone.

"You must evacuate immediately! There is no time to waste! Those to the east, head to the Gladrom cemetery! Those to the west, flee beyond the main gate!"

The ground began to shake.

"Damn it!" I seized the microphone from Paul. "Hurry! Flee east or west! Carry the children! Support the elderly! Move, now!"

The townsfolk scattered, rushing from their homes to the designated escape routes. Switching to my radio, I gave my subordinates a new order.

"We must hold the enemy back, or the citizens will have no chance to escape! Push forward and attack!"

I switched off the radio and turned to Paul and Father Cruz.

"Both of you need to evacuate now! Flee through the main gate!"

Paul hesitated, his eyes darting toward the fleeing citizens. "But the people—"

"There's no time!" I snapped. "Go!"

Reluctantly, Paul and Father Cruz joined the townsfolk heading for the main gate.

I climbed back into the Terminator and floored the accelerator.

"Maria, man the guns!"

"Will do!"

Ahead, flames began to rise from the center of the city. A column shot skyward, a serpent of fire twisting in the night. It suddenly began spreading outward, consuming everything in its path. The center of the city had turned into a massive fountain of flames.

Screams filled the air.

"Aaah!"

"It burns! I'm burning!"

"Run!"

"Mommy! Mommy!"

In moments, the fire spread like a living creature, consuming everything in its path. People, homes—everything was swallowed by the inferno. Searing flames snaked through the alleyways like serpents, burning and spreading to new areas. The blaze surged forward, a tidal wave devouring the houses as it went. Pillars of fire erupted throughout the city, consuming the fleeing masses. The guesthouse, Paul's manor, the church, and the guildhalls were all burning.

The magic circle at the city's perimeter flared, forming a barrier that cut off escape. The doomed citizens, young and old alike, were trapped. An elderly man. A mother clutching her child. A young boy carrying his little sister. A girl searching for her lost parents. Everything and everyone was reduced to ash. Only a handful of people had managed to escape beyond the magic circle.

"Damn it!" I roared.

This had been their plan all along. The enemy's main force had sacrificed itself in a suicidal assault to trap us here, to keep us in Gladrom as it burned. They'd treated their own soldiers' lives as mere pawns in their monstrous scheme.

Paul let out a heartrending cry as he tried to rush back toward the burning city, his face contorting in desperation.

“Gazzam, stop him!”

Gazzam moved swiftly, catching up to Paul and striking him at the base of his neck. Paul’s eyes rolled back, and he collapsed unconscious.

“What... What madness is this?” Father Cruz fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face.

Meanwhile, the two fanatical priests within the flames screamed ecstatically.

“God, oh God, thank you! Save us! Wah ha ha!”

“Ah ha ha ha!”

Their cries were cut short as their bodies were reduced to cinders, leaving nothing behind.

A massive pillar of flame shot over a hundred meters skyward, illuminating the night as if it were day.

“What is this?!” I screamed. “What the hell is this?! Damn it!”

“Lord Raul!” Gersham’s voice crackled through the communicator. “The enemy is retreating!”

I clenched my teeth, my rage boiling over. I gave them a new order.

“Listen, all of you! Do not let a single one of them escape! Kill them all!”

The demons surged forward, unleashing a devastating assault on the retreating enemy. Gunfire rained down on their backs, cutting down scores of soldiers with each volley. Every death fed me—their souls pouring into me in a flood of energy.

Through my shared vision with Sharmilia, I scanned the battlefield. My gaze settled on a glowing circle in the distance, coming from the enemy’s base.

What is that?

Soldiers disappeared into the light, vanishing one by one. Behind the circle, a figure stood—a mage, by the looks of them.

“What is that magic?” I muttered.

“Master,” Sharmilia spoke directly into my mind, feeling my confusion, “it appears to be a teleportation circle. A forbidden magic in the human world, but unmistakable.”

“So they’re escaping...” I clenched my fists. “Sharmilia! Drop your

weapon and get to me immediately!”

Thud!

In an instant, Sharmilia landed on the roof of the Terminator combat vehicle. I used my radio to issue new commands.

“All of you, fall back behind the vehicle! Phantom, you too!”

The demons hurriedly regrouped behind the Terminator. When the last one reached me, I gave them final orders.

“Stay here and hold this position. If any enemies approach, kill them!”

“Yes, my lord!”

I looked at Sharmilia.

“Sharmilia, take me to the sky, above the light!”

“As you command.”

Sharmilia wrapped her arms around my waist. With a single, powerful leap, we shot into the sky at an incredible speed. In the blink of an eye, we vanished from the battlefield below and began soaring toward the glowing circle two kilometers ahead of us.

