I'm Quitting Heroing



Vol. 1

Part 1

Original Work: Quantum

Character Design: Hana Amano

KADOKAWA

I'm Quitting Heroing



Vol. 1

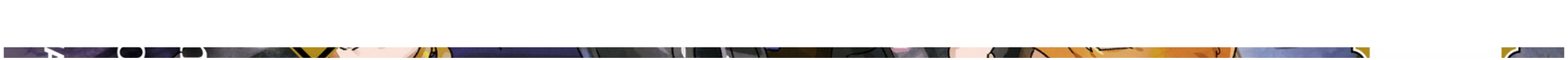
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Sorcerer General Shutina

Chief Administrator

Shadowless General Mernes

Spymaster General





Dragon General Edvard

Army Commander

CHARACTER



Leo Demonhart

Former Hero



Echidna

Demon Queen



Beast General Lili

Quartermaster General



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Epilogue

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Chapter 1: Just Hire Me

1 — A Hero Arrives at the Interview Room

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

Four knocks, not too loud, not too quiet. After waiting for the "come in," I put my hand to the thick, red-iron door.

...I'm getting this job. I'm taking it. It's mine, no matter what. This is the only place I have left to go!

I pumped myself up, faced forward, and pushed the door open. The frigid air of the interview room—or rather the throne room—caressed my cheeks.

How many months had it been since I'd visited here last? Three months, was it? It used to be such a grand, overpowering space, but now...it had become bland and cold.

The torn-up red carpet. The pieces of shattered full plate armor scattered over the floor. The scars on the floor and walls left behind by the brutal battle between demon queen and hero were still as vivid as ever, with no signs of repairs.

Awaiting me deep in the room, sitting nobly upon the grand throne, was a girl in a crimson dress.

The Overlord of the Demon World, the Empress of Conflagration: Demon Queen Echidna.

She was attended on both sides by her adjutants, the Four Great Guardians.

All eyes were on me.

I bowed deeply to them, then took off the robe on which I had cast the disguising illusion spell Ghost Face, revealing my identity. A look of shock came over Echidna's face, and I saw her rise from her throne.

Her reaction was understandable. A mere three months ago, we were desperately trying to kill each other, after all. A no-holds-barred battle to the finish, a dance of death that the hero won. Hero, meaning me.

Mixed feelings too difficult to describe festered between her and I.

Still, let bygones be bygones. The war was over, and now was the time to look to the future—the time for human and demon to join hands and step towards a hopeful tomorrow.

Now, Echidna was no fool. No one knew more than her how much the Demon Queen's army was hurting for help. Hell, I was sure they'd hear out anyone—*anyone*—even the hero that, well, defeated them and got them in this mess in the first place.

I laid my resume on the hastily-made wooden table in the room and began to sell myself, just as *Interviewing Like A Pro!* had told me to. I'd read it a few times on the way here, by the way.

You want to speak clearly and thoroughly elaborate on your history, while proudly proclaiming what you're able to do.

"I am Leo Demonhart, former hero! I'm particularly skilled at swordsmanship, black magic, spirit magic, sacred magic, and all other arcane schools! My portfolio includes the defeat of Demon Queen Echidna in single combat, and I can be put to work right away!"



I thought maybe a vein appeared on Echidna's forehead around the "defeat of

the Demon Queen" part, but that was probably my imagination at work. The book had told me to simply present facts as facts, after all.

As for my motivation for applying, well...I figured I could embellish a tad. After all, who doesn't lie in interviews nowadays? I took a deep breath and shared my motivation.

"I wish to join the reborn Demon Queen's army to bring ruin upon the foolish humans of the land and establish a demons' kingdom that will last a thousand years!"

"....."

I was met with silence.

Beams of gentle spring sunlight poured into the throne room as sparrows flittered about outside.

I stood there, tall and proud after selling myself, waiting for the reactions of my interviewers: the Demon Queen and the Four Great Guardians.

The Four Great Guardians did not budge. It seemed that no one was quite sure how they should respond.

But what of their master, Demon Queen Echidna herself?

...Well, it looked like I left quite a good impression on her. She must have been overjoyed to have such a talented applicant show up, because she sat in silence with her head bowed and shoulders trembling in apparent relief.

After about a minute, Echidna finally stood up and held out her hand in my direction.

Then it happened.

"Of course you're not getting the job, moron!"

The fiery red explosion accompanying her scream instantly filled my view.

2 — The Hero Explains His Motivation

...The explanation for how I got to that moment lay a year in the past.

I departed from the holy city Renaye as the chosen hero, bringing peace to the human world by defeating the Demon Queen Echidna as she attacked with her armies from the Demon World.

It was a solo journey, for a number of reasons, but I couldn't say the combat presented much challenge. I may be tooting my own horn here, but I've always been very strong. I'd obtained the title of Royal Knight, had mastered the use of most weapons, and was a first-rate mage. And it wasn't just combat skills, either—I could boast the knowledge of a guild master when it came to hunting or alchemy.

And, well...it may sound a bit presumptuous, but party members would simply get in my way.

That's no joke, they really would. Priests? All they can do is cast healing spells. And fighters? They can't tell a spell from a charm. Was I to build up a relationship with that dead weight, defeat our foes with the power of friendship, and divvy up rooms at the inn whenever we stopped in town? What a pain! Could anything be slower? In that time, I could have saved the world five times over!

With that in mind, I embarked on my journey alone and defeated the Demon Queen alone.

"Lord Leo, wasn't that personality of yours the reason for your solo journey?"

"If you'd let me finish. I'm telling you, I've had a change of heart!"

"Yeah! He had a change o' heart!"

"Shut up, Lili. And quit your hopping."

"...Goodness."

The succubus sitting directly across the table from me let out a very noticeable sigh.

She twirled her wavy, blonde hair with an alabaster finger while tapping on the table in mild irritation with her other hand. This succubus mage was one of the Four Great Guardians and Demon Queen Echidna's right-hand woman, Sorcerer General Shutina: The Almighty Magic.

Her sizable bust noticeable even under her generous robes, her beautiful face... Normally, I would have already been hitting on her, but unfortunately, it seemed I was not being welcomed.

Shutina wasn't the only member of the Four Great Guardians here, either. The first to comment was an enormous man well over six feet tall. Dragon General Edvard, a dragonfolk swordsman with scales tougher than steel, as most of his people boasted.

Hopping about next to him was Lili, a carefree girl. Surprisingly, she was also one of the Four Great Guardians. Although she looked like little more than a human girl at a glance, the white wolf ears peeking from her hair and the wolf tail protruding from her shorts stood out. People like her are called demi-beastfolk. Anyway, Beast General Lili was in charge of the army's beastfolk and magical beasts.

The silver-haired boy looking at Lili with cold eyes was Shadowless General Mernes. A genius of the killing arts, he rose to the top of the Assassins' Guild at the mere age of 16. He always wore a hood to cover his features, and friendliness even toward comrades seemed to be an alien concept to him. Of

course, he, too, was one of the Four Great Guardians.

After looking at the four in turn, I offered my honest opinion.

"You guys sure are a varied lot."

"Where did that come from?"

The four generals of the Demon Queen's army and their mortal enemy, the hero, were sitting in the same room enjoying a pleasant spot of tea. This absurd scene was taking place in a guest room separated from the Demon Queen's castle.

This probably needed to be explained.

It all happened about an hour prior. Not a minute after I strode into the throne room to receive my interview did I earn the ire of Demon Queen Echidna, which led to me being thrown off the premises. The moment she heard me say why I wanted to join the Demon Queen's army, she blasted me with fire magic in a rage, but I didn't let that get to me. No, even immolated, I held up the presentation I'd made enumerating the ways I would be a useful addition to her forces, and began repeating those personal strengths I'd spent all night thinking up. This, unfortunately, was fuel to her flames.

After being cast out like garbage at the castle gates, I decided not to let my chance escape and infiltrated the fortress once more. I quietly rounded up Echidna's assistant interviewers, the Four Great Guardians, and with much persuasion dragged them out to the guest room for my...second? Yeah, my second interview.

Echidna knew nothing of this, of course. If she learned that that accursed Leo still drew breath in her halls, I was sure she would come to kill me with enough rage to burn down the entire castle. And that would just ruin the whole thing.

I wasn't here in the Demon Queen's castle to mess around. I was here to get a job.

I wanted to join the Demon Queen's army and work for Echidna. That desire brought me all the way from the holy city to the Demon Queen's castle, deep within the Seshat Mountains, and she just turned me away without hearing me out? Heartless! Too heartless! At least hear me out! Give me another chance!

After casting aside my pride, pleading with Shutina and groveling on the ground before her, I managed to get her to prepare this guest room for my second interview. There was no way I could afford to mess it up.

"Before I get into the main topic, I'd like to do a bit of a presentation."

"A what?"

Lili had a huge question mark hanging over her head. I waved it off and continued.

"I'd like you all to consider my strength. I defeated all of you on my own, remember? Now, I will admit I'm not the easiest guy to get along with, but you can at least acknowledge my skill, right?"

"Ahahaha! Point taken, point taken."

Booming laughter came from the red-haired giant.

"Indeed, Lord Leo, your skill is the stuff of legends. I can hardly remember the last time I was defeated in a fair duel! Ahahaha!"

"Edvard, that is hardly anything to laugh over!"

The towering Edvard shrugged off Shutina's chiding and scooped up a large bottle of wine. After downing its contents in a single swig, he reached for another. Shutina furrowed her brow.

Edvard, the Dragon General—also known as the Red Roar—was the first of the Four Great Guardians I fought.

If I had to compare, I'd say in terms of raw ability he was the toughest nut to crack. Dragonfolk like him were known for their ridiculously strong dragon scales, you see. Luckily I'd been a master of magic, because if I had to take him on in a sword duel, it's anyone's guess. The man was a fool...er, sorry, a noble warrior with a penchant for charging the enemy alone, and that saved me from a grueling battle.

Why was a man of such strength and talent letting himself stew under Echidna? I had to ask.

"Hey, Edvard."

"Yeah?"

"Why're you working for Echidna, anyway? I mean, you could probably take over the world yourself."

"Why, you ask? I've never given it proper thought, lad, but...really, the life of a simple swordsman facing powerful opponents, that's all I want. And besides..."

Edvard paused, then took a big swig of wine and laughed.

"Not many jobs busier than a king, and that would cut into my father-daughter time with Julietta! I couldn't bear it, no sir! Hahahaha!"

"Daughter, huh?"

Watching Edvard down wine like it was water made me feel thirsty myself. I took a sip of tea from my cup then looked at him again. The man was straight as an arrow. I fully believed his statement.

Edvard's boss, Demon Queen Echidna, was a bit of an odd bird. Though she'd led an army from the Demon World to conquer the human realm, she had kept needless killing to a minimum, and commanded her subordinates to rule occupied territory as peacefully as possible. And she meant it. A few evil lords were overthrown, and the peasants lived better under her army's rule—which sounds like a joke, but it really isn't. I suppose it's only natural an honest man like Edvard would be pulled into such an army's leadership.

"When you put it like that, I feel bad for him."

"Hm? What for?"

A voice rang out from beside Edvard. It came from the silver-haired boy wearing his hood pulled low.

He looked at me with a touch of pity in his eyes.

"He was traveling alone, right? That means he didn't have even a single friend. It's sad."

"...You're the last person I want to hear that from, Mernes. You don't have any friends either, I guarantee it."

Shadowless General Mernes, the Invisible Blade. I fought him after Edvard.

He was a silent, grumpy, moody kid. I'd heard that the Assassins' Guild had a half-demon in their ranks, and when I met him, his speed and ability to mask his presence was unparalleled. Even *I* had trouble following his movements.

We fought our decisive battle in an old church in some town. As light poured in through the stained-glass windows, Mernes zipped back and forth with near-invisible speed, slicing into me with his dagger. Five more minutes and he would have won, but fighting against his speed had never been my intention.

While he was having a jolly old time dashing around, I'd been focusing on defense and chanting a spell, waiting for the perfect time to unleash my Crimson Comet. The taboo spell would blast away everything in its radius, caster included, and it sure did. Its force knocked out both Mernes and the church, and I ended up with painful burns all over, but I'd say I came out on top after defeating one of the Four Great Guardians.

If anything, the true struggle came after defeating Mernes. The Crimson Comet was so powerful it ended up destroying a statue somewhere in town, which I heard was a really important cultural artifact. So when the townspeople came running up to my battered and bruised self, they didn't thank me, no. They demanded a massive sum in compensation. Can you believe those people? I busted my ass adjusting the power of my spell to beat Mernes without killing any of them, and that was the thanks I got?

In that moment, I swore never to use a taboo spell in town again, and promptly ran off without paying them a single copper.

"What was that argument you were having with the people in town? Something about compensation, or..."

"I can't hear you! I can't hear youuuu!"

When I plugged my ears to avoid Mernes's question, Lili mimicked my pose from the seat across from me.

"I can't hear you! I can't hear youuuu!"

"...Um, Lili."