Looking at it from above, it was clear that the source of the light was indeed a magic circle. One by one, the retreating enemy soldiers ran into it. I wasted no time and summoned the 9K111 Fagot missile system. I locked onto the glowing circle, centering it in my sights. Then I opened the weapons database.

```
By Theatre:
Ground Weaponry LV 4
Aerial Weaponry LV 2
Naval Weaponry LV 3
Space Weaponry LV 0

By Purpose:
Offensive Weaponry LV 6
Defensive Weaponry LV 3

By Scale:
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Weapons of Mass Destruction LV 2

Conventional Weaponry LV 6

By Type:

Nuclear Weaponry LV 0

Biological Weaponry LV 0

Chemical Weaponry LV 0

Optical Weaponry LV 0

Acoustic Weaponry LV 2

By Target:

Antipersonnel Weaponry LV 7

Anti-Materiel Weaponry LV 5

By Effect:

Nonlethal Weaponry LV 2

Facilities:

Base Equipment LV 3

Utility:

Equipment LV 4

Augmentation LV 2

[Select Augmentation LV 1]

I poured the vast reservoir of human souls I'd absorbed into the missile. It began to glow with magical energy.

Would the enemy commander notice?

The figure standing at the edge of the magic circle looked in my direction and began to move frantically. They leaped into the magic circle's glowing light.

"Damn it!" I hissed.

Whoosh!

I fired the missile without hesitation. I poured my magic freely into the missile, augmenting it, and it streaked toward the circle. But just as it was about to strike, the light of the magic circle flickered and disappeared.



The missile hit where the circle had been, erupting in a flash of light that consumed the area in an instant. A deafening explosion followed, the force of the detonation rippling outward, instantly engulfing everything within a hundred-meter radius. Enemy soldiers who had been rushing toward the circle were caught in the blast, their bodies disintegrating into smoke.

Seconds later, the shock wave reached the Terminator combat vehicle two kilometers away. Lufra reacted instantly, expanding her viscous form to shield those gathered behind the vehicle. Maquina, who stood outside of Lufra's protection, looked unperturbed, though her clothes bore the faint scorch marks of the heat. Phantom stood gazing off into the distance as if a mere breeze had brushed him.

When the initial blast finally cleared, a mushroom cloud towered above what used to be the enemy's base, its edges crackling with lightning.

As the smoke cleared, two things became clear: The enemy commander had escaped. And the city of Gladrom—along with its people—was no more.

Chapter Six: After the Battle

It was raining.

The massive explosion I'd caused with my magic-augmented missile had birthed a mushroom cloud that now darkened the sky. From it descended black rain, thick with ash and dirt. The few enemy soldiers who had survived the initial blast lay dying, and the demons dispatched them without mercy. The blood spilled was soon washed away by the black rain.

Nearly four thousand enemy corpses littered the ground, their numbers far exceeding the two thousand we were initially told of. It appeared the teleportation magic had brought reinforcements to the battlefield. Sharmilia and Maquina quickly went through the battlefield, having Phantom absorb the corpses. With three hours until sunrise, the vampires would need to finish before they needed to move indoors.

Meanwhile, Lupia had flown to retrieve the ship that had escaped to the open sea. By morning, it would return. My other subordinates searched the devastated city for survivors. A few had managed to escape through the main gate, but most of Gladrom's people had perished.

"I haven't changed at all," I muttered to myself. "I'm still weak. Still powerless."

In Sanaria, I had been a child—too weak to protect even a single life. Now, I had gained strength and the loyalty of the demons by my side. But it had made no difference. I had again allowed countless lives to be lost.

But there was no time to wallow in despair. Survivors had to be found.

The magic circle had left nothing behind. Those caught within it had been reduced to ash, not even their bones remaining. The once-bustling city of Gladrom was now a barren wasteland, a featureless

expanse of scorched earth.

"It must have been the spell Inferno," Father Cruz had speculated. *"But I've never seen any spell on that scale. Not even ten thousand mages could have cast something like that. It must have been the work of that massive magic stone."*

The stone had vanished, leaving only destruction in its wake.

The crackle of my radio interrupted my thoughts.

"Paul has woken up," Maria reported.

I rushed to his side. Father Cruz was there, casting healing magic. Paul sat in a daze, his expression blank, but soon his eyes regained focus.

"My... My people... My city... I even sacrificed my wife and daughter, sending them to Fattoria, to protect everyone... Now they're gone...all gone."

He broke down, his cries of anguish echoing in the air.

He sacrificed his family to protect his citizens? Paul...

I respected him more than I ever had. But I couldn't find the words to comfort him.

"Lord Raul, we've found survivors near the cemetery," Gog reported over the radio.

"Secure them," I ordered.

"The thing is...one of them is David."

"What?!" Paul's head snapped up at the name, his face twisting with fury. "Lord Raul, I beg you, take me to the cemetery!"

I nodded.

The steps to the cemetery stretched before us, climbing high above to the cliffs that loomed over the destroyed city. Paul and I led the way, while Lufra and Anamis accompanied us as guards. Normally, you could look out from the cliff tops and see all of Gladrom, but today, the black rain obscured everything.

When we reached the cemetery, we found Gersham, Gog, and Zieg standing watch over a huddled group of survivors—fifteen civilians, David among them. Scattered around were the corpses of Fattorian mages and Bargian knights, killed by Maria and Lupia's onslaught.

"What's their condition?" I asked.

"They all keep begging us to let them die," Gog replied grimly.

Paul clenched his teeth and walked slowly toward David, who sat slumped on the ground, unable to meet Paul's gaze. The others wept softly, their sobs blending with the rain.

"David," Paul began, his voice heavy with pain. "Why? Why would you do this?"

"My king," David finally said, but he then faltered.

"Answer me," Paul pressed.

At last, David managed to speak, his voice trembling.

"For three years, your wife and daughter have been held in Fattoria as hostages. You allowed as much to protect the citizens and end the abductions. But the enemy betrayed their promises and kept taking people. I couldn't take it anymore."

Paul closed his eyes. "That was my failure. I bear the blame. But why, then, did you aid Fattoria?"

"They said if I handed over Lord Raul—or killed him—they would free Gladrom," David said lifelessly. "They promised to return everyone they'd taken."

Paul was silent for a long moment, his face pale. Then he spoke in admonishment. "Lord Raul risked his life to defend Gladrom. He spared us from destruction and even gave us the ability to use our connection to the demons as a way to protect ourselves. How could you betray him?"

"I resented him. If he and his demons had never come, maybe Fattoria and Bargius would have left us alone."

"David, you old fool," Paul said bitterly. "Do you not know what has become of Rashtal and Schladen? Their people have suffered even more than we have, living in starvation and oppression. It is only because of our alliance with the Land of Demons that we had access to food and resources. Without Lord Raul, this remote area would have fallen long ago."

David's shoulders fell. "You're right. But I was blinded..."

David had once been a brilliant and capable chancellor, but three years of the enemy's oppression had crushed him, striking at his weaknesses until the temptation was too great to resist. Paul, too,

had failed to notice the betrayal fomenting directly beneath him. I couldn't imagine how heavy that guilt must be.

"When did it start?" Paul asked.

"Two years ago," David whispered. "Two priests from Fattoria disguised themselves as clergy from Schladen and infiltrated Gladrom."

Tears fell down Paul's face. "Two whole years..."

His shoulders trembled, and for a moment, I feared he might collapse.

"And so you came up with this...this horrifying plan?"

"No!" David said. "Originally, the servants from Bargius were only to poison the demons. We never imagined it would end like *this*."

"Fool! Galdzin and the other demons protected Gladrom for years!"

"I... I thought that since they weren't human, it didn't matter..."

The prejudice against demons ran deep, it seemed. Perhaps it would have been the same in my past life—if creatures like vampires, demons, or werewolves had appeared in Tokyo, humanity would have done anything to destroy them. History was littered with witch hunts and other purges against the supernatural.

But something about David's story gnawed at me.

"If you had planned to poison us, why didn't you send us straight to dinner? Why did the knights attack first?" I asked.

David kept looking at the ground. "I was afraid that Maria might take her seat at the poisoned table. I couldn't allow that possibility. So I convinced Baum to burn Rugan incense and activate the light barrier. Then there would be no need to feed you the poisoned food. I thought that would be enough to trap you and allow the knights to finish the job."

"But you failed."

"Yes. You... You were struck down, but then..." David's voice trembled. "You started speaking even as your body was cut in half."

Baum had sliced through Lufra who had taken my form. They must have thought they'd succeeded. I remembered David's look of utter shock when the real me arrived shortly after.

"You were trying to save Maria, then?"

"Yes."

So that was it. Maria's presence had saved me, in a way. In the final moments, David and the servants couldn't fully harden their hearts, and that hesitation had given me the chance to act.

"And then, Lord Raul, you...you let us escape," David said, his voice breaking.

"Raul saved your lives," Paul said. "Why didn't you stop then? Why continue?"

"There was no turning back. If we did nothing, we'd all be killed."

"What nonsense are you spouting?!" Paul roared. "Look at the result! You've burned your families—your parents, spouses, children, and grandchildren! Refugees who sought safety here found only death! This place was their last hope, and you destroyed it!"

The group in front of us collapsed into sobs, their anguish filling the air.

"We had no idea their plan would lead to this..." David's voice was filled with despair.

"What did you *think* would happen?" Paul yelled. "Did you think they wouldn't punish you for failing your mission? Did you truly think Gladrom would be spared?"

Paul was right. Capturing or betraying us would likely not have brought back the abducted citizens, and failure was certain to bring even greater disaster.

David's voice cracked as he spoke. "I couldn't bear it... The wails of parents losing their children, the cries of families torn apart... And above all, I wanted to save your wife and daughter, my king!"

Unable to stay silent, I spoke up. "Paul, this is my fault. If I'd trained faster, become stronger sooner, this wouldn't have happened. I was too young and took too long to build the army we needed."

Paul turned to me. "No, Lord Raul. You did more than anyone could have asked. To return with such strength in just three years' time is a miracle. This isn't something any boy of twelve could do. I am eternally grateful to you."

"No, Paul, I failed. I couldn't save Gladrom, just like I couldn't save Sanaria."

“Lord Raul, you’re wrong!” Paul interrupted, his voice shaking. “If anyone is to blame, it is me. I failed to see the betrayal among my people. For two years I allowed this trap to be built right under my nose. I didn’t notice the worms burrowing into Gladrom!”

David couldn’t keep quiet at that. “No, my king! You did everything you could! You sacrificed your family to protect us! This is all because of my betrayal. It’s my fault alone!”

The other servants joined in, their voices desperate.

“Your Majesty, please deliver your judgment!”

“Our families are gone; our lives are meaningless!”

“We don’t deserve forgiveness!”

“Our homes are gone. Give us death!”

Paul listened silently. He no longer wept. Finally, he spoke, “I understand how you feel. None of you imagined this tragedy, but it’s too late. Because of what you allowed into Gladrom, tens of thousands have died. The elderly, the young, even infants. The weight of their lives is a burden you can never atone for.”

The servants collapsed into sobs, unable to speak. Then Paul addressed them one by one.

“David, you’ve served this worthless king faithfully for years. Forgive me for what I must do. Julia, you worked tirelessly as head maid. Thank you. Dag, your efforts as head butler kept us together. I’m grateful to you. Nadia, as the head of the kitchen, your cooking always brought us joy. I’ll cherish those memories. Sara...”

One by one, Paul acknowledged them, their sobs growing louder as he thanked them.

Finally, he spoke to them all.

“Each of you served me well. I thank you.”

The servants bowed deeply, tears streaming down their faces.

“King Paul! Serving you was the greatest honor of our lives!”

“Thank you! I was truly blessed!”

“To work for you was my pride and joy!”

One after another, the servants offered their gratitude.

At last, David spoke, his voice filled with regret. “Why... Why did it come to this? What have I been doing all this time? I’m so sorry... And yet, even after all of this, you still believe in me. Thank you for

your faith, even in someone as foolish as I am."

"David...you've been by my side since I was a child. Thank you for everything."

Paul turned away, unable to look at his oldest friend. He approached me with the appearance of a broken man.

"Lord Raul..." His voice faltered. "With your power...with the techniques you and your subordinates use, you could spare them any suffering. Please, I beg of you...end it quickly for them. Do it where I cannot see."

"But, I—"

"I am asking this of you as a king appealing to another leader. Lord Raul, we are at war, fighting the Fattorian-Bargian alliance together. Please...I implore you."

I tried to speak, but Paul cut me off, his voice filled with desperation.

"Please! I beg you!"

Without waiting for my reply, he turned and began descending the steps, never looking in the direction of David and his former servants. His shoulders slumped under the weight of his sorrow.

He's right. I'm no longer playing games. This is war—real war. Judgment has to be passed. If I had just been stronger, none of this would have happened. It was the same as in Sanaria. Damn it!

I knew it would be painful, but I decided that I would do as Paul had requested. I called Lupia over the radio.

"Lupia, has the ship docked?"

"Yes, we just arrived."

"Could you take some cloth from the ship and bring it to the cemetery?"

"Yes, sir."

Before long, she came down from the sky, carrying bundles of cloth.

"Gog, Gersham, Zieg, Lupia, Lufra, Anamis—cover their eyes with these," I said, handing out the cloth.

"Yes, sir."

The group blindfolded each servant with the cloth. One by one, David and the fifteen remaining servants knelt in a single row, their

figures hunched and dirtied by the black rain that had finally stopped.

I stood behind David, raising a VP9 handgun to the back of his head.

My hand shook.

I can't do it.

The gun felt impossibly heavy. I couldn't do it. I couldn't pull the trigger.

"Lord Raul!" David's voice cut through my hesitation. "Please forgive this last selfish request! Spare them further pain! Don't let us suffer any longer!"

The others joined in, their voices pleading.

Seeing that I was hesitating, Gersham stepped forward.

"Lord Raul, allow me to do this. You shouldn't dirty your hands with this cruel act."

"No." I shook my head firmly. "It must be me."

This is what war looks like. In war, such acts happen every day. Perhaps it hadn't happened in Japan, but in other places, this was their reality. And now, here I stand, doing something I could never have imagined doing.

"But—" Gersham began.