"Eheheheh. Hey, Leo, what'd you think of my impression? Did I do it right?"

Lili laughed and came happily trotting over to me with her white tail wagging. I recalled she was the third of the Four Great Guardians I fought, right after

Mernes.

Beast General Lili, the Ruthless Fang. This demi-beastfolk from the continent of Erkia in the west was able to communicate with any type of beast and could turn into a fearsome one herself. Now, that all may sound impressive, but in reality, she was just a silly wolfgirl.

I won't mince words. I should have never gotten involved with her.

"Why did I give her the time of day?"

"Hm? What?"

As I stroked the head of the girl pressing against me, I thought back to how we first met.

It was a ridiculous encounter, when I think about it. It happened when I was on the way to the next town, fresh from defeating Mernes.

A sudden rain dampened my plans, and after taking cover under some trees, I turned to find a girl standing next to me. After speaking with her for a bit, I found out that she had amnesia, no parents, no friends, and nowhere to go.

Now, I couldn't leave a needy child in danger, so I offered to take her under my wing—until her memories returned, of course—and she helped me take care of a few matters. When her memories returned, I found out that she was Beast General Lili.

Looking back, I really, really should have abandoned her!

"Why did I give her the time of day?"

Lili glanced up curiously as I quietly repeated myself, then happily began to purr as I stroked her head again.

I didn't mind that she was one of the Four Great Guardians. Really, I didn't. I figured we'd have to fight eventually, and since her memories were back, I would simply beat her right away and that would be that. That's what I thought, at the time. And so I defeated her. Unfortunately!

Later I would learn that to her tribe, being defeated by a powerful member of the opposite sex was equivalent to meeting your fated spouse. She was traveling to the central continent where the Demon Queen's castle was located to fight a powerful man. In other words, she was looking for a mate. I'd jumped right into the romantic scope of a wolfgirl looking for love.

To put it simply, I was in the unenviable position of having Lili be terribly fond of me.

"Hey, mister, let's get married! C'mon, let's get married!"

"Sure. Maybe when you get a little bigger."

"No, not later! Now! Riiight nowww!"

Lili had been like this ever since I defeated her. I really wished she wasn't.

After peeling her off of me, I felt someone else's persistent gaze. It belonged to the beautiful succubus, Sorcerer General Shutina, whose brow remained furrowed.

She was, of course, the last of the generals I fought. Shutina, the Almighty Magic. Now, this will sound harsh, but she was laughably easy to defeat.

Rumor had it that she was imbued with particularly high magical power for a succubus, and had mastered all kinds of spells, ancient and taboo included. With that in mind, I cast the ancient spell Stasis, sealing any and all magic in its field, and challenged her to a physical battle.

And without her spells, the Sorcerer General was...embarrassingly weak.

After about two minutes of pummeling, she started begging for mercy in tears. A shame to see, really.

"I'm a mage! How am I supposed to defeat a hero in physical combat?!"

"Ideally, a professional would have a solution or two up their sleeves..."

"A solution?! Who in the world would immediately ignore all of my defensive spells and put up an ancient anti-magic field?!"

"Me! I would!"

With that, I defeated all of the Four Great Guardians, and you know the rest. I, Leo Demonhart the hero, invaded the Demon Queen's castle in the Seshat Mountains, defeated the Demon Queen Echidna, and brought peace to this world.

After learning that the Four Great Guardians and the Demon Queen had fallen, the Demon Queen's army fell into disarray, with occupying forces across the land laying down their arms. The army that had conquered more than half the world was decimated, and what remained ended up pushed back into the Demon Queen's castle in the center of the continent, completely losing any threat it had once posed.

"So we're all caught up, right?"

"I suppose?"

Shutina pressed a pale finger to her brow and pursed her lips.

"The question I asked was, 'Why did you, the hero, answer the call for applicants to the Demon Queen's army?' Did we really need to review how you defeated us for you to answer that?"

"I said I was giving a presentation, right? I wanted you to remember just how

strong I am before getting down to the meat of things. And besides...you've got to be a *little* curious about how your coworkers went down, right?"

An interview, you see, has steps to it. A flow. Depending on how you word it, even the blandest self-aggrandizing statement can sound like the most compelling of proposals. On the other hand, sometimes the most talented people will fall through the gaps simply because they didn't know how to sell themselves.

I wanted to front-load my explanation of my motivations with persuasiveness, and to do that, I needed them to remember my strength.

Dominate the flow of the conversation. That was the fastest way to win a job.

The other half of why I brought all that up was...I'll be honest. I wanted to see how the others would react to Shutina's embarrassing loss. That was it. And the other three spoke with no ill intent.

"Yeah, you're right. Everyone had been taken out before I knew it, and I wondered what'd happened to the others."

"Indeed, lad, right you are!"

"Yeah, I was real curious!"

"It sounds like Shutina got embarrassingly wrecked."

"Indeed, lad, right you are!"

"Yeah, real sad!"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Shutina going red as a tomato from having her unsightly defeat exposed.

Hm. Her reaction was unexpectedly straightforward. Weren't succubi more the type to toy with people? Or was she just poorly prepared to be toyed with

herself?

I was thinking of throwing her a lifeboat, but a howl of rage stopped me.

"...Just get to the point!"

Shutina slammed the table with both hands as she shouted.

My cup of freshly poured tea spilled out, leaving a brown stain on the tablecloth.

"Why did *you*, of *all people*, think to join the Demon Queen's army?!"

Shutina, Mernes, Lili, Edvard. All four pairs of eyes were on me.

Now, let me say this again. I didn't come to the Demon Queen's castle to play around. I had a solid reason, basis, and motivation to join the Demon Queen's army.

I gulped down the cookie I'd been munching on, peeled Lili off as she desperately attempted to climb into my lap, and leaned back in my chair. Then, I started to tell them why I wanted to join their army.

I was to reveal the reason that I, the man who brought the Demon Queen's army to ruin all by himself, wanted to join them now.

3 — The Hero Really Explains His Motivation

Why would the hero who saved the world want to join the Demon Queen's army?

Ridiculous. Truly, a ridiculous tale to the ears.

Leo Demonhart, hero of the land, defeated Demon Queen Echidna in a journey that lasted just a little over a year.

When I got back to the holy city of Renaye, I wasn't met with the cheers of the populace or a lavish reward from the king.

I only got one thing: glares. Glares of shock, fear, and skepticism. That was it.

"This monster is stronger than the Demon Queen."

"It's a beast in human form!"

"What if he turned on us? What then?"

"No one could defeat him."

"We would all be slaughtered."

"Kill or be killed! Slay the hero!"

To plenty of people, I was the next demon lord.

And if their misgivings weren't enough, the following day countless assassins began coming after me.

This move was really, incredibly stupid. I just wish they used their heads a little.

Before I started my journey, half the world was controlled by the Demon Queen's army. That meant all of the other armies of the world, all cobbled together, could barely fight them on even ground. Yet I defeated them all on my

own! Who in this world, might I ask, can kill me?!

Besides, one of the Four Great Guardians that I defeated was the Assassins' Guild's secret weapon! Get with the program. No amount of your commonplace assassins would dent me!

Come to think of it, some of them were smart enough to realize assassins wouldn't do the trick. They sent paladins after me disguised as bandits. That's not what I meant either, though.

Really, the whole thing was too baffling for me to comment on.

They couldn't kill the hero. Even a child could understand that.

So, I figured they could be diplomatic. They could raise me up as a hero again, try to win me over, put all that assassination stuff behind us. After all, I saved the world once, at least. I probably wasn't going to turn on humanity that easily.

I waited for public opinion to shift in that direction, but...it didn't happen. When you get the ball rolling on fear and anxiety, no one can stop it. Eventually, the saint-king ordered me exiled from the kingdom.

Although he appeared to empathize with me, I did not fail to notice the same glint of suspicion in his eyes as all the others.

I say exiled, but I never actually put down roots in the first place and had no place to call home. And as I wandered aimlessly, the world around me quickly lost its luster. Blue skies, abundant greenery, townspeople going about their daily lives...it all meant nothing now.

Why, I wondered, did I risk my life to protect this world?

Why did I fight the Demon Queen's army?

Oh. Wait. The army. How were they doing?

Would...would they accept me?

When I heard the rumor in a backwater village bar that the dark army was accepting volunteers and trying to rebuild itself, I made my decision.

I admitted that I was wrong to take the humans' side. I crossed the sea, climbed countless mountains, and reached the castle of my former foe, Demon Queen Echidna. Then, after staying up all night figuring out the words with which to sell myself, I disguised myself as a high-level demon and infiltrated her army interview proceedings.

The Demon Queen's army was the only place I had left.

If the world was trying to kill me, I would kill it first.

Those were my thoughts as I stepped into the interview.

"And that's why I want to join the Demon Queen's army."

"Urr...urgghh..."

I went to wet my throat and discovered my tea was cold.

Foolish humans, indeed. The Four Great Guardians fell silent after hearing my tale.

Except Lili. At some point she had pulled her chair up beside me and began making strange whimpering sounds. No...it might have been crying. It was hard to tell.

4 — The Hero's Trial Period

Now, there was this particular institution called job probation. A trial, if you will.

Originally developed by the merchant guild of the port town Ravelta, probation entailed a worker being employed on a trial basis for one or more months. Both sides stood to benefit.

For the employer, it allowed them to gauge the usefulness of the possible hire. For the employee, it gave them a physical taste of the atmosphere and culture in the workplace which they couldn't acquire otherwise.

There are plenty of things in life you can't really understand until you try them.

It's like fighting. A single bout is worth a hundred lectures, and the quickest way to understand someone is to do battle alongside them.

In this trial period, both parties would see how well they could work together.

"...Very well."

After letting out a long sigh, Sorcerer General Shutina finally spoke up. She then placed a thoughtful finger to her lips before reluctantly continuing.

"Pitiful hero, betrayed by the world he saved, who erred in his choice of master to serve, of populace to protect...your motives bear no falsehood. That I believe."

"Thank you, Sorcerer General Shutina."

My gratitude was sincere.

As I said before, the saint-king and other powerful figures like him sent assassins after me. Now, I would be fine if assassins were all I had to worry about. I'd defeated Echidna and the Four Great Guardians, so any number of bargain-bin footpads would be simple enough to dispatch. Beating them back without taking their lives was child's play. No, the problem was the PR damage that followed.

Mail, messenger crows, familiars, communication magic, flyers, speeches, and all sorts of other methods of information dispersal—those in power used all the means at their disposal to spread the word from city to city that I was a great danger. The assassins had changed their game, too. Instead of showing passersby that they were assailing me, they made it seemed like *I* was attacking *them*.

At that point, I'd found myself stuck. Inns would no longer have me, and I spent my days sleeping in tree hollows and stable corners.

The Demon Queen's army really would be an advantage in that regard. They'd at least give me the bare minimum to eat, I'd have a roof over my head when I slept, and I wouldn't have to worry about swatting away assassins every day.

Well, maybe. I'd likely have to deal with members of the old Demon Queen's army who had it in for me, but I would cross that bridge when I came to it. I made a mental note to come up with a peaceful solution when confronted. Either way, the castle would be leaps and bounds ahead of sleeping outside.

Shutina seemed to have the same worry about lingering grudges and hammered caution into me.

"Listen well. First, we're keeping it a secret from Queen Echidna that you've

joined the army. Make sure to use a magic item or spell to keep yourself disguised. There are still a few among our ranks that hold you in...less than high regard, and we wouldn't want one of them to happen upon you."

"A few, huh?"

"...Indeed. A few."

I figured there really were only a few.

The present Demon Queen's army was, after all, rather small—mainly thanks to my exploits. Their ranks had nearly been reduced to that of a rural militia, and the organization had mostly ceased functioning. Bolstering their ranks had to be their number one priority.

Now, listen. I'll say this here. I wasn't indiscriminately slaughtering their soldiers or anything like that. The only times I used spells of mass destruction, like Crimson Comet, was when fighting the Demon Queen herself, or one of the Four Great Guardians.

And how could I? Echidna's forces made a point of killing as little as possible. Slaughter brings slaughter, and resentment breeds resentment. If the Demon Queen's army was moving peacefully, then so would I. If grunts had occupied a town, I would disrupt the unit from within by casting Temptation or make them sick with Weakness and leave them tied up in a cell. I made sure not to create any unnecessary grudges as I went about my campaign.

Still, sometimes I'd encounter unavoidable fights. Particularly when I faced off against the Four Great Guardians. And when I headed for the Demon Queen's castle, legions of soldiers stood in my way. Even I have a limit to my restraint, so a lot of soldiers had to die.

That meant that most of the people who had it in for me were either dead or

back in the Demon World recovering. The real tough folk like Echidna aside, most guys who hated me probably looked at me like the guy they lost to in a bar fight.

"Yeah, I figure there's more than a few guys around here who have it in for me, so I'll make sure no one finds out who I am."

"I'm glad we've reached a mutual understanding. Seeing as I'm up to my eyeballs in work already, I would really rather not deal with more trouble."