"Listen to me, Gersham. This is my burden. My weakness brought us to this point."

"Lord Raul..."

My other subordinates watched me with concern. I turned to Anamis with a request.

"Anamis, I need your help."

"Of course. What do you require?"

"Can you show them...nice dreams? Let them see their happiest memories—their families, their loved ones."

Anamis nodded. "It will be done."

A magenta mist billowed from Anamis, spreading gently around the kneeling figures. One by one, they fell into a dreamlike slumber, murmuring softly.

"Paul, what fine clothing! You've truly become king!"

"What a sweet child you are. Thank you for bringing me flowers

every day."

"Twins? Oh, they're beautiful, just like you..."

"Father, off to the mountains again? Please, be careful!"

"You're the big sister now. Take care of your little brother, my sweet girl."

"Grandma! My beloved grandma... I've missed you so."

Smiles spread across their faces. They truly looked at peace.

I raised my gun to the first one's head and pulled the trigger.

"I'm sorry."

Bang!

They slumped forward, lifeless.

"I failed you."

Bang!

Another fell forward and lay in silence.

This was who I had become. I was no longer human. I was the son of the King of Demons, and this was the war that I had chosen. These were the means by which I could reclaim my homeland and survive in this callous world. Even after I had killed so many people, I hadn't truly realized what needed to be done until Paul had asked this of me.

Tears began to fall down my cheeks. I forced my finger to pull the trigger each time.

Bang!

Bang!

The only sound in the cemetery was the echo of gunfire.

The sun finally rose over the ruins of Gladrom.

Sharmilia and Maquina had completed replenishing Phantom's reserves and retreated to their specially made quarters in the ship's hold to avoid the coming daylight. Phantom had grown larger after feasting on the nearly four thousand dead of the enemy. He now loomed by my side, staring off into the distance. Teela and Tappy had been left at the ship to guard the vampires' quarters and the injured Mazul. Two dark elves had been left behind as well, one to act as a lookout and another to handle navigation if needed.

The rest of us had entered the city.

"Phantom! Go to the main gate," I ordered.

Phantom vanished in an instant, becoming a speck no larger than a grain of sand in the distance. I'd be able to use our shared vision to make sure the area was secure.

"All right," I muttered, turning to the next task.

The massive Inferno spell that had consumed Gladrom had turned every structure to ashes, leaving behind only a flat, featureless wasteland. I needed to summon emergency shelters for the survivors.

I summoned tents designated as *Base Facilities Lv 1* in my database and had them set up, then summoned eight *Base Facilities Lv 2* portable latrines, the kind often used in military or disaster relief operations, and had them set up at a distance from the tents.

The demons, along with Paul and the other uninjured men, worked together to pitch all the tents. Meanwhile, Father Cruz took to healing the wounded with healing magic.

To those still helping with search-and-rescue efforts, I ordered them to halt their search—continuing to push themselves would only add to the already staggering death toll. Less than a hundred survivors had been found so far.

But Paul was against it.

"King Paul, the other survivors are resting for now," I said. "You need to rest too. Us demons can handle what's left."

Paul wiped the sweat from his brow as he stopped to speak with me. "I cannot. I bear responsibility for this tragedy. If I do not do all I can, how could I face those who died when it is my time to pass into the next world?"

"That's all the more reason to rest," I said. "There is much you'll need to oversee in the days to come. Please, leave this to us for now. Consider this a formal request from the Demon King's representative."

After a moment of hesitation, he finally relented. "Very well. I shall rest to make sure I have the strength to get through the coming days."

"Thank you."

Once the humans had been convinced to rest, I distributed

combat rations, the ones that Iona and the maids had once praised so highly.

I called over Maria, Lufra, and Anamis, who had been caring for the injured. When they approached, I gave them new orders.

"I'll keep summoning more of these. Stack them neatly inside the tent, please."

"Should we separate the cans from the pouches, or stack them all together?" Maria asked.

"Keep them together for now," I replied.

I summoned two hundred rations, while the three women stacked them, preparing them for distribution.

"All right, let's start handing these out!"

"Yes, sir!"

I radioed the demons under my command. Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Slaga, Anamis, Lufra, Dal'ambah, Lupia, Zieg, and the nine dark elves gathered quickly. Maria stood by my side. They worked without complaint, their clothes stained with the ashen residue of the black rain.

"I know you're all exhausted, but the injured and frail among the humans must come first. They need rest, as well as food and water. Distribute these rations to them!"

"Yes, sir!"

Next, I summoned an LRAD loudspeaker with a heavy *thud*. Taking up the microphone, I addressed the survivors.

"People of Gladrom, your efforts in the rescue have been nothing short of heroic. Take a moment to rest. For those who can move, food has been prepared—come and take what you need. For those who cannot, we will bring it to you. Have no fear, there is enough for everyone. The injured will be moved to the large tents for care, while those unharmed or only lightly wounded can take refuge in the private tents. Again, do not worry, for there is space for everyone."

Slowly, the survivors began to gather.

"Maria, you should eat something first," I said.

"But...I should help with the distribution."

"If you collapse, it will only make things worse. Please, put yourself first for once. If you try to keep up with the demons all the

time, you'll push yourself to the breaking point."

Reluctantly, Maria nodded. She was the type of person who wanted to help everyone before taking care of her own needs, but even she had to face human limitations. I knew that it would be difficult for her, but she needed to look out for herself.

I turned back to my demon subordinates and gave out the next orders.

"Make sure they understand how to eat these!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Some may be in shock and unable to eat. Offer them water and canned fruit first. For those who can't manage on their own, help them."

Lufra, Anamis, and Lupia moved swiftly to assist those who needed help eating. The men divided the remaining tasks among themselves, handing out rations and patiently explaining their use. Once the initial distribution was complete, the men returned, awaiting further commands.

"Well done. Now, while the humans eat and rest, we must move quickly to evacuate the wounded. They won't last long in this heat. We need to get them all to safety before the sun rises higher!"

I summoned military stretchers.

"Follow Vice Captain Dal'ambah's lead," I said to the dark elves. "Transport the injured to the large tents. Be careful and mind their wounds."

"Understood!"

The dark elves paired off and dispersed.

I turned to the rest of the men. "Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Zieg, Slaga—continue searching for survivors. I want to save as many as we can."

"Understood!"

As the men left, the three women returned. They had completed their tasks assisting the humans and now awaited new instructions.

"I want you two to continue helping the injured," I said to Lufra and Anamis. "Lufra, I want you to help ease the pain of those who have severe burns."

Lufra nodded. "As you command." Her slime could cool the body,

and she could use it to wrap the burn victims' bodies like a blanket and soothe their burns.

"Anamis, help those who are struggling psychologically. Lull them into dreams if you can—give them a moment's respite."

"I will."

"Begin when the injured arrive at the big tent. Help them in order of those who need it most."

At that moment, Father Cruz approached. He had been tending to the injured all day and looked exhausted.

"Lord Raul, forgive me. I've depleted my magic—I can do no more."

"Then rest, Father. But before you sleep, eat something."

"Thank you."

I led him to a nearby tent and summoned rations for him.

"Is this some divine miracle?" he asked, his eyes wide. "I've never seen magic like this."

"It's a peculiarity of mine. A magic that only I can use," I replied.

"An extraordinary gift—a power meant to save lives."

Before I could respond, a message from Zieg came through the radio.

"Lord Raul! Survivors have been found in the caves—seventy of them!"

My eyes widened. "Seventy?! Are you certain? I'm on my way!"

"Yes, Slaga and I are assisting them now."

I ran to find Paul to relay the news to him.

"Seventy survivors have been found! They took refuge in the caves and are unharmed!"

"Seventy? By the gods, this is a miracle!" he exclaimed, tears filling his eyes.

A big smile found its way onto my face. "We'll bring them to safety at once."

"Please, do so!"

The cave, hidden within the jagged cliffs, had escaped the Inferno's deadly reach. If the caves had been closer to the town, its occupants would have suffocated as the flames burned off the oxygen in the atmosphere. It seemed fate had granted them a

reprieve.

Just as I prepared to head to the cave, another transmission crackled through. It was Gersham.

"Lord Raul! We've found survivors at sea!"

"At sea?"

"Yes. Just before the flames reached them, they leaped into the water. They've been floating there ever since."

"How have they survived in the waters for this long?"

Gersham started laughing in disbelief. "It was Penta! Penta kept them afloat!"

Penta, the great sea serpent bound to my command, had saved them.

When Zieg, Slaga, and I returned to the tent village with the seventy survivors from the caves, the villagers saved from the sea were already sitting and eating.

"I'll summon more rations! Everyone, come and get them! Make sure to distribute them to those who haven't received theirs yet!" I ordered my subordinates.

"Yes, sir!"

Those who weren't busy taking care of the survivors rushed over to transport the rations. At the same time, Dal'ambah and the dark elves, who had been transporting the wounded, returned to report.

"Lord Raul! The injured have all been moved to the big tents!"

"Good. I'm sorry to ask more of you so soon, but I need you and Slaga to unload the supplies from the ship and move them into the storage tent."

"Understood!"

They began heading toward the ship to begin their next task. As they departed, Catherine, the former noble from Eucrit whom I had saved at Paul's estate, approached me.

"Lord Raul, may I have a word?"

"Yes, of course. What is it?"

"I can use healing magic."

"Healing magic? Really?"

"Yes!"

Catherine's revelation was unexpected but invaluable. It would be a significant help if she could tend to the wounded while Father Cruz rested.

"Understood. Then, I'll leave it to you to provide what healing you can."

"Could you take me to where the injured are gathered?"

"Sure, I'll escort you myself. They're in the large tents. Follow me."

"Of course."

A noble from Eucrit capable of casting healing magic... What kind of childhood had she lived to develop such a skill?

I led her to the tent where the injured were being treated. It was an even worse sight than I had anticipated. Many were covered in burns, their skin blistered and raw. Some had broken limbs from falling or deep gashes from the jagged rock walls. The fire had consumed everything, leaving us without the medicine or supplies to treat them properly.

Those with severe burns covering their entire bodies...they were beyond saving. We could only hope to help those with minor injuries.

We didn't even have enough fabric to bind their wounds, leaving them exposed to contaminants. Still, Father Cruz's limited healing magic had managed to save a few, and Lufra's cooling abilities had soothed the pain of burned flesh. Others rested under the spell of Anamis, who used her dream magic as a makeshift anesthetic. Yet without proper facilities, there was little more we could do.

"Lupia! I've brought someone who can help with the healing! Lufra and Anamis, can you pause your work for a moment?"

"Yes, sir!"

I turned to Catherine and gestured toward the injured. "Catherine, can you try healing them?"

"Yes, Lord Raul. I'll begin now."

"Who will you start with?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

I shifted my weight, uncomfortable. "I think you should focus on those who have the best chance of recovery."

"I don't understand."

"Well, when the city burned, we lost all of the medicine and proper facilities. You'll save the greatest number of lives if you prioritize those who are most likely to survive. I hate to say it, but this is a time when we must make hard choices."

It was cruel, but I wouldn't sugarcoat the truth. I knew that the injured could hear me, but the situation was urgent. There was no time to deliberate in private about who could be saved.

"Have you decided?"

"Yes," Catherine said, her face full of determination. "I will save all of them."

"What? Were you even listening—"

Before I could finish, light spilled out from between Catherine's hands. The glow radiated outward, filling the entire room. The tie around her hair fluttered, and her hair floated weightlessly around her. A gentle, soothing breeze swept through the tent.

In a powerful voice, she cried out, "Zone of Curing!"

The tent was suddenly bathed in a dazzling light. It was so intense that I instinctively shut my eyes, unable to look. Outside, the radiance spilled through every seam of the tent, drawing alarmed cries from the demons.

"Lord Raul?!" Gersham shouted.

"Are you all right?!" bellowed Gog.

"What's happening?!" Zieg exclaimed as he rushed to my side.

"I-I'm fine! Everyone, lower your weapons! There's no threat here!" I called out.

The light began to recede, and silence returned to the tent.

"Lord Raul," Catherine said softly. "The healing is complete."

"It is? Who did you heal?"

"Everyone," she replied simply.

"...Everyone?"

"Yes. Even the demons' minor injuries should be healed now."

I blinked, trying to process her words. One by one, the gravely injured—those who had been on the brink of death—began to stir.

"Wha—"

I couldn't understand what I was seeing. Their wounds were

gone. Charred flesh, twisted limbs, gaping abdominal injuries—all of them had vanished.

"Lord Raul, thank you!" one survivor sobbed.

"It's a miracle!" exclaimed another.

"I can see again!"

"I can stand on my own legs!"

"We survived. We actually survived!"

In an instant, they had all recovered.

"Catherine... Th-Thank you! This is incredible! A true miracle!" I was overwhelmed, patting her shoulder repeatedly in my excitement.

"N-Not at all," she stammered, smiling. "I'm just glad everyone is doing better."

Hm? Why does that smile seem so familiar to me? Now that I look at her, she's beautiful under all that grime and soot.

"That must have exhausted your magical power," I said. "You need to rest now."

"No, I'm fine. There are still injured people in the other tents. I can continue."

"You don't need to push yourself. The others were in much better shape. They'll need treatment eventually, but we don't need you to push yourself to the point of collapse."

"But...I still have plenty of magic left," she said with a look of confusion.

Even after using a spell like that?! I also have large magical reserves, but that's because I'm half Demon of Origin. This girl is *human, right? But Gram did tell me about mages with extraordinary magic reserves—the court wizards. Could she be...*

Ignoring my protests, Catherine strode out of the tent and into the next.

"I'll begin the healing now," she said as she raised her hands once more.

"W-Wait!" I called, following after her.

Once again, light radiated from her hands, and her hair floated in the air.

"Zone of Curing!"

Cries of amazement rose around us as wounds vanished before our eyes.

"My burns are gone!"