A look of relief came over Shutina. Busy with work, huh? She must be, having to give interviews every day.

Work. I figured Echidna and the Four Great Guardians would take care of most of the jobs, interviews included, and hold off on invading human territory until they restored their ranks. Which meant I wouldn't have much work to do.

All I'd need to do is eat, sleep, play, and goof off. The Demon Queen's army sounded like it would be my ideal workplace.

"And remember, this is just a one-month trial! I'll be keeping a close eye on you as your supervisor, and I expect proper results from you!"

Let me correct myself.

It had sounded like my ideal workplace, but now it seemed that goofing off was out.

My reaction to that wasn't lost on Shutina. She walked right up to me, stared me straight in the eyes, and poked my foot with her staff.

"I trust you weren't thinking that you could spend your time here lollygagging about, helping yourself to our larders and warm beds, correct?"

"What, who, me? Never!"

She sighed as I waved my hands in denial. Then her voice took on an instructive tone.

"Listen, Leo. This is as much for you as it is for us."

"For me? What do you mean?"

"If you show us some results during this trial period, you won't simply end up a mere contract worker; we of the Four Great Guardians will beseech Queen Echidna to make you a full-time employee."

"I see. And if I don't show results?"

"You'll end up back on the road."

She didn't mince words.

Well, that's fair. Their coffers were likely running near empty as is. I couldn't imagine they could afford to hire someone who just lay around eating into the budget. Solid reasoning.

"All right, all right, I'll work. I'm tired of sleeping in trees, so I'll make it worth your while. Our first goal's to get the Demon Queen's army back up and running, right?"

"Correct. Recruitment of new soldiers, repairs to the castle, and procurement of armaments takes priority. From there, we'll need to reduce costs, bolster our employee benefits, provide counseling...rebuilding an army's no easy task."

I bet. I mean, I was the one who brought that army to a near unrecoverable state.

We had soldiers back in the Demon World recovering, soldiers who were still in human stockades and soldiers who deserted after having their fill of combat. Whatever their reasons for being gone, calling them back would be a tall order.

Going from near zero to the army's former glory would be like going from pauper to prince—a nigh-impossible task.

Which is why I wanted to sit down and ask Echidna these questions: *Why won't you abandon the human world after being beaten this badly? Is there some sort of reason?*

Sure, I'd lost my place in human society, but the biggest reason I wanted to join the Demon Queen's army was simply to chat with Echidna. Unfortunately, the interview went too poorly to allow me that opportunity, but I was sure I would have plenty of chances after my actual employment. I just wanted to sit down and have a nice, long talk with her.

"There's also maintenance of the magic power reactors, training the new recruits...Leo? Are you listening?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm listening."

"Shutina's not the only busy one! I got lotsa stuff to deal with, too! It's real hard!"

Shutina paused with lips pursed, and Lili saw her opening. Tail wagging excitedly, she leaped up from her chair as if propelled by a spring and began regaling me with her own difficulties.

"For a while they've been making me do lojjy...logistics? And it's real hard! I got a lotta work!"

"Are you kidding?"

I unwittingly vocalized my reaction.

Was Echidna of sound mind? She put this idiot in charge of logistics of all things? Did the stress finally get to her head? Concern came over me. Deep concern.

I turned to the other Four Great Guardians, and Shutina and Edvard awkwardly looked away. Mernes seemed entirely unconcerned as he busied himself with peeling an apple from the basket on the table.

I tried to trace the thought process. Bulky old Edvard was a warrior to the core, so I wagered he would be in charge of training the kobolds, orcs, and other muscular types into first-class warriors. And there were a few dragons among the applicants—larger wyrms and wyverns who understood human and demon language. Now, they have pride like you wouldn't believe and would only accept a dragonfolk like Edvard as their superior. That was more than enough to keep his hands full.

Shutina, on the other hand, would be responsible for the army's sorcerer troop with its ranks of succubi, fairies, and other mystical demi-humans and beasts with high magical abilities. She was also surely taking care of accounting and personnel, too, being one of the few brainy characters around.

You couldn't tell from a distance, but she had dark bags under her eyes, and her face was sickly pale. Her once glossy, blonde hair looked dull, telling me that she hadn't had the time to maintain it. Hell, she might just have been on death's door from overwork. A shame.

Mernes, well...he was as bad at communication as he looked, so he was a poor match on a fundamental level for the detail-oriented work logistics demanded. Given his skill set, he was fit best working with ghosts capable of avoiding detection, and dexterous beastfolk like goblins. Scouting, spy work, sabotage: his place on stage would be behind the scenes.

Unlike Lili, the other three had specific roles and niches to fill. However, an army needs food, water, and well-maintained equipment.

Logistics is an army's top priority.

"So you were the sacrificial lamb, Lili?"

"I sure was!"

Lili eagerly nodded, not grasping the significance of my quiet observation.

Aside from Demon Queen Echidna—whose duties were a mystery—Lili was the only free top-ranking officer. They had no choice but to put the army's lifeline, logistics, into the hands of this airheaded girl.

This was a serious tragedy. More than any of Shutina's complaints, it told me how tattered the Demon Queen's army was in terms of personnel.

"Wow, this is...a lot worse than I expected."

"And *whose* fault do you think *that* is?!"

"Whoa!"

I caught the silently cast Fireball Shutina threw at me with a silently cast Void Mist, gently wrapped it in my magic, and made it vanish without a trace.

Now, I want you to appreciate the fact that I didn't use the much easier Wind Shield here. If I had, the Fireball spell would have bounced off and exploded on a wall or the ceiling, rendering the guest room temporarily, if not permanently, unusable.

Able to remain considerate while making snap decisions—that was simply the kind of genius hero that I, Leo Demonhart, was. A man of all this talent, volunteering for the Demon Queen's army! Shutina really should have shown more respect. And I kept that complaint to myself—there's another lesson I wish she'd learn from me.

"Calm yourself Sorcerer General and think. What could be more of a boon than Lord Leo himself joining our forces? And is it not you most often

complaining about our lack of hands around the castle?"

"U-urgh...well..."

Shutina tried to object to what Edvard said, but Lili signaled her own objection to cut her off. It was clear Shutina still had something to say, though.

"...Tch. Very well. I am calm, yes, a very picture of composure."

Despite her reluctant silence, she seemed content not to pursue the issue further.

Edvard saw that and put one of his thick, log-like arms around my shoulder with a grin. It looked like I'd won his trust!

"Well then, what say we let the past stay in the past, yes? Glad to have you on board, Lord Leo!"

"Glad to have you here!"

"Yeah. Thanks, both of you. Glad to be here."

I stroked Lili's head as she clung to my waist, then glanced toward the corner of the table.

For better or worse, Sorcerer General Shutina would always let me know how she felt. And Dragon General Edvard and Beast General Lili were both friendly after our personal histories together. There was, however, one of the four who stayed out of the conversation and maintained his silence throughout.

"....."

Shadowless General Mernes. He'd continued watching me in silence after I'd shared my motivation, munching on his apple. I couldn't quite tell if he was pleased to have me around.

Wait. A horrifying thought crossed my mind. Did he pity my position so much

that he'd fallen speechless?

No. No, that couldn't be it. I shook my head to chase the foolish idea out.

The boy was an assassin. The type of person who can have a pleasant chat with someone one moment and lop their smiling head off the next. And Mernes was the top assassin, the guild master. Would someone like that have any heart left *to* pity someone? No. Impossible. One couldn't be an assassin while holding onto their humanity.

He wore a hood enchanted with disguising magic said to be passed down from guild master to guild master. Under that, his face held a neutral expression, telling me he didn't feel particularly strongly about his former foe joining forces with him. I decide to wave my hand in front of that face as a bit of a joke.

"Hey there, Mernes. You doing okay?"

"....."

His emerald-green eyes peeked out at me through his silver bangs. No answer.

"Looks like you are. Well, looking forward to working with you."

"....."

He vigorously ignored me. No, that's not quite true. He held up the silent act pretty well, but his eyes continued to follow me.

Then again, if the stars aligned and he said, "Glad to have you on the team, Leo! Let's do our best," well, that would just be kind of gross, so I didn't mind that he was keeping silent. Really, I didn't, but still.

We were going to be working together, so...I was hoping he would at least say

something to me.

A few hours after being rejected by Demon Queen Echidna, I, former hero Leo Demonhart, survived a second interview to win a period of trial employment.

"Phew..."

I was given a room in some corner of the Demon Queen's castle where I could relax. Lying down on the rickety bed and closing my eyes, I contemplated the job I'd be starting tomorrow.

There was a lot to do. Solving the lack of personnel; building up knowledge on how to run the organization; training the soldiers; communicating with my coworkers, the Four Great Guardians; building results for my full-time employment; and making up with my boss, Echidna.

Running into some issues with the humans was a concern, too. With the interviews going for days, they'd likely noticed all of the magical beasts and demi-humans and the like moving toward the center of the land. If the humans in power heard that the Demon Queen's army was starting to reform, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to imagine the sparks of war flaring up again. Perhaps if I put those embers out before they spread, Echidna might see me in a different light.

"Just watch me, Echidna. I'm getting into the Demon Queen's army, you'll see."

I'd just gotten the job, but there was already a ton of work to be done.

Chapter 2: Hero vs Sorcerer General Shutina

1 — Newbies, Be the First Guy Into the Office!

Days in the Demon Queen's castle started early—earlier if you were in your trial. You needed to get to work earlier than anyone to really show off your motivation if you wanted to get that job on lock.

Now, you might think that's overdoing it, but that's the sort of thing you need to pay attention to when getting used to a new environment. It's a newbie's job to win their coworkers' and boss's trust.

With that, I cast the Master Key spell to open the door before me and confidently strode into the room. It looked like the owner was still asleep. The curtains were closed, and it was rather dimly lit inside. Hm. I shuffled over to the windows and pulled the curtains open, filling the room with beautiful sunlight.

Truly, wonderful weather out.

The sun's rays poured into my cells, making me feel like I'm charged with energy for the day. I would have felt awfully blue if it had been cloudy or raining so early, but the beautiful weather reassured me that I'd enjoy work today. It was perfect weather to get down to business, really.

"Looks like she's still sleeping, huh. Well..."

Let's open one more.

I reached out to the door in the back of the room and used the same spell to unlock it. The inner room behind that door was even darker. There was some sort of incense in the air, and a lavish bed by the wall. I took the liberty of opening the curtains and letting light pour in.

"Zzz...mmm..."

"...Hey."

Even with all this light, she showed no sign of waking. Nope, she simply slumbered on, in the midst of some quality Zs. How could she be such an intense oversleeper? Well, this was part of a newbie's job. I had to do my boss the favor of waking her up.

"Hey, wake up."

"Mmm...mmm..."

First I tried telling her to do so, but she showed no sign of hearing me. Then, I tried shaking her shoulders.

"Come on, it's morning. Wake up."

"Urgh, give me...give me five more minutes..."

No dice. Strong shakes were meaningless before her slumber.

Was she just that tired? Had she been losing out on that much sleep?

I glanced back at the first room I passed through—the office she spent much of her time working in—and took note. Her mahogany desk held piles of documents which were clearly not the kind of workload you could knock out in a day or two.

I had a feeling from the start, but it looked like the woman slumbering away

in front of me was taking care of more than half of the work in the army. The only reason she'd been keeping afloat under this excessive burden was because she was made of tougher stuff than a human, I reckoned. If your average human had to deal with all of this, they'd die three deaths and be on the verge of dying a fourth for their trouble.

It made sense why she was sleep-deprived. I nodded to myself, then called out to her in a slightly sweeter tone of voice.

"Hey, Shutina. It's me, Leo. You've still got work to do, right? C'mon, wake up and I'll help you."

"No thanks... I just wanna relax in bed today..."

"Aren't you the one who told me to come to your room and get my orders first thing in the morning?"

"Mmm...zzz..."

"This...is getting me nowhere."

Well, damn. She showed no signs of getting up. She probably would if I waited for an hour, but that would waste my valuable first hour of my first day on the job. I couldn't let that happen.

After thinking it over, I decided to drag Shutina out of bed with a bit of force.

I murmured a spell under my breath while envisioning a particular individual. Her appearance, the pitch of her voice, how she spoke...there we go.

"Voice Change: Demon Queen Echidna."

A quietly spoken word or two confirmed the effects of the spell.

Ahem. Ahem. ...Okay. This sounded like it could work.

Then I took a deep breath and hollered loud enough for my voice to reach

Shutina in those delightful dreams she was surely having—in the voice of her *boss*, Echidna, of course.

"Sorcerer General, have you finished processing the applications?!"

"Eep?!"

"You would dare keep the Demon Queen waiting?!"

It worked wonders. She immediately jumped out of bed and prostrated herself before launching into an apologetic speech.

"F-forgive me, Queen Echidna! There were far more applicants than expected, and I've hit a...slight delay in processing them!"

"A delay in processing them? Now, that's no good."

"N-not at all! There may be a delay, but it's nothing I can't handle myself, so it will all be done by tomm...no, by today! I'll send you a list of applicants ready for the final interview!"

There we go. This was why she wasn't getting any sleep. It was great to see her working hard, but tightening the noose around her own neck like this would accomplish nothing.

"Listen, your problem is you're trying to do everything yourself. Train up some subordinates you can trust and make *them* work. That's your job as the boss, remember?"



"Yes, my liege, it is precisely as you...sa...?"

Shutina abruptly paused. She must have finally realized it wasn't Demon Queen Echidna standing in front of her.

Still, she took far too long to wake up. I had such a cool, imposing impression of her when we were on opposite sides, but not a shred of that image remained now. Maybe, as her drowsy replies had suggested, she was a lot looser and lazier at her core.

I took another look at her face, now illuminated by the sun. She stared back with her mouth agape in an expression I couldn't call intellectual. Still, her wavy blonde hair, with slight bedhead, sparkled in the morning rays.

My eyes went lower. Her bust, succubus-sized and wrapped in pink negligee, was a sight to behold.

It was then, I, rising rookie of the Demon Queen's army, Hero Leo Demonhart, smiled at the fully awake Shutina and properly greeted her.

"Good morning, Shutina. I know I'm a bit early, but give me some work."

"Pgyahhhhhhhh?!"

She didn't answer me with a "good morning" or even a "thank you."

Instead, she cast Icicle Lance, unleashing countless spears of ice—that could skewer an iron golem with ease—at the dark army's newest star.

2 — Work to Make Things Easier Tomorrow

Shutina and I had moved to the office next to her bedroom, and the atmosphere present there could hardly be worse.

"I can't believe this. I just can't believe this."

"Oh, lucky us. Hey, Shutina, the window frame itself is all right. Won't even take a day to fix."

"I can't believe this. I simply cannot believe this..."

"You really going to keep complaining? You've been going at it this whole time."

She had been complaining to herself for a full five minutes while I swept up the broken window glass on the office floor. I was surprised, really, that she could keep it going for so long. I wouldn't tell her to quit grumbling, but listening to it was really getting distracting.

Now, at work, communication with your coworkers is key. The smallest of small talk—even the most trivial things—forms the bedrock of trust between you and them. I decided to stop sweeping up and start listening to her troubles.

"So, let's hear it. What's got you grumbling?"

Sorcerer General Shutina's face turned beet red as she yelled back at me.

"You, obviously!"

Let's review. The army suffered from a brutal lack of personnel.

Now, this was little surprise. They were in such a bad state that they had the

Beast General taking care of logistics, the army's lifeline.

Like Shutina complained about during the interview, there was an immense amount of work to be done. Since many of the army's top brass had returned to the Demon World to recover from wounds I inflicted, those remaining had to deal with it all and there were many jobs only Shutina could handle.

Well, saying only she could handle them would be a bit of an exaggeration. Others could take on the jobs, but she was the only one who knew how to do most of them. Now, there was nothing really unusual about this. It's like all those little jobs in your average workplace that any veteran understands, but never bothers to write up in a manual.

Take the knight brigade I used to be a member of, for example. The captain was left-handed, so you needed to switch the placement of his sword and shield in the armory, and you couldn't get permission to charge red potion purchases to the expense account if you didn't buy them in lots of a hundred, et cetera.

None of this was written anywhere, and if you messed up, you'd get a lecture for having the audacity to not know something that *no one had told you in the first place.* Like, I was the new guy! You could have let me know in advance!

So, getting back on topic, Shutina was a busy woman. Far too busy to compile a manual for any subordinates. The other Great Guardians were busy too, and nobody had time to go training potential delegates.

Yet at the same time, her boss, Echidna, wanted this army back in action as soon as possible.

What could she do? Nothing. Nothing but sacrifice her sleep hours.

She had to keep paddling against this flood of work just to stay afloat and not drown. As I suspected, her desperate attempt to refill the army's ranks had

driven her to death's door from overwork.

That explained why the Icicle Lance she blasted at me seemed so wimpy. She probably only had a fraction of her normal magical strength—hell, I could probably defeat her without casting Stasis like I did before, easy. Even if she launched her most powerful attack spell at me, it likely wouldn't have pierced my defensive enchantments.

To conclude: too much of the work had fallen onto Shutina.

Of course, I had figured that out during the interview days prior, and had arrived here first thing in the morning to lighten her load, but...

"Hey, I'm here to help you with all this work, all right? You could show a little gratitude, you know."

"Have you lost your mind?"

Her reply was immediate. I got nothing but a cold stare and the sound of her disgust in her voice.

"You just barge into someone's room and mimic the Demon Queen's voice? ...It's not normal! Who would do that?!'

"Well..."

"Why would I show a shred of gratitude to someone like that?!"

"All right, all right, just take it easy, okay?"

And besides, what gives a top leader in the Demon Queen's army, of all people, the right to lecture me on being "normal"?! I decided not to make a fuss about that, though. If I nudged her any further, we might end up in a duel to the death. I scooped up one of the papers on her desk to change the topic.

"Anyway. This a list of your work?"

"It is. The higher priority items are higher up on the list."

I ran my eyes down the page after she angrily nodded in agreement.

Evaluation of applications, reorganization of the sorcerer corps, regular maintenance of the Demon Queen's caretaker homunculi, budget slashing on castle operating costs, et cetera, et cetera. The piece of paper held a list of all sorts of task names. There were exactly 50 in total.

Now, 50 is a nice, round number to end on, but seeing it all in a list like this sent a chill down my spine. Was she really doing all of this, all by herself? ...Seriously?

"Delegate this crap to someone else."

"I told you before, there *is* no one to delegate this to! Not a single subordinate or coworker!"

"All right, all right. Sorry, my bad."

While I was soothing Shutina's flaring temper, I picked up a red-inked feather pen. Then, I circled the bottom task, the one lowest on the priority list.

The least important of all 50 tasks: refilling of the magic power reactors around the castle.

As the name suggested, a magic power reactor was a structure meant to store mana, a spellcaster's magical power. They were constructed around rubies, aquamarines, emeralds, and other well-polished jewels, which made perfect catalysts for pooling this power.

Magic power reactors had a variety of handy uses. Connecting a circuit to the reactor allowed you to activate all sorts of magical items, power guardian golems, or replenish your store of magical power when it was near empty. They were surprisingly easy to maintain, too—all you needed to do was touch the

reactor and pour in your magic power. When the reactor was full, your job was done.

A number of facilities in the castle had to be running off the energy of these reactors. Using their magic power would cause them to run out, of course, so they had to be refilled periodically.

Now, you might think that just any old hedge wizard could fill them up with magic, but it didn't work like that. As a rule, only the sorcerer who made a particular reactor could refill it.

Much like the way every person has a different voice, every spellcaster has a different magic wavelength. A sorcerer would tweak a catalyst bit by bit in accordance with their wavelength to create a reactor, meaning that maintenance—a refilling of magic power—needed someone of the same wavelength. The creator, in other words.

Now, it was possible to force magic power into the reactor, but that would greatly reduce its lifespan. In the worst-case scenario, it would end up overloading and its core would destroy itself, leaving the reactor unusable as a whole, and forcing the user to make an entirely new one with valuable catalysts.

Jewels usable as catalysts were relatively rare, and simply acquiring them was a pricey endeavor. Since the army was already suffering a dire lack of materiel and personnel, they wanted to avoid reactor breakdowns at all costs.

"One, two, three...okay, I count that you made four of the reactors in use."

"Mm. There are over a hundred magical power reactors in the castle, so mine only occupy a small fraction. All I need to do is refill them once every few days."

The strained look on Shutina's face told me that wasn't as easy as it sounded.

And how could it be? She had to find time in her brutal work schedule, walk all the way to each individual reactor, then make sure she didn't break the valuable catalysts with her power infusion—a simple task but it allowed no mistakes. And she had to do this once every few days? It had to be a pain.

That was where I came in!

I wasn't your run-of-the-mill, third-rate mageling—I was the hero, Leo, master of magic! Copying Shutina's magical wavelength was kindergarten to me and refilling her reactors would be a piece of cake.

I had to smile to myself. Good thing I was so good at magic. If I kept on lightening her workload, I knew she would start thinking better of me!

A recommendation from one of the Four Great Guardians. Full-time employment. A rosy future awaited me!

"What are you grinning to yourself for?"

"No reason. Anyway, this reactor refilling stuff? Yeah, I'll be doing that from now on. Let me at 'em."

"Oh, that? I would appreciate it. It's more taxing than it looks."

Instead of being surprised, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Wait, what? No 'are you really up to this?' No 'how are you going to handle it?'"

"You're going to copy my wavelength, aren't you? Come on, any sorcerer worth their salt knows their way around a Harmonize spell, that's normal. You're not mocking me, are you?!"

"N-no, I would never!"

I gently pushed aside the accusatory finger Shutina pointed at me and shook

my head.

Harmonize, the magic synchronization spell. Despite what Shutina implied, a lot of sorcerers didn't know the special technique where you could use it to copy someone's wavelength and fill up their reactors. I guessed she wasn't the Sorcerer General for nothing. Damn, and there I had been hoping to get her to owe me one by showing her this weird trick.

And this, too, was "normal." I could feel her weak point coming into view.

"Anyway, leave the reactor business to me. Thirty minutes and two hours. I'll finish it all in thirty minutes and two hours."

"What do you mean 'thirty minutes and'? Just say two and a half hours."

Disappointment began to color her tone.

"Is it really going to take that long? It would only take me a bit under an hour."

"Listen."

Now, that was my issue with people who couldn't see the bigger picture. I was taking some work off her hands. Why couldn't she just have been happy about that? She sounded like she'd need some convincing, so I got down to explaining.

"Don't be like that, Shutina. And look, I swear this on my name as a hero."

"Swear what?"

"That I absolutely won't do anything you'll regret. Absolutely. After two hours and thirty minutes, I guarantee you'll be overjoyed and saying, 'Great, work is going to be so much easier now! You're amazing, Lord Leo! Brilliant! I love you!' I bet you'll be kissing me, too."

"Hmm."

Her weak reaction left me wondering if she didn't believe me, or had just decided that digging any deeper would be ridiculous.

After simply telling me to "please just handle it," she immediately shifted focus to the work on her desk.

"Well, I'll get to it, then."

I snapped my fingers and cast Metamorphose to change my appearance. I was now draped in jet-black, full plate armor from head to toe. A blood-red cloak adorned my back, accompanied by a sword at my hip of the same color. The front of my helmet had a design resembling a skull, and an unsettling, dim, violet light glowed from within the visor.

Anyone who saw me would immediately think me a mighty knight who had fallen to darkness and joined Echidna's ranks. And I used the Ghost Face spell to camouflage myself to prying magic and intuition, so no one would be able to piece together my identity as the hero.

"I'll need a name, too. Hey, how about...'Lord Godhart'?"

"I don't care! Just get to work!"

"Tch. Fine."

I snatched up a feather pen and paper and left Shutina's room.

Then, just as predicted, my actual work ended in thirty minutes.

"Indeed, I am back."

"What's with that voice?"

On returning to Shutina's room, I dispelled Metamorphose and leaned back against a nearby chair. It might have been magically-made and just for show, but full plate armor was full plate armor. My face had gotten awfully hot inside the helmet, so having the cool air against my cheeks was a welcome change.

"I figured I should change my voice and speaking style if I wanted to go incognito, y'know? It was pretty funny out there. Like, all the lower demons and apparitions I passed by in the halls would salute me."

That included a dark elf warlock I beat up in some town during my journey, a vampire lord who I'd KO'd as he tried to attack a town and make its inhabitants his brood, a goblin bandit who survived me dropping their "impregnable" fortress off a cliff, and other former foes, none of whom realized they were saluting Leo Demonhart, the former hero himself.

"You'll tell them I'm a powerful, solitary dark knight attending to the Four Great Guardians, right?"

"If you don't end up fired today."

She didn't pull her punches.

Still, I wouldn't be able to walk around the castle if I didn't have some sort of cover story, so I was glad Shutina had agreed to work with me.

Being on even footing with Demon Queen Echidna—or, rather, having defeated her—and finding myself in the position of *attendant* to the Four Great Guardians did irk me a little, but my situation was rather tenuous. For the time being, I had to be modest and discreet as I built up the accomplishments that would get me full-time employment.

Shutina must have been satisfied to see me back in exactly thirty minutes, because she contentedly began tousling her wavy, blonde hair while looking for

my next task.

"I suppose I'll get you working on the next task, then. That would be..."

"Nah, I'll pass. I'm a little tired."

"You what?"

I stopped her before she could go any further.

With a snap of my fingers, I conjured up a small, black object—a tiny seeing eye—over her head. It parked itself in the air, looking down at both Shutina and her desk.

"You cast Mirage Eye?"

"Yeah. I want to see how you do your work while I rest. You don't mind for a little bit, right?"

Mirage Eye allowed the caster to see faraway places. Anything the eye saw would be made visible to the caster too.