"I can move my broken fingers!"

"My wounds have healed completely!"

Once again, their wounds were healed in an instant.

"Catherine, are you okay?" I asked, astonished.

"I'm a little tired, but I can still manage minor injuries," she replied.

"No, that's enough! You seriously need to rest now. Have you eaten anything?"

"Yes, I did. It was...an unusual food. I opened a metal container and found fish inside," she said, referring to the canned tuna from the rations.

"How was it?"

"It was delicious."

"Good. For now, please rest in one of the private tents."

If she rested properly and recovered her magic, then maybe everyone could be saved.

"Lord Raul? If you have a moment, there's something I'd like to discuss...privately," she said hesitantly.

"Privately?"

"Yes, if possible."

Before I could respond, Gersham interjected from where he had been watching behind us. "Absolutely not! Someone must accompany you. We can't risk anything happening to you, Lord Raul."

He was right. As the representative of the Demon King, I always had to have someone by my side.

"Catherine, would it be all right if someone joined us?"

"I don't mind," she replied. "In fact, if it's someone close to you, that would be even better."

"I see. Gersham, you accompany us. And bring Maria as well."

"Understood," he said, then headed out.

I checked on the injured as we waited. Before long, Gersham returned with Maria in tow. She looked as though she'd just been

roused from rest.

"Maria, I'm sorry to disturb you while you were sleeping. Please join us," I said.

Together, the four of us left the tent village and walked toward the main gate. We stopped when we had gone far enough that we were ensured privacy.

"All right, Catherine. Is this far enough?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"What's on your mind?"

She hesitated, her shoulders trembling slightly.

"Lord Raul...when you ordered the Bargian servants to eat that poisoned food, I decided I would eat it myself. I even tried to get your attention by looking you in the eyes."

"You tried to get me to choose you?" I said, surprised.

Now that she mentioned it, I had been drawn to her gaze as I'd hesitated over whom to choose.

"I thought that if I ate it, the plot would be exposed, and the others might be spared," she said softly. "And as I'd hoped...you chose me first."

"You knew the food was poisoned?"

"Of course I did. I overheard everything in the kitchen."

"And you were still willing to go through with it?"

"Yes, but...I was terrified," she said, her voice breaking as tears began streaming down her cheeks. "I knew what would happen. But I still ran when you told me to go. I abandoned everyone."

"Anyone would've run," I said gently.

"No. I left them behind to die."

"You wanted to save the Bargian servants?"

"It didn't matter where they came from. They were still people I had traveled to Gladrom with. I couldn't bear to watch them be killed."

"I see. And what do you want from me now?"

It was in the past. No matter how we wished otherwise, not everyone had survived.

"When I was smuggled among the servants going to Gladrom, I was given a mission," she said. "My teacher told me to save people."

"To save people?"

"Yes. I believed that moment was the time to fulfill my mission."

"Did your teacher foresee that something like that would happen?"

"No, Magister Morris, he..."

Wait. Magister Morris?

That name stirred something in my memory.

"Hold on," I interrupted. "What did you just say?"

"I was saying that I was sure that the time to do as my teacher told me had come..." she repeated.

"No, after that. The name, say it again."

"Magister Morris? Sauer Morris."

My heart skipped a beat.

"Magister Morris... He's alive?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"Yes. He was still well when he had me hide among the servants."

"Where is he now?!"

"I believe he's hiding in the western regions of Eucrit."

"Magister Morris... He's still alive..."

"Do you know him?" Catherine asked, puzzled by my reaction.

I turned to Maria, who looked as shocked as I felt.

Magister Morris is still alive? And sent this girl here to save others? Does he know I'm still alive as well?

"What else did Magister Morris tell you?" I demanded.

"He told me that if I ever met the Demon King, I should tell them my full name."

"Your full name? What is it?"

"I am Catherine Lena Nastalia."

Maria collapsed on the spot, tears streaming down her face. Her wails cut through the air. The shock hit me just as hard, a weight pressing down on my chest as the truth settled in.

Magister Morris was alive, and he had sent this girl who bore the name Nastalia here, not to be a servant of Bargius but to protect her. He knew we would come here.

"This can't be..." I murmured.

"Lord Raul?" Catherine asked, tilting her head.

"Catherine," I asked carefully, "do you know Iona Forrest?"

"Of course," she replied, nodding. "She's my aunt."

Of course! She's my mother's niece. And I... I almost forced her to take poison.

The realization crushed me. My legs buckled, and I dropped to the ground next to Maria, tears flowing uncontrollably.

I reached for Catherine's skirt, clutching it tightly as I sobbed.

"Catherine, I'm so sorry! Forgive me! I'm so glad you survived. Thank you for still being here!"

I... I almost made my cousin take poison. I almost killed her.

She watched me silently, her eyes wide with confusion. Time felt like it was standing still as Maria and I wept.

I took a deep breath and said, "Catherine, I am the son of Gram and Iona Forrest, Raul Forrest."

Her eyes widened in shock. "What? That can't be!"

"I'm your cousin."

"I... You're alive?!" She collapsed to the ground in tears.

It was understandable. Her family had been destroyed, her country occupied, and she had been forced to live in hiding, stripped of her noble status. Now, after all she had endured, she finally learned that some of her family had survived. The emotional dam broke, and she sobbed uncontrollably.

Maria knelt beside her and spoke gently.

"Lady Catherine, I am Maria Sanar, Lady Iona's attendant. I met you when you were very young. Forgive me for not recognizing you, but there's no doubt—you are Lady Catherine."

Catherine wiped her tears and managed a smile. "No, I don't blame you. I've grown much since then. But what about Aunt Iona? Where is she?"

"She's safe. She's living as a guest of the King in the Land of Demons," I assured her.

"Alive... She's alive! Oh, thank goodness!"

Tears streamed down her face once more.

"Thank you for surviving," I repeated. "From now on, we'll protect you. You don't have to live in fear anymore."

"Thank you," she said, clutching her hands to her chest.

"I don't even know how I can begin to thank Magister Morris for

this."

Catherine smiled warmly. "Don't worry. He's the same as ever, doing things his own way."

Seeing her smile, I realized why her face had felt so familiar. She bore a strong resemblance to Iona, and it was her likeness to my mother that had stirred something within me earlier.

"Still, I'm amazed that you managed to hide yourself as a Bargian servant," I said.

"I had help," she replied.

"You did?"

"Yes. The magister told me there are people across the land who oppose the tyranny of Fattoria and Bargius. It was a holy woman of Fattoria who helped me. She never gave me her name, but she said she was working to liberate the people. She was truly an amazing woman."

So, even in the lands of our enemies, there were those who resisted this senseless war.

"Do you believe there are many people like that?"

"I do. In fact, Magister Morris is one of them."

The revelation brought a glimmer of hope. Perhaps not all the world was against us. This knowledge could greatly influence our future strategies.

"Truly, thank you for surviving," I said one more time.

"And thank you, Lord Raul, for protecting my aunt."

"Well, protecting my mother is only natural," I said with a smile.

"That being said," she said hesitantly, "I thought you were younger. Are you not only twelve?"

"Well, a lot has happened. I had to grow up fast."

It must be a surprise to see me standing taller than her like this.

Maria chimed in. "It's surprising, isn't it? Lord Raul grows stronger and taller with each battle he survives. I've been by his side from the start, but I'm still surprised each time it happens! If you stay with us, Lady Catherine, I'm sure you'll get used to it."

Catherine listened to Maria with a smile.

"I do vaguely remember you, Maria," she said. "I saw you once in the capital when I was small. But you've changed so much since

then."

Maria laughed softly. "I've been through countless battles with Lord Raul. Maybe my expression has hardened a little, but my heart has never changed."

The two women began to bond. They were of different classes, but their shared roots in Eucrit drew them close together. I was sure they would become good friends.

Next, I had a question for Catherine.

"Your magic is extraordinary. Where did you learn it?"

"I was training under Magister Morris and preparing to take the entrance exam for the Royal Mage Corps when the war broke out. The Magister told me that if I'd been able to join, I undoubtedly would have made a name for myself."

I smiled. "I was a student of Magister Morris too!"

She looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yes," I said, before turning to darker matters. "But what happened to the Royal Mage Corps?"

"They were all slaughtered," she said quietly.

I nodded grimly. "I figured as much."

Catherine's survival seemed almost miraculous, like she had the favor of the Goddess herself. If she had joined the Corps, she would have been killed alongside them.

"I'm just glad you're safe," I said. "You should rest in one of the tents. How about sharing Maria's? You can continue talking after you've recovered."

"Maria, would that be all right?"

"Of course! I'd be happy to have you!"

As the conversation ended, we returned to the tent village. The sun was now directly overhead.

It's getting unbearably hot. The humans need to rest.

I grabbed the microphone for the LRAD speaker and addressed the camp of human survivors.

"Everyone! Your meals today include dried big-horned deer jerky. Please stop all work immediately. Working under the scorching sun is dangerous. Please stay in the shade of your tents and rest. This is not a request—it is mandatory. I'm sorry, but I won't allow any

dissent."

The people began retreating to their tents. Many lay down in the shade, some slumped against the tent walls, heads bowed in exhaustion.

That's as much as the human body can last under these conditions.

I turned my attention to the demons. "Gather round, everyone. It's time to distribute meals. And this time you need to eat as well. We'll have big-horned deer jerky and soup, and for something special, I'll summon canned Salisbury steaks and sausages."

"Finally!" Gog exclaimed, his face lighting up with a grin. He'd always loved the canned Salisbury steaks.


SALISBURY STEAK
SALISBURY STEAK
SALISBURY STEAK

"All right. I'll summon the food. Distribute it to the humans first, then come back for your share."

After ensuring every human had been fed, the demons returned to where the rations had been summoned.

"All right, let's eat!" I said.

"I don't require any food," Lufra said softly.

"Why not, Lufra?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"During the battle, I consumed...a few enemy soldiers," she admitted.

"Oh, okay," I said simply. "All right, then. The rest of you, dig in!"

Just as we began, Anamis spoke up. "I don't need food either."

"Anamis? You too? Why not?"

"Yesterday, during the battle, I fully drained some humans of their life force," she explained matter-of-factly.

"Oh, right. I did say you could do that," I said, nodding. She must be full then.

"In that case, I'll take your share," Gog said, immediately grabbing her cans.

"I'd like more as well," Zieg chimed in.

"Don't hold back," I said, laughing. "I'll summon as much as you can eat."

"Thank you!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Take what you want and eat to your heart's content."

"Yes, sir!" the demons cheered, eagerly digging into the feast.

At last, the demons began their meal. Despite having barely slept or eaten, none of them showed any signs of exhaustion. As I ate alongside them, I decided to hold a meeting to plan our next steps.

"For now, we'll focus on aiding Gladrom's recovery. The damage is far too severe for the humans to handle on their own. What they need more than anything else is water and shelter. I'll handle food for the time being, but I plan to ask Penta to help by catching fish. We'll also gather resources from the forest—animals, fruits, nuts, and other plants. However, the forest is too dangerous for unarmed humans, so we'll have to take care of that ourselves."

"Yes, sir!" the demons responded in unison.

"I'll consult King Paul about finding a reliable source of water. For

shelter, we'll cut down trees in the forest and bring them into Gladrom to rebuild homes. However, this will require us to bring in dwarves from the Land of Demons. Someone will need to return by ship with my instructions, as I can't leave yet myself."

"Yes, sir!"

After we finished eating, I went to Paul's tent. Paul was awake, his hands clasped tightly in prayer.

"If you don't rest, you won't be able to make it through the coming days," I said gently.

"I know," he replied, his voice heavy. "But I can't sleep. The screams and cries of my people haunt me. So many who were here just yesterday are now gone. Their deaths...are on my hands. My subjects, my servants—I killed all of them. I don't know how to atone for this, or if I deserve to even live."

How could anyone find peace after losing so many in such a short time? Most of the survivors must have lost family members too, and their will to live along with them. Most of them likely now existed in a state of deep despair. If we were to rebuild, we would need to heal their hearts as much as their city.

"I understand. It's impossible to move past what happened so quickly," I said. "But we must move forward for those who survived. Please, let us help you rebuild. We must both now face a powerful enemy, and I have the strength to fight them. If possible, I'd like to establish a base here. May I ask for your blessing?"

"That would be an honor," Paul said. "We've always had a good relationship with Lord Galdzin. But I fear we have nothing to offer in return. How could you possibly benefit from helping us?"

"Then let us use the land. Please grant us a portion of the territory adjacent to Gladrom. We need a base on the mainland, and I intend to build it here."

"That's more than acceptable. With your help, our recovery will go faster. We would be grateful for your assistance," Paul said.

As we spoke, Father Cruz entered the tent.

"Father Cruz, thank you for coming," I said. "I'd like to discuss the liberation of Rashtal and Schladen with you."

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Our mission from the Demon King is to free the entire world from oppression.”

“A bold ambition,” Father Cruz said. “But with power like yours, perhaps it’s possible.”

“I will do everything I can to make sure we succeed.”

“Then please, allow me to help,” he said, stepping forward to take my hand.

Paul, standing beside me, let out a chuckle and took my other hand. “Well, I cannot continue to wallow in despair while you two push forward. Count me in as well!”

“Father Cruz,” I said, “Rashtal has lost its royalty and nobility. After we reclaim it, someone must sit on the throne. Would you be willing to take on the role of king?”

“Me, a king? Impossible! I’m not fit for such a position!”

“Without a leader, the people will have no direction, and the country won’t recover. Even if it’s temporary, I ask for your help.”

“Only until someone more suitable can take the throne,” he said reluctantly.

“That will be enough,” Paul assured him.

“We need to expand our territory strategically,” I told them. “We can’t just march right into the heart of the enemy’s territory. And to do that, I’ll need your cooperation.”

“You’ll have it,” Paul said.

“I’ll gladly help,” Father Cruz added.