Easy to learn and broadly useful, the spell proved popular in a variety of situations in the world. Reconnaissance, spying, surveillance of prisoners, theft prevention in shops...parents would even use it to keep watch on their kids during outings. It came in handy.

However, rumor had it the spell was born from a pervy wizard who wanted to peep on women changing. I understood that war and lust pushed civilization forward, but could the man not have come up with a better reason to develop the spell?

I leaned against the window and basked in the sunlight while watching her work.

"Don't worry, I won't get in your way. I'm just going to sit here quietly and

watch."

"...Very well. And I will be giving you your next task when your break is over."

Thirty minutes passed. Shutina decided it was time and spoke up.

"Leo? You should be about ready for your next t—"

"Hang on. It's been a while since I used Metamorphose, so I'm tired. Let me rest some more."

"....."

I munched on my allotted bread. It really wasn't too good. I told myself I might want to renovate the kitchens if I had time.

"An hour has passed. You've rested enough by now, haven't you?"

"Nah, just a bit more. Let me watch for a little bit more."

"Why, you lazy...! Stand up, right n...h-how are you this heavy?!"

"Hahaha. Most people use Gravity Root to immobilize their foes, but you can use it like this, too. See, learn something new every day. Now, there's a lot more uses for it, like—"

"Just get up!"

Then, after two hours.

"....."

"Man, decisions, decisions."

"....."

"Lord Godhart, or Lord Bloodsword..."

"....."

"Oh, I could do a different approach and go with Black Knight Onyx. Hey, Shutina, what do you think?"

There was no answer.

Shutina stopped her paperwork and slowly stood up. She called her magical staff, Claustrum, to her hand and began charging her power—to the maximum, no less. The long robe she wore began to rise up and flutter.

"I understand now, Hero Leo."

"Yeah?"

"You really are just a lazy, lounging, lethargic drain on resources."

"Hold on a second!"

Her eyes were on me, burning with rage. I might have flown too close to the sun, because the Sorcerer General *seriously* wanted me gone.

And that was understandable. I only did thirty minutes of work, then just hung out in the office using my Mirage Eye to leisurely watch Shutina's work...and, well, cleavage.

All right, that wasn't what was going on, but she probably saw it that way. I quickly stood up and tried to appease her.

"Hold up, just cool it. Just calm down."

"Oh, I am calm. After calmly and coolly thinking this over, I came to the clear conclusion that you will not be useful to our army in the least."

Shutina waved her staff and unleashed the magic within. The pressure alone sent her papers flying into the air and made the windows tremble. The fire in the hearth died out as ashes flew into the air.

"You swore you wouldn't do anything I would regret. What nonsense! I'm positively *adrift* in a sea of regret!"

"Well, I'd love to re-*moor*-se you back in port, if you'd—"

"Silence! Dio Neel Zod, spiral of great radiant light! Fill my hands with your piercing rays of the gods!"

She drew a spiral with her staff and left hand, making a magic circle in the air. Soon, light began to coalesce around the staff's tip, emitting an unpleasant, crackling sound that could be heard over her chanting. This...this was bad!

I knew that chant. She was trying to unleash the highest level lightning spell possible, right where we were standing!

If that happened, we could have kissed all the documents in the room goodbye. She was so angry that she was willing to toss the work she'd done into the gutter just to rub me out!

"Put the sparks away, you idiot! Just listen, I promise it'll make sense!"

"Come forth, oh blade of cleansing light! Burst forth and crucify my foe!"

"You idiot!"

"Aurora—"

Knock, knock.

"....."

"....."

Right as she was on the verge of unleashing Aurora Assail, lance of the radiant lightning god, on me...the sound of a quiet knock came from the door.

I held up both hands in a sign of surrender, and calmly prompted her.

"We've...we've got a guest. You going to keep them waiting?"

"....."

"Could be for something important."

She sighed and tossed her staff into a small magic circle that opened at her feet. The moment she did, the lightning storm in the room passed, and peace returned to the office.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and turned back into Black Knight Onyx with Metamorphose.

Shutina cleared her throat, regained her composure as Sorcerer General, and greeted the guest.

"You may enter."

"Honored, my lady."

We both watched the door to the office slowly open. The person who stepped through was exactly who I expected.

Our visitor was a smart and diligent-looking dark elf. The *same elf* I had taught how to refill the reactors.

"Ma'am...General Shutina, your four magic power reactors have been successfully replenished."

"Excuse me?"

Phew.

I made the right call. It looked like my plot to have *someone other than Shutina* handle the refueling work was a success.

I quickly answered the elf before Shutina could recover from her confusion and say something inappropriate.

"You have done well. From your tone, I trust there were no complications."

"No, sir. It all went well."

When I lauded her with a voice that sounded like it came from the depths of the earth, the already-stiff dark elf snapped even further to attention. Shutina, not seeming to understand the situation, gave me a puzzled look.

It was time to show my work. Imagining Shutina's surprise, I smiled under my black helmet.

My employment might have been provisional, but come hell or high water, I was getting into the Demon Queen's army. I had to, and there was a good reason for that.

And to get in, I needed to build a portfolio of accomplishments and get recommendations from all of the Four Great Guardians.

"Very well. Proceed with your report on your maintenance of the reactors."

This—this was the first step in my plan!

3 — The Organization Should Function With or Without You

The dark elf reporting in was named Dianette. She had refilled the reactors exactly as I'd explained. I could see she still had the paper I'd given her, the one I'd written with all the instructions. Looked like she'd made good use of it—a model employee, really.

"Very well. Proceed with your report on your maintenance of the reactors."

"As you wish, er, Lord Godhart."

"I am now Black Knight Onyx. You will call me Lord Onyx."

"R-right. In any case, Lord Onyx, the talisman you granted me worked without incident. It appears to be durable enough for continued use, so—"

"Hold on. Hold on."

Shutina was still struggling to grasp the situation and waved both hands in the air to interrupt us.

"Talisman? What are you talking about? Le...Lord Onyx, was it not you who refilled the reactors?"

"U-um. Well."

"Let her finish. Then all will be clear, Sorcerer General."

Goodness. Didn't she know that calmly listening to subordinates report in is a boss's job?

Either way, Dianette's report would answer all her questions, and I didn't want Shutina accidentally revealing my identity before she finished. I nodded to Dianette, prompting her to continue.

"The talisman appears to be durable enough for continued use, so with your

permission, I would like us to continue refilling the reactors in your stead. May I be allowed that, General Shutina?"

"Those reactors were made with my wavelength—and you were able to handle them?"

"Yes, we were. Had you not heard, General?"

Dianette offered Shutina the small talisman hanging by a string around her neck. It was the one I'd made in about fifteen minutes, after I'd left the office to borrow the goblin goldsmith's workshop. It was a fairly simple effort.

First, I copied Shutina's magic wavelength. Then, I put a reasonably priced amethyst in the center of a magic circle and slowly fed it power from my palm, familiarizing it with the wavelength. This made it so the amethyst remembered the wavelength and would automatically adjust the wearer's to match.

I then cut the amethyst into a hexagonal prism, slipped it into a random leather bag and boom, the talisman was done.

Amethysts were pretty tough stones, and they'd never forget a magic wavelength they'd learned. That usually allowed novice goldsmiths to ruin the stones, but this time, it was a solid plus.

They didn't need to be maintained, either. As long as the stone didn't crack or break, the user would permanently be able to mimic Shutina's wavelength. Admittedly, though, all that would get you is the ability to refill reactors that she made, but...really, that was all we needed.

I used the first fifteen minutes to make the talisman. With the remaining fifteen minutes, I spent five getting a hold of Dianette, another five showing her how to do the job, and the last five messing around before heading back to the office.

Thirty minutes in total. That was how each minute was spent.

I'd said thirty minutes and two hours because I was including how long it would take for Dianette to get the work done. I figured it would take her around two hours, and I was exactly right. That was another win for me.

"This talisman will allow any of us to temporarily have your magic wavelength, allowing us to refill the reactors you made, General Shutina. That's what Lord Onyx told me."

"....."

Shutina shot me a look, but I ignored her.

I'll deal with you later.

I took a step forward and addressed Dianette.

"And then I told you to find a few others with magic power capacities similar to yours and split this job up among you."

"Yes, Lord Onyx. I managed to find three other sorcerers of similar capacity. The four of us passed the talisman around to refill the reactors."

"Very well. I trust, then, that all four of you understand the procedure?"

She nodded eagerly.

It's kind of fun to talk like this...feels like I've become the Demon Queen myself.

Meanwhile, Shutina seemed to have grasped a bit of the situation and elected to listen to my exchange.

"The Sorcerer General is a busy woman. Form a team of four and assume reactor maintenance duty permanently. I'll have enough talismans for all of you within three days."

"Yes, sir!"

"You took your time today, but a slow first day is forgivable. Focus on speed and efficiency next."

"Understood!"

"That will be all."

Our conversation ended, and Dianette turned to Shutina.

We were in Shutina's office, after all, and Dianette could not leave without her permission. The poor dark elf stood frozen in place, eagerly awaiting her order of dismissal.

And how could she not have frozen up? This was Shutina, the sage of the Demon World, master of all sorts of spells both difficult and obscure. Any reasonably serious sorceress knew of her and knew the name "The Almighty Magic" wasn't for show.

Back when the army was large enough to take over half the realm, Dianette wouldn't have had the slightest chance to speak with someone like Shutina. Of course she would be nervous.

The Almighty Magic, however, appeared far from intellectual as she muttered to herself while desperately trying to process the situation.

"Um. Er. Well."

"General Shutina?"

"Err...umm..."

"U-um...?"

If this went on, the Four Great Guardians' authority and reputation would be as good as gone. I had to toss her a lifeboat.

"Sorcerer General, as you requested, I have seen to it that the reactors were resupplied with magic."

"Oh? O-oh, yes, of course."

"It is our duty to lessen your burden. Dianette, too, was worried for your health."

"...She was?"

"O-oh, um. Forgive the indiscretion, but yes."

Dianette's long, elven ears perked up as she stuttered in response.

"I knew of the mountain of tasks you must be grappling with, General, but...as shameful as it is to admit, I had no idea how to possibly help you and could only watch."

"....."

"With Lord Onyx's assistance, I believe I and the others can take care of resupplying the reactors. If there is anything else we can aid you with, please, let me know."

"O-oh. ...Right."

"Hm?"

"Ahem."

Shutina authoritatively cleared her throat then addressed Dianette in a final bid to regain control of the situation.

"Your report has been heard, Dianette. Good work. You are dismissed."

"Y-yes, General!"

The faint smile on Dianette's lips told me her dismissal came as a relief. After

bowing deeply to both of us, she hurried out of the office.

As soon as the door had completely closed, I spoke up.

"Well, Sorcerer General? Did you see the fruits my machinations have born?"

"First of all, stop talking like that. Get rid of the Metamorphose, too."

"Sure thing."

I dispelled my Black Knight disguise and sat back down in my chair.

Shutina watched me closely the whole time. She didn't say anything, but her eyes demanded an explanation. The succubus had pieced together most of what had happened, but I gathered that she wanted to hear it from my mouth.

"You used an amethyst, didn't you?"

"I did."

Shutina nodded.

"The problem was you were the only person able to refill the reactors, so that's what we needed to tackle. With an amethyst talisman, anyone can mimic your wavelength. Dianette and three other workers plus four talismans and a couple of spares ought to do the trick."

I pulled out a spare talisman from my pocket and gave it a shake so she could hear the jewel rattling inside. If the one I'd handed Dianette broke or just didn't work, I had planned on handing her this one and accompanying her during the task. It'd been years since I last worked with jewels, but apparently any fears I had about that were unfounded. It looked like I still had the touch when it came to goldsmithing.

"Amethysts with your wavelength form the core of the talisman. I've already handed the goblin goldsmith more of them, so he should have the additional

talismans ready before long. From now on, all you need to do is listen to Dianette's regular reports and head to the reactors if something's gone wrong. Got it?"

"...Guh."

"I promised you. In thirty minutes and two hours, I knocked a task off your list permanently."

"...Guh..."

It looked like she didn't have the words to argue back.

When you were at war, nothing was more important than taking advantage of an opening. When the leader went down and the unit was in chaos. When a fort's sentries changed. When your opponent shot off a huge attack and was sure it did you in. That was when you struck.

The same held true for interpersonal relationships. Shutina's guard was down, and I took the chance to say what I'd always wanted to say.

"Listen. Work isn't something you do alone, especially not if you're in an organization that employs so many. You don't want some skilled person taking on everything alone. It's better to have a bunch of average guys doing what they can. That'll usually get things done."

I was speaking in idealistic terms, of course. Sometimes things didn't go that well, like when the workers didn't quite have the skill or experience, or when there was simply too much work for the group's numbers to handle.

The thought took me back to years ago, when I was helping out around a merchant guild. Now that was an awful time.

There was way too much work. Jobs that we needed twice, thrice the amount of hands on deck to accomplish came in at a nonstop pace, so we had to deal

with people collapsing on the guild floor and supervisors skipping town.

Nowadays, it was an international guild with branches the world over, but at the time it was just another no-name commercial joint in a tiny port town. Management know-how? Don't make me laugh. If I hadn't chased out the guild master with his penchant for taking on jobs we had no business tackling, it probably wouldn't be where it was today.

Special cases like that aside, you never wanted to have a situation like the one the army faced now, where it needed specific people to keep its engine running. That was the type of organizational trap you wanted to avoid at all costs. An executive's job was to teach her subordinates how to do their jobs, to give them work, and to make sure that the organization could survive losing anyone—even if the executive herself died. Shutina's overwhelming talent blinded her to that fact.

She must have thought, "Oh, I have to do it all, and all on my own. The army won't function without me."

But she was wrong.

She and everyone else was replaceable—and I meant that in a good way. That meant she didn't have to do absolutely everything. She and all the others could support themselves moving forward, like an organization is supposed to. That's what I had wanted to convey to her.

I wasn't sure if the message got through to her, though, because all she did was quietly stare back at me.

After an awfully long silence, she finally began to speak.

"Why didn't you tell me you were showing Dianette how to fill the reactors?"

"Because you're a born worrier."

I didn't pull punches.

"That's what I learned watching you work with my Mirage Eye. Being cautious isn't a bad thing, but if I'd told you what I had Dianette working on, you would've gotten worried and gone to check up on her, wouldn't you?"

"Guh."

"Think about it. Most of the people in the army now are those you've interviewed, people whose skills you believe in. Trust your judgment, believe in the people you picked, and give them stuff to do. Believing in your underlings is your job as a boss!"

"...Says the person who's been traveling alone this whole time."

Shutina's retort was accompanied by a small pout. Her expression seemed so comically childish I nearly laughed.

"Listen, I've got tons of life experience, all right? I'm allowed a solo adventure or two. And you've seen it yourself; I got results."

"Plenty of life experience? You've got to be...w-wait a second!"

Her expression had been quietly drooping in defeat when suddenly she spotted her opening for a counterattack and her head snapped up. She pointed an accusatory finger as her path to victory became clear.

"How wonderful that you taught our sorcerers the task and left it to them, but while they were hard at work, the fact remains that you simply loafed about in my office! Slacker! What's your excuse for that?!"

"Shutina, you wound me. I was loafing around in the sun, yeah, but I was working."

"Excuse me?"

I held a paper before her.

It was the prioritized list of jobs I'd acquired from her at the start of the day.

The items on the list hadn't changed, but I'd applied numbers and footnotes to all fifty of them and circled a few in red.

"I learned a lot watching you and your cleavage work these last two hours. You were pretty inefficient on occasion, so I reworked your task priorities. Look 'em over, and read the footnotes on the side for details."

"My cleavage...? Wait, hand me that paper."

She snatched the paper from my hands and ran her eyes over it.

"Oh, one more thing."

I tapped the red circles with my pen to draw attention to them.

"See these seven tasks I circled in red? You don't have to do them anymore. Just find some empty hands to do them, like we did with the reactor business."

"...Can they handle it?"

"Teach them how. That's your job as boss."

"....."

She fell silent.

Well, not completely silent. She was murmuring to herself as she started pacing the room. Her expression looked terribly complicated.

I had a pretty good idea what she was grumbling about. With nothing better to do, I elected to stay in the room and enjoy the sun while gazing at the faraway scenery.

The weather outside was lovely, granting me a splendid view of the Seshat

Mountains in the afternoon sun. If this wasn't the dark castle, it would be a fantastic tourist spot.

"Oh, wow, you can even see the sea a little from here."

"....."

"Ever have Bemel Sea sardines? They taste fantastic with chopped onions."

"....."

"But that bread you gave me, man! Sorry, I'm going to be frank as frank can be here, but it tasted like garbage. Now listen, a big culinary guild scouted me for my skill in cuisine, so—"

"Leo."

Shutina interrupted my charming small talk.

I turned around to see her, face lowered and fingers sheepishly intertwined, desperately searching for the right words.

"Yes? Have something to say, Almighty Magic, Sorcerer General Shutina?"

"Well...you see..."

"....."

"I apologize. My impression of you was incorrect."

She bowed her head with a guilty sigh.

"Hey, no need for that. I just did what I was supposed to."

"That only makes it worse."

I thought brushing it off would make her upset, but she dug deeper. Shutina walked around to stand before me and looked deep into my eyes.

"Despite how harshly I acted towards you during the interview, you turned

around and did excellent work. If I don't thank you here, I couldn't very well call myself one of the Four Great Guardians."

"Don't worry about it. If you fall over, so does this whole operation. Well...maybe it wouldn't be that bad, but close. Sad to say, but that's the truth."

I glanced over at the mountain of papers on her desk. Shutina had been doing nothing but working for hours, and that mountain hadn't shrunk any.

"If the Demon Queen's army goes belly-up, I won't have anywhere to go. So you don't have to thank me. I was just looking out for number one."

"Listen to you! Can't you just accept a heartfelt apology?!"

"Why do you think I was traveling alone?"

Personally, I thought that was a pretty convincing comeback. If I had that social butterfly talent—actually, I felt I was fairly social and well-liked a long, long time ago—I wouldn't have been cast out by humanity, and I wouldn't have had to take on the Demon Queen alone.

Stubborn. Contrarian. Edgy. That pretty much summed me up.

"Well, I'll be getting to my next job. Call me if you need me."

"Very well. Looking forward to working with you, Leo."

"Wh—?"

The voice behind me was so surprisingly soft I had to turn around.

When I did, I saw Shutina standing there smiling. It was a conflicted smile that...still managed to convey her gratitude and fondness. She gave me a little bow.

You know, she's got a really cute smile.

"...Ah!"

She giggled.

Our eyes met when she raised her head. I answered her with a smile of my own and turned to leave the room, then remembered something.

She'd really come around to me. Perhaps my gambit could work.

"Shutina, there's something I forgot."

"Oh? What would that be?"

"Remember what I said, after I said I wouldn't do anything you'd regret?"

"Come again?"

She thoughtfully began sifting through her memories.

After a few seconds, the Sorcerer General went red in the cheeks.

Is she really a succubus? Did she, like, get so deep into studying magic she didn't end up with any succubus experience?

I puckered my lips to show I was waiting for my reward.

"I'll take lips or cheek. Or, you know, on top of your bed would be—"

"Get *out!*"

I had my proof her stress was gone. The Icicle Lance she blasted at me was so much stronger than the one that morning.



The Almighty Magic

Sorcerer General Shutina

Actual Age: 241

Race: Succubus

A succubus from the Demon World. Hailed as a genius of sorcery from a young age, she has mastered all the spells her dark world has to offer. Possesses a meticulous, diligent personality. Very smart, but slow to adapt to surprises and not one for physical conflict. Leo, being skilled in both sword and magic while having a laid-back, rule-bending personality has them naturally opposed. The two get on like cats and dogs. Most fond of herb tea. Her favorite is chamomile tea, owing to its relaxing aroma and effects as a sleep aid.

Chapter 3: Hero vs Beast General Lili

1 — My First Errand (and the Ruin it Brings)

"Here we go! Everyone ready? You're all ready, right?"

"H-hold."

I quickly called out to Lili, but she was standing on an immense boulder and didn't seem to hear my voice. Needing to get closer, I forced my way through the crowd.

A grumpy orc tried to swing at me when I pushed him, but I quickly zapped him with a Stun Bolt and smoothly dispatched a body blow to shut him up.

Sorry, I really don't have time to deal with you! I've got to stop this moron!

"Start at the count of three, okay! Remember, guys, no cheating!"

"Hold! Listen, you fool!"

My pleas fell on deaf ears.

"Three! Two! One!"

"Ahhh! Lili, you stupid brat, *stop!*"

I forgot my Black Knight's voice and belted out an insult instead.

"Gooooooooo!"

At Beast General Lili's roar, the logistics unit under her command took off.

The demon wolves sped off on their powerful legs, and the rocs spread their

wings and flew through the air. Following them were kobolds and goblins, the relatively nimble beastfolk. The bulkier troops, such as ogres and giants, lurched along behind them.

A small figure ran far, far ahead of them: Lili. She looked like she was having the time of her life.

Local farmers turned to me with looks of frustration and impatience, wondering when this charade would end and the unit would go home.

"....."

Our military logistics unit...or, rather, Beast General Lili's sheer foolishness had greatly exceeded my expectations.

The Largo Sea.

The Demon Queen had established her castle in the Seshat Mountains, deep within the central continent, the world's greatest landmass. Far to the southeast of this continent lay an ocean, most of which remained uncharted territory, its islands shrouded in mystery. That was the Largo Sea.

If you wanted to learn about Largo, you could go to any old bar in any old port town and treat any old sailor to a mug of ale. Upon the mere mention of the Largo Sea, they would regale you with tales of how you could find rare minerals there lacking on the mainland, of wildlife both strange and unique, of ruins and remnants from that old age before magic, the Machine Civilization, and far more. Whether you would hear anything trustworthy, however, was a different story.

Indeed, the area stimulated boyish hearts with promise of adventure, but I would advise against sailing out on a ship like you would any other sea.

The reason was simple, really. You would die.

The sea itself had a variety of complicated currents to keep track of, meaning that those who entered did not come back alive. Even if you survived the harsh waters, you would have to deal with the leviathans and sea monsters that called them home.

No one approached the area by ship. Only birds could come and go as they pleased.

Still, rumors of the countless islands the beautiful Largo Sea held continued to enchant land dwellers.

Some rumors spoke of landmasses large enough to rival the continent of Erkia to the west, but those were just rumors.

After all, no one had come back from perilous Largo alive. Well, except for me.

With all that said, I was presently on one of those Largo Sea islands. I couldn't remember how many times I'd been there.

I sliced open a tropical fruit—coconuts, they were called—with a weakened Wind Blade spell and munched on its juice-drenched flesh. The sweet juice and nutty solids had an excellent chemistry and helped re-energize my exhausted head.

The reason for my exhaustion was obvious; she came bursting into my tent with her tail eagerly wagging after catching the coconut's scent.

"Wait! Hold on, Leo, lemme do it! Say ahh!"

Lili snatched the wooden spoon and coconut out of my hands, then held the fruit's flesh up to my mouth again. She did this with so much force, however, that the juice splashed everywhere, including all over my clothes.

Ugh, this stickiness is gonna stay with me for a while...

"Say ahhh!"

"Thanks..."

"You're very welcome!"

Lili made a sound emphasizing her pride, and the dog ears poking through her orange hair—well, wolf ears to be exact—wiggled happily. Her tail was, of course, wagging the whole time, making her as easy to read as ever.

What were we doing there in Largo? Well, we weren't on a honeymoon in the tropics, that was for sure. I hadn't quit my job in the army to take a vacation, and I wasn't slacking off without Shutina's knowledge, either. I was in the midst of an honest day's work: a supply run.

It may come as a surprise, but the denizens of Largo were allied with the Demon Queen's forces. Most of the islands in this sea acted as the dark army's supply bases.

And, well—

"Hah!"

Lili broke open a coconut with her bare hands and slurped up its juices. Unfortunately, this wild child was in charge.

There was a good reason that our resource center was hidden away in the uncharted Largo Sea. Its denizens were dragonfolk, isolated from the world of humans and working in full cooperation with Echidna's army.

You'd only find information on dragonfolk in musty old texts, so allow me to explain.

This world was home to all sorts of people other than humans. Way, way

back, humans were the only game in town, but about 3,000 years ago, a being who called himself Demon King Belial led an army of demons, beastfolk, and demi-humans from the Demon World and invaded the realm of humans.

The dark invasion ended with Belial's defeat, but plenty of Demon World denizens found peace with humanity and moved into their realm. Marriages were had, descendants begat, and our current salad bowl society of diversity was created.

There were werewolves and lizardfolk who looked as bestial as could be, and there were demi-humans like elves and dwarves that looked quite a bit like the average human.

People like Lili, who looked basically like humans with animal ears or tails, were called demi-beastfolk. These names, however, were ultimately academic. On the ground, humans and the other races weren't terribly different. Barring situations where you needed to categorize, we were all just people.

You'd see it if you stepped into any town. Next to a human merchant hawking his wares off his carpet, you'd have a dwarven blacksmith chatting with a lizardfolk jewel seller. A young succubus would be sizing up the guys at a bar when a hairy werewolf chats her up, getting a slap in the face for his trouble. That was the kind of world we were in.

Bringing the topic back to Largo, the dragonfolk who lived here were comfortably in that salad bowl on the mainland up until a hundred years ago.

Dragonfolk didn't look too different from humans. Unlike lizardfolk, they were not all that reptilian in appearance, and you'd be forgiven for not realizing you'd seen one.

The differences they did possess were high magical power drawn from their

dragon heritage, and the tougher-than-steel dragon scales covering part of their bodies. It was those very dragon scales that were the cause of their misfortunes.

Now, it took the military power of a whole kingdom to take out a dragon, meaning dragon scales were incredibly valuable. They were the type of thing you barely saw on the market.