“Our first target is the town of Luton at the crossroads between the Kingdom of Rashtal, the Holy Land of Fattoria, and Gladrom. It will serve as our forward base,” I explained.

“I see,” Paul said, nodding thoughtfully.

“You mean to secure a base from where we can strike at either nation,” Father Cruz added.

“Yes, but not immediately. First, we must focus on rebuilding this city,” I said firmly.

“Then securing a water source should be our priority,” Paul suggested.

“Do you know where we can find one?”

"I do. Heading east beyond the Gladrom cemetery, you'll reach the mountains. At their base lies a forest, and within it, a lake. It remains untouched due to the presence of magical beasts, but I believe your people could drive them back," Paul said thoughtfully. "And thankfully, we have over two hundred human survivors. With their help, we could build a canal for the water, which would also allow us to begin farming within the city."

"Understood. We'll assist with the construction and provide protection."

"That would be most helpful. Until that's secured, we'll need drinking water. Gladrom has numerous wells, but they've been buried under the scorched rubble. Could you help locate and excavate them?"

"Of course. Gog and Zieg are perfect for that—they have excellent noses for such things."

"I'm deeply grateful," Paul said.

Paul had clearly been considering these things already. Even in the depths of despair, he'd never stopped thinking about how he could help his people survive. He was a true king.

"If I may," Father Cruz interjected, "we are also in dire need of medical facilities and supplies."

"I agree," I said.

"I want to send people to gather medicinal herbs from the forest, but it's too dangerous for humans. The magical beasts would kill us before we could put up a fight."

"So, you need protection?"

"Exactly."

"Very well. We'll also prioritize creating a facility for processing the medicine as well."

"That would be invaluable," Father Cruz said with a sigh of relief.

"While we're gathering herbs, we can also hunt the magical beasts for meat and collect fruits. That'll kill two birds with one stone," I added.

Together, the three of us brainstormed the first steps needed to rebuild Gladrom.

"Then let's get started," I said. "May the bonds between us

endure forever."

"Thank you," Paul replied.

"Yes, may it last forever," Father Cruz echoed.

Thus ended the first summit between our three nations.

Epilogue

We settled into Gladrom and began the arduous work of its reconstruction. Unlike the Land of Demons, this place was rich in resources. The abundance of edible magical beasts made it easy for the demons to secure food.

"If we can restore this land as a base, it'll become our foothold for expanding into the mainland," I said.

"It's just as you say, my lord," Sharmilia replied. "With your strength, reclaiming the mainland will be a simple task."

As always, Sharmilia's faith in me was unwavering. But I made sure to keep my feet firmly on the ground. We didn't know the full extent of our enemies' power, or the threats posed by the magical beasts of the mainland. We couldn't count on the enemies' forces being our only obstacles.

"I agree with Sharmilia," Gersham added. "Your power has brought the rest of us greater strength."

Both Sharmilia and Gersham had proven themselves indispensable as my most trusted lieutenants. I could delegate any task to them and know it would be done. We would need as many leaders as we could gather for the campaign ahead, and these two would be crucial in our mission to strengthen our forces.



"Still, the discovery that your mother's relative survived is wonderful news," Sharmilia said.

"It is," I agreed. "I'm ashamed that I came so close to killing my own cousin. I'm truly happy that she's survived everything she has."

"We understand your feelings all too well, my lord," Sharmilia said softly.

"I value all of you too," I said, glancing between Sharmilia and Gersham.

Sharmilia smiled. "You honor us, master. Thank you for your kindness."

"Truly," Gersham said with a nod. "It's a privilege to serve someone like you."

Before I could reply, Catherine walked up to us.

"Lord Raul, the meal's ready!" she said with a cheerful smile.

"Thanks, Catherine. A former noble who can cook—you're full of surprises," I said, grinning.

She gave a small laugh. "I picked it up while working as a servant."

"You've done well," I said.

Sharmilia and Gersham both gazed upon her with looks of approval. It turned out that she had been a high-ranking noble in Eucrit, of even higher status than the Forrest family. Despite that, she treated others with kindness and humility, winning the respect of the demons.

"Come now, Lord Raul! If you wait too long, the food will get cold!" Catherine urged, motioning for me to follow.

Her energy was a far cry from the wary girl I'd first met. Knowing that someone from Eucrit's nobility had survived gave me hope for the coming campaign to reclaim the various nations from the control of the enemy.

With Catherine's hand pulling me along, I followed her to where everyone awaited me.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been a while! This is Midorimamesora. The second volume has finally been published! Thank you so much for picking up this book! I'm so happy! I'm savoring this moment of joy together with Raul, the Bullet Hellion himself.

Now, this might seem a bit sudden, but let me ask you something, dear reader: What hobbies do you enjoy? Lately, I've been into trading card games. I'm not usually up to date with trends, yet I've found myself visiting trading card shops and just staring at the cards, despite not knowing much about them. I can't help but think, "These are so cool!" While I'm just admiring them for now, I've started to dream a little. What if the characters from *Bullet Hellion: The Gunslinging Demon Prince* became trading cards? I feel like people would connect even more deeply with characters they already know and love. Of course, for that to happen, the game itself would need to exist first—and I'm fully aware of the complexities of that. For now, it's just a fantasy.

But, dear readers! Wouldn't you love to see Raul, Sharmilia, Maria, Gersham, Gazzam, Gog, Lusemia, Phantom, and Iona—all with art drawn by the talented Naoki Akamine—become trading cards? I know I would! Even Gruis Peintos, who died in the first volume, was so cool! It would be such a waste if he didn't make it in. He'd definitely be a rare card! Please, join me in supporting this dream and making it a reality someday!

In my imagination, I'm already the best player of the trading card game *Bullet Hellion*. I can see myself proudly collecting cards of Sharmilia Mistroad, and of course, Gersham, Gazzam, and Gog.

Ha ha ha... Okay, I'll stop with my fantasies for now.

Finally, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who helped make volume two possible, to Naoki Akamine-sensei for inspiring my card game daydreams, and to you, dear readers, for

purchasing this book. Your support means everything to me!

Thank you so much, and I hope you'll continue to stick with me in the future!

July 2023
Midorimamesora

Author Information
Midorimamesora
The story enters the Bullet Demon Prince Raul's training arc!
Most bad guys? He'll just shoot 'em!
Occupation: A trial-and-error dark hero in another world!
Motto: "Firearms are friends, not scary!"

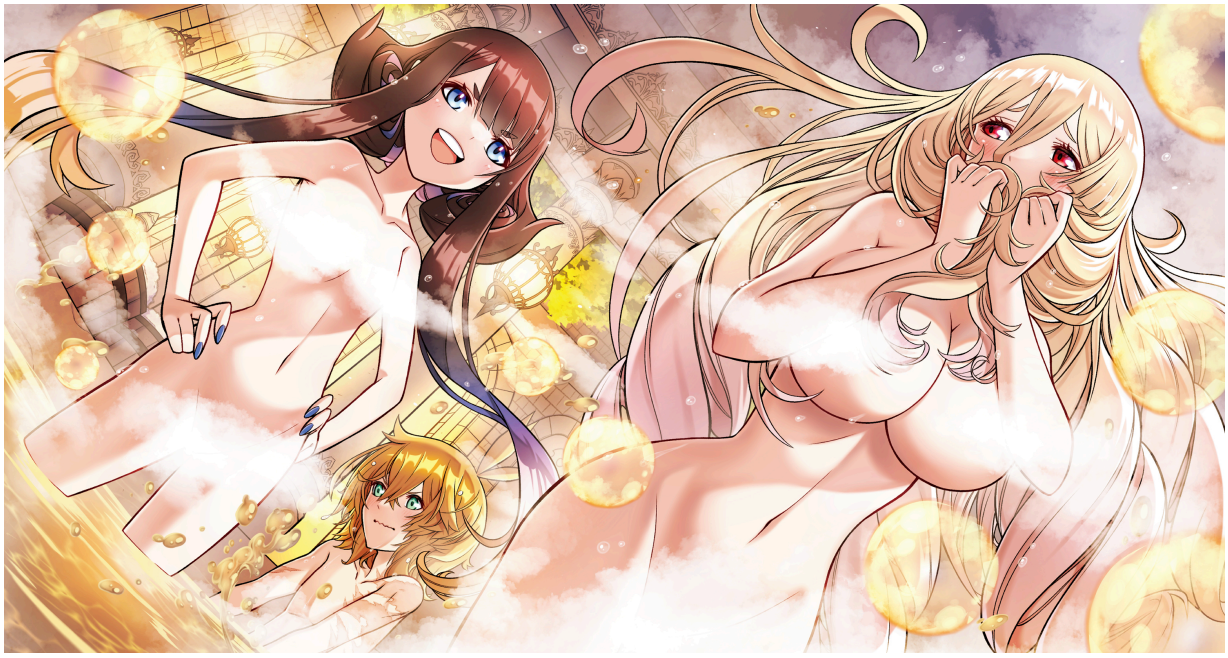
Though our protagonist might be a bit strange, don't worry—he's serious about his training too!

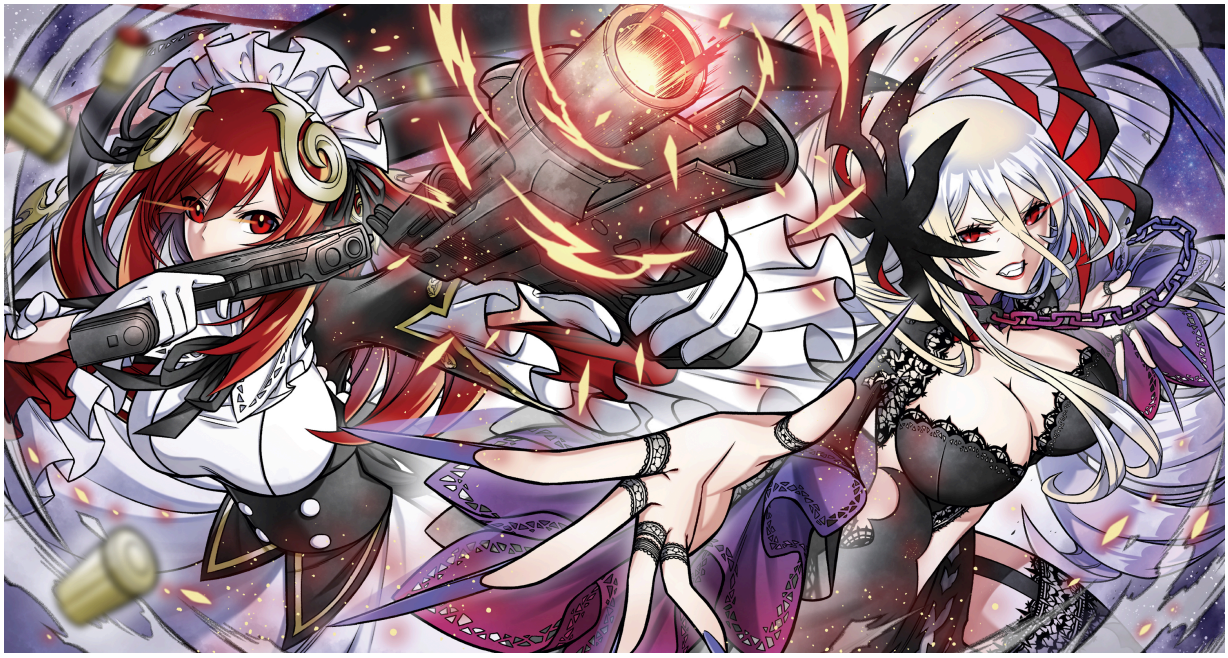
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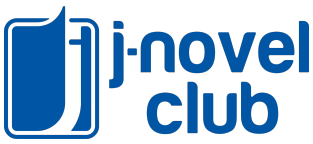
In a new place with new allies, the Bullet Hellion Raul and the Demon Lord's Army train to grow stronger every day.

I'll continue to work hard alongside them to create illustrations that bring out their unique charm!









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Bullet Hellion: The Gunslinging Demon Prince Crushes Another World with Modern Arms Volume 2
by MIDORIMAMESORA

Translated by Jeremy Browning Edited by Austin Conrad

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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