Regrettably, the worst kind of person noticed something: instead of risking life and limb to take on a dragon for their scales, you could simply take the life and limbs of dragonfolk.

So they went and kidnapped dragonfolk children, tore their scales off, and sold them to weapon merchants. Think of it like tearing off a human's nails, or their skin—then think about how it was justified by how much money it made.

Eventually, a whole state got involved in raiding a dragonfolk village, and that threw this peaceful people into a rage. They formed a mob and destroyed the greedy merchants and the military state Nephthyl that propped them up. After leaving that dreadful state in ruins, the entirety of the race went off to live in peace in the Largo Islands to the south.

Crossing the sea was a dangerous affair, but they simply wanted to leave the mainland that much. They wanted nothing to do with its people anymore.

With that history in mind, you could imagine the resentment the dragonfolk held towards the mainland folk, particularly the humans.

They welcomed Echidna's invasion from the Demon World with open arms, allowing the construction of a Warp Portal between the Demon Queen's castle and the Largo Islands. The hospitality didn't stop there, either—they promised to trade a bounty of material for some of the resources the Demon Queen's

army possessed. I didn't know this before I joined the army myself, but the support from Largo really kept the troops in the field during the war.

"Guess what, guess what?! I got some carrots from the farm! Wanna eat some?"

"Ah, I'll pass."

"Oh yeah?"

Lili started to munch on a carrot.

As Lili demonstrated, there was plenty of fresh produce to be had at their farms, and the fisherman by the coast were all too eager to offer up mountains of fresh fish. Visiting a dragonfolk settlement would net you weapons, armor, elixirs, blankets, and clothing...anything you'd need, really.

Food, equipment, and everything in between. These islands hidden away in the Largo Sea truly formed the dark army's lifeline. As I mulled over that, I had to groan.

"Dragonfolk, huh. Can't imagine they'll forgive and forget too easily."

"Hwah? What?"

"Just talkin' to myself. And remember to chew."

I gave Lili a noncommittal answer while wiping a bit of carrot off the corner of her mouth.

Looking at the trade deal objectively, the dragonfolk barely gained anything.

On one hand, the resources you could get from the central continent the Demon Queen's castle stood on were different from those in Largo's tropical sea. The mainland boasted unique magical minerals and unique herbs used to make certain potions, and Shutina had been giving those priority in trade deals

with Largo.

However, most of what we offered them, they could make with local substitutes. Our resources weren't particularly valuable. If I had to be perfectly honest, it was the Demon Queen's army that was getting all the benefit from the arrangement. Still, the dragonfolk remained locked in full, eager cooperation with us, showing me just how deep and lasting their burning resentment was.

After learning all of this, I finally understood why the idiot munching on her second carrot was in charge of logistics.

The infrastructure was already there. All that was left were easy errands.

The process was simple: visit each village and trade the resources that Shutina had already listed for us. The troops of the logistics corps would then carry them through the Warp Portal leading to the castle, then into the castle's storerooms.

The scale was large, yes, but it was a child's errand. Lili boasted a variety of beastfolk, demi-humans, and magical beasts under her command, meaning this *could* be done very efficiently.

Rocs could fly, meaning they could collect supplies from the other islands without waiting for the ships to arrive. The giants had the sheer brawn to carry crates of grain and produce with ease. Clever demi-humans like goblins could negotiate quantities and keep relations stable. Demon wolves could be yoked to sleds to help slower demi-humans reach the distant villages of the islands with comfort and ease.

With efficient delegation, this supply mission could be finished in a day.

With efficient delegation!

"Ahhh..."

"What's the matter? Your tummy hurt?"

"Try my head."

"Oh, no! Wait right there!"

Wait, no, it doesn't actually...

Before I could clear up the misunderstanding, Lili had already blasted out of the tent. I could hear her cheerful voice outside.

"Medicine! Does anyone have any medicine?!"

I let out another sigh. What was I talking about, again? Oh, right. Effective delegation. As you'd imagine from a wild child, Lili did not make effective use of her forces in the least.

After innocently boasting that she'd do a great job, she ordered her troops to...have a race to see who could carry their supplies to base the fastest. I watched in awe as the army of demons had a sports day, with a footrace being the only game.

A relatively smart kobold asked her how much they should carry at once, in practical terms. Lili, relatively not-so-smart, held her arms wide open and said, "A bunch!"

Then, a goblin asked if they only needed to do one trip. The playful Beast General cheerfully responded, "Let's call it a day and do the rest tomorrow!"

It was painfully clear.

There was *no* way we were finishing at this rate!

There was no way in *hell* we were getting *anywhere* with this pace!

The job should have taken two days at most, but we were crashing into the sixth day. I'd even gotten a message from Shutina, back at the castle, complaining that troop exercises had slowed down from lack of materials.

We'd been getting a ton of complaints from the dragonfolk locals, too. And why wouldn't they complain, with an army that big milling about in chaos? I'd been sending a few unoccupied units to villages here and there to help in the fields as an apology, but it probably wasn't enough.

Honestly, I just want to go back. Let me help Shutina, or Mernes, or Edvard.

"If it were me...if it were me in charge, this would be so quick..."

But no. That wouldn't be good for Lili, and it wouldn't be good for the army. I couldn't babysit this section of the army forever. To get her doing this job properly, I had to teach her how to keep deadlines for the organization, how to work together with her people do get jobs done efficiently, and that she shouldn't make trouble for the locals.

If I didn't, the logistics corps would be stuck in this rut for the foreseeable future. No, chances were much higher that the army would collapse from a lack of supplies, or that the dragonfolk would get fed up with us and tear up the trade deal. That would truly spell the end of the Demon Queen's army.

"But Lili's just a kid...a real straight arrow, but not necessarily the sharpest. Is lecturing her about increasing work productivity really going to get us anywhere? There's just no way..."

I clutched my head. I might have been able to use reason with Shutina, but that wouldn't work with a child.

Maybe asking a dragonfolk parent about how to make kids enjoy learning would help. ...I could still hear Lili being loud outside.

"Does anyone got medicine?! Leo's in trouble!"

"She is a pretty good kid, though..."

The nice things about Lili were that she'd do what I asked her (if she comprehended the question), and she would go to any length for my sake.

I sighed. It was wonderful that she was so fond of me and all, but if she would put half of that passion...no, even just a 10th of it into her work...

Then it hit me.

"I've got it!"

Yeah. Yeah, that's it, good idea.

I drew up the plan in my mind. With the corps scattered throughout the island, now was the perfect time.

You couldn't use words to get a kid to learn, no. You needed experience. Successful experiences made people grow, and fun experiences drew them in. All I needed to do was give Lili an experience that told her working together to do a job could be fun!

I wasted no time in executing the plan I'd come up with. It all started with chanting the Summon Beast spell and calling the perfect creature to appear before me.

A few minutes later, Lili burst back into the tent.

"Sorry I'm so late, Leo!"

"....."

"Leo? Y-you okay?"

"....."

"Your head hurt?"

Suspicious about my lack of response, Lili crept up to me. She leaned over my prone figure and peered into my face, then her eyes shot open in surprise.

"Oh, no!"

She was staring at the weakened figure of Leo the Hero, breath labored and face a reddish-purple from the venom coursing through his veins.

The Erkian spotted viper that bit me slithered between her legs and out of the tent.

2 — You Just Can't Get Through to Some

Please, I'm begging you! Do it right this time!

I prayed desperately. This was the last of the trials I'd prepared. If this one didn't challenge Lili, everything I'd done today would have been for naught.

No, this was going to be fine. *This* time it would work. I'd prepared *twelve* trials for her. There was no way she would just break through all of them with ease. No w— "Urrraahhhhh!"

Ahhh! She actually did it!

My desperate prayers fell on deaf ears, and Lili made a smoldering mess of the immense clay golem I'd tuned to be unbeatable without the full help of her unit.

The Riddle Room spell I'd cast broke, allowing her to proceed. She turned to give me a happy look.

"I did it, Mr. Bard! I beat him!"

"Oh, uh, yeah. You uh, you sure did..."

"Well, I'm in a hurry! Later!"

"Y-yeah..."

I just watched as she zoomed off. My plan was in shambles.

How did it come to this? Where had I gone wrong?

I'd have to explain. Allow me to make my excuses.

It started earlier, around the time the snake bit me.

Now, I didn't go and get myself bitten by a poisonous snake for no reason. I had a reason, a good reason.

"Leo?!"

Lili tossed away the headache medicine she'd brought and desperately shook me with both hands.

The Erkian spotted viper that bit me slid past her feet and out of the tent.

"Lili...th-that snake's..."

"I know! It's a Hitokami Korori!"

Being from Erkia, Lili would know how fearsome the Erkian spotted viper was. A single bite would fill your body with poison even a high-level priest would have trouble cleansing, and it would only take a few hours before you were left red and dead. It could kill with one bite, hence the name Hitokami Korori, the "one bite killer."

The snake I took the liberty of summoning was the core of my plan to make Lili grow.

"Help...someone, help...this poison's gonna kill me..."

"Hang in there, Leo!"

"Looks like even I can't laugh off venom...I don't think I'll last half a day..."

"D-don't die on me!"

The script was like this: first, Lili would find me dying from poison. There were two ways of healing this. You could call a powerful spellcaster to cast Cleanse, or you could use herbs that grow only on a mountain to the west of our location here in the Largo Islands.

However...

"I-I know! Maybe Shutina could heal you?!"

"We're outta luck there...someone busted up the Warp Portal, so we're stuck here for now..."

"Oh, no, oh no no no no..."

I'd sealed off the first choice by making sure beforehand that Lili wouldn't be able to find anyone to cast Cleanse. She had no choice but to hunt for the herbs. The mountain was a ways away, but to Lili, it would be a literal walk in the park.

Fool! You didn't really think it would be that easy, did you? I've laid countless trials on the path to the mountain!

For example, the massive crevice I made with the help of the gnomes she wouldn't be able to pass without help from a roc or a harpy. Teamwork would be key.

I also had a passage of flames, made with the power of the fire spirit Salamander. She'd need to bring along kobold or goblin curse-makers to cast constant freeze spells to get through.

To top it all off, there was Riddle Room, a base-defense spell that would lock its targets inside a barrier until they completed a pre-established task. I used it in a few of the trials, particularly the 12th and final one: a hundred-meter-tall clay golem she would have to defeat before leaving the barrier.

The golem's weak point was the back of its head. To strike it, she would need teamwork. Her troops would stop and distract it, then she would ride a roc to reach its head while goblin and harpy archers fired at it. Then, the moment the arrow barrage staggered the golem, Lili would deliver the decisive blow.

I had arranged twelve of these trials, all difficult to complete alone, but fairly easy if she worked with her underlings.

These trials were going to teach Lili teamwork with her troops. That was the plan.

It wasn't important to get into who destroyed the highly valuable Warp Portal that connected the Largo Islands to the castle. As long as it got repaired in the end, who cared?

"You need herbs, then, right? I just gotta bring you back some herbs?"

"Please...the ones on the mountain to the west... Ah, vision...fading..."

"Got it! Don't worry, I'm real fast—it'll only take a minute!"

"Counting on you."

She dashed out of the tent, but came right back.

"Which way's west again?"

"...That way."

"Got it!"

Okay, that time she really ran out.

I immediately cast Cleanse to heal myself of the poison, then deactivated the Summon Beast spell to erase that snake off in who-knows-where. After that, I elected to watch over Lili with an airborne Mirage Eye.

"Herbs on the west mountain, herbs on the west mountain...!"

Lili was rocketing down the road, not noticing the Mirage Eye following her.

She bounded across sun-kissed plains, leapt over streams, used tree branches as platforms to jump from, and only gained speed.

That pace was impressive. Only a gryphon could match her velocity, but she wasn't even serious yet. She still had a trick up her sleeve.

Suddenly Lily was glowing. The faint light coming from her whole body began to flicker wildly. A wolf's howl rang out through the forest, and the light faded.

"Herbs! On! West mountain!"

An immense white wolf now stood in her place. Her four powerful legs dug into the ground as she launched off like an arrow.

When transformed, her speed shot off the charts. She virtually flew across the ground. I saw a stunned dragonfolk family get passed by, but they were yards away before I could blink, and mere dots on the horizon in the next instant.

Fenrir, the Divine Wolf.

This immense wolf was worshiped as a protective deity on the continent of Erkia, Lili's home.

I had no idea why she could turn into something so significant and imposing. Could anyone in her tribe do that? Was it just Lili, and she was special? I had no clue. All I knew for sure was that she'd reached the first trial.

"Grr...!"

She growled when she got to the cave that was the sole path to the western mountain. The entrance had been plugged with a giant boulder conjured up with magic.

My doing, of course. I'd cast Invincibility on it, and the spell would nullify nearly 100% of all physical attacks. It wasn't something you could punch your

way through.

Invincibility had the drawback of making the target completely immobile, but that worked to my advantage. There was no way she could move that rock. However, a spellcaster from her unit could solve her problem. I needed to make her realize that even if a task seemed impossible, it could be overcome with help from your team!

"Can I break this thing...?"

Fenrir eagerly threw herself at the rock a few times. This failed, of course, and she bounced off.

"Oh, no! It's unbreakable!"

She slammed into it again and again. It looked like even Lili was realizing this rock wasn't normal. Excellent, this was all according to plan.

"Come onnn! I'm in a hurry!"

Still, Fenrir continued to tackle it.

Come on, that's just not going to be effective! You've already figured out physical attacks won't get you anywhere! Go back to the village and get a kobold or goblin who can use magic!

She couldn't hear my impatient shouts and continued her string of blows.

While I waited for her to find the answer, I mulled over the philosophy of the situation. Everyone starts as a beginner. No matter how powerful they were, every sorcerer started out casting Dim Light, and every swordsman began with wimpy swings.

It was only natural to start out with failure.

It was only natural to do poorly at something you'd never been taught.

So, how did people grow? By acquiring experience, simple as that.

Oh, they'll say, I can pull this off. Oh, they'll say, doing it like this makes it easier.

Acquiring experience piles up those little insights, allowing people to grow. They'd gain the ability to do things they couldn't before. This boulder, I hoped, would give Lili one of those insights.

It would take her forever to do it, but calling in help would make it much quicker. If she realized that, she should start to understand the benefits of teamwork. And if she did— "Oh! It budged!"

What?

I looked through my Mirage Eye again to see something a touch hard to believe.

The unbreakable rock blocking the cave entrance had a small, but undeniable, crack on its surface.

Wait, wait, wait, no way, no way! You're not allowed to do that!

This was Invincibility! It provided near 100% immunity to physical attacks! This wasn't making any sense!

Now, all right, I know. Near 100%. When you put it under the microscope, it would come out to 99, maybe 98% immunity. Still, it would be mostly invincible in the face of a simple physical attack like a tackle. How much had this idiot been tackling it while I was ruminating?

"Just a...little more!"

Don't you 'just a little more' me! Quit it! Leave that poor rock alone!

Fenrir slammed her large frame into the boulder again and again. She stuck

her claws and fangs in and started to twist. With each strike and each twist, the crack grew, becoming clearer as the rock groaned.

"Just a bit more!"

"Don't do it! You're not supposed to solve it like this!"

I cried out at her, but she was miles away and couldn't hear. After pondering what to do for a few seconds, I decided to wager that the wise Beast General would change her mind.

Come on, just give up and go back to the nearby village. It won't even take a minute with your speed, and you've got a kobold curse-maker troop stationed there.

Like, it would just take one spell, that's it. Just bring over spellcasters! Work together! Succeed and celebrate victory with your te— Ahhh, there goes the boulder!

With a crash loud enough to make my Mirage Eye vision briefly blur, the boulder broke down. As the dust covered her, that muscle-headed wolf let out a satisfied bark and bounded into the dim cave.

No way... She got past the rock alone? Without any help from her underlings?

The scene had left me in disbelief, but I recovered. The trap I'd laid in the cave wasn't something she could slice her way through. The next trial would be different.

"Grr!"

Fenrir stopped in the dim cave. In front of her were immense green slimes, blocking her way. About several dozen of them.

That, too, was my bidding. They looked slow and lacking in poison...because

they were. The slimes posed no threat to anyone, they were just big. Big, and blocking the way.

Fenrir seemed to have noticed that and slashed at one with no hesitation. Her claws, sharper than steel, sent the slime splattering in every direction. However...

"Whuh?!"

Her tail shot up as she raised her guard. The slime pieces on the ground quickly ballooned up, creating dozens more giant slimes.

How do you like my second trial, the infinitely replicating slime?!

"Argh, why are there more?!"

Fenrir let out a groan and smashed another slime, but that did nothing to reduce their numbers. They just kept on increasing.

Yeah, keep wasting time. You'll never get out of the cave if you keep that up.

I'll get right to the answer: these slimes weren't invincible. The observant adventurer would notice that hidden among the first several dozen was a single, tiny red slime. That was their core.

All the other slimes were, essentially, dummies. If you crushed the red slime, they would all evaporate in an instant.

I saw Fenrir perform a dance of death through the Mirage Eye, but the slimes simply duplicated at a matching pace.

"Why do more keep popping up?!"

Lili hadn't picked up on trick yet. She had little chance of finding the tiny red slime among the hundreds of green slimes she'd generated. Make that no chance.

The fastest way to clear this would be to bring over a perceptive underling. For example, phelps, a race of cat-beastfolk, had sharp intuition and night vision enough to tell where the correct slime was in the dark cave with ease.

She could also bring over an underling who could cast freeze spells. Slimes tended to be highly vulnerable to being made solid, so freezing and breaking them would— "I got 'em!"

You what?!

I quickly returned to my Mirage Eye to see that the slimes had been annihilated.

How? What did she do?!

As Fenrir eagerly dashed through the cave, I slipped back through the Mirage Eye's memories and played back the past footage...and found myself covering my eyes.

Thirty seconds ago: With every one of Fenrir's attacks, more slimes filled the cramped cave passage.

Twenty seconds ago: Too many slimes had filled the passage, applying pressure to the core red slime.

Ten seconds ago: The red slime was on the verge of collapse from the pressure.

Five seconds ago: The red slime was crushed completely. All the other slimes immediately exploded, and Fenrir let out a howl of victory.

"....."

"Hold!"

"Gr?"

Fenrir froze at my command. Her mighty claws scarred the earth, and her huge, white frame stopped seconds before hurtling into the crevice.

"What a relief! A few more seconds, and you would have been at the bottom of that cliff. Do take a look at how high up we are."

"Whoa..."

She reacted in that deep, bestial voice of her full transformation as she looked into the abyss below and shuddered. Her white tail drooped between her hind legs in disappointment.

That was the third trial, the crevice I'd conjured up with the power of gnomes. We could see a tiny road on the other side of the cliff—the only path that continued to the west mountain. There was, of course, no bridge.

A fierce river roared far below, its current going at a blinding speed. It was originally a stream of groundwater, but I'd exposed it to the surface while making the crevice.

Fenrir probably wouldn't die if she fell into the river, but it flowed all the way back to the cave she started at, so it would eat up a lot of time.

Now, the idea of this trial was to get her to seek the help of the rocs or harpies under her command. After all, not even the mighty Fenrir could bound over this gap. No, this was a challenge she couldn't solve with brute force, and I *knew* my plan would succeed this time.

"Who're you, mister?"

"Ah, I have forgotten to introduce myself. I am Godhart, a traveler."

I bowed my head after delivering a theatrical introduction.

I forgot to mention it, but I was using the Disguise spell to take on the appearance of a traveling bard. I gave myself a large hat, strapped a lute to my back, wore some clothes that just yelled "traveler," and changed my face and body type with Metamorphose. Lili's magical senses were laughable, so she wouldn't see through my façade.

Sitting back and hoping she would figure things out was no longer on the table. I had to make Lili realize what this test was about, even if I had to be a little hands-on.

With a melancholy strum of my lute, I spoke up.

"How tragic. How tragic, I tell you! If only I had a friend who could fly! Like, say, a roc or a harpy! Why, I would simply have them ferry me over to the other side with ease, in a display of wonderful teamwork!"

"Friends? Teamwork?!"

Fenrir's white ears shot up. *Bingo*. It looked like she finally found the answer!

"When you can't solve a problem alone, perhaps you need...a little help, wouldn't you say?"

"You know...yeah, you're right! You're right! Okay!"

The giant wolf nodded eagerly, then leapt clear over my head. She was about to go dashing off when she stopped and turned back to me, wagging her tail in joy.

"Thanks, Mr. God! I'll go talk with the others!"

"Well, do take care."

By the time I waved her off, she was already well on the path she'd taken to

get here. When the white wolf vanished completely from my view, I let out a sigh and plopped down on the ground.

Phew. Sure, I was a bit heavy-handed...all right, very heavy-handed, but if it ended well, it would all be worth it. She should realize that working together with her subordinates was key. If she figured that out, all she'd need would be practice to improve her teamwork quality.

Practice. Whether in work or play, there's always people who are good at what they do, and people who aren't.

If you're bad at something, you might feel like you'll never be able to beat those who are good at it. Oh, they've got talent and I don't, you might say to yourself.

But that isn't the case.

People who are skilled at things are just used to them. They just have more experience. People who aren't simply aren't used to them. They lack that experience. That's how it is for most things. If you've got time and motivation, you can do most things you've got the experience for. Which is why when you have someone new you want to teach a job to, it is better you give them all kinds of work to build up that experience.

"It's okay to make mistakes. Just give it a try."

Those words were key. They applied to Lili's situation, too.

I'll have to make sure Lili gets a lot of experience. I'll make up for the mistakes she makes while she gets a feel for commanding, and make her succeed as a leader...

A smile came to my face as I imagined Lili taking charge and giving perfect orders.

She was still just what, eleven? Twelve? Definitely the youngest of the Guardians. If she started building experience now, she would be a fantastic—*Splash splash splash.*

Splashing from below interrupted my thoughts. It sounded almost like...something was swimming in the river.

"Huh?"

A terrible feeling led me to peer into the crevice, and I immediately regretted my decision. Despair assailed me for the umpteenth time that day.

"....."

I didn't want to believe it, but...a huge wolf was swimming upstream.

"Mr. Gaawwwd!"

The wolf at the bottom of the crevice was saying something, and I didn't want to hear it.

"I talked to the others! They said I should just swim from the bottom and climb up! Look!"

At the bottom of that accursed crevice, Fenrir had swum upstream and clung to the cliff face on the other side, wagging her tail triumphantly. Then, against my expectations, she ran up the sheer cliff.

Climbing up the hundred-meter-tall rock face in a few blinks, she easily made it to the only path to the western mountain. This was a solution I could not have predicted. The rocs and harpies I wanted her to bring didn't have a chance.

"Mr. Gawwwd! Thanks a bunch!"

She bowed her head. Well, as much as a wolf could.

"Your advice really helped!"

"Uh...y-yeah, sure..."

"Well, I'm in a hurry! See you!"

"Y-yeah..."

All I could do was watch the wolf sprint off into the distance.

The string of failures continued after that.

The fourth test, where you had to press ten spaced-out switches at the same time to open a door? Lili turned back into human form and threw rocks at them with impeccable timing and accuracy.

The fifth test, where the power of Salamander kept a cave passage along the route blazing with flames? Fenrir scared the fire spirit off with her howls, and the conflagration went with them.

My tests failed, again and again.

Failure, failure, failure, failure.

"I...I can't believe this..."

After the clay golem of the final test had been defeated, I'd returned to the main base camp before her and collapsed on the ground.

My scheme had ended in complete failure.

3 — Small Insights Birth Productivity

"Ah?!"

My eyes shot open and I picked myself up. It looked like the fatigue had gotten to me.

I noticed what I assumed was Lili's handiwork by my pillow: a bowl of yellow soup likely made from crushed and infused herbs. Some of the stuff was on the side of my mouth, too.

It was bright outside the tent. Morning already.

"Leo!"

Lili tossed aside the pile of herbs in her hands and lunged at me, and I thought back to yesterday while I pacified her.

Ahh, I passed out the second I got back. Felt like I was having a nightmare...and considering how embarrassing the trials turned out, I wish I was!

"So you got the herbs, then?"

"Yeah! Feeling better? You are, right?"

"Ah...y-yeah, I'm feeling a lot better. Thanks."

"Eheheh."

I patted her on the head, and she bashfully began to purr. Ah, ignorance was bliss!

Lili enjoyed being petted for a while, but then she stood up, as if remembering something. She shuffled over to the corner of the room, then brought back a piece of parchment with a picture scribbled on it.

"So, when I was out yesterday, I thoughta something!"

"And what's that?"

"Well, think it'd be okay if I tried working like this?"

"...Huh?"

I looked over the paper and fell speechless. In a good way. All of the insights I wanted Lili to pick up during the trial, they were all there.

There were giants carrying heavy loads, rocs flying to other islands to collect supplies, demon wolves carrying goblins to their negotiation missions, and Lili and me as Black Knight Onyx giving orders.

That art quality was terrible, but it got the idea across.

"Hey...what's with all of this?"

"You don't think it'll work?"

"No, it's not that, just...did you come up with this yourself?"

"Nope!"

She shook her head.

"So, I met this guy on the road, Mr. Godhart! He told me that it's way easier doing things as a team than alone!"

"....."

"And I'm kinda dumb, so I'm not gonna figure that out unless someone tells me!"

Lili sheepishly scratched her head as she explained.

It looked like she had figured out for herself that her way of working was less than optimal. Still, no one would show her the right way to do things. The other

Guardians were busy and couldn't take questions, and right when she worked up the resolve to ask me for advice, I got bitten by a poisonous snake.

When she finally did get some good advice, it came from this "Mr. Godhart" that she ran into on her way to get the herbs.

Then, last night while tending to me, she thought back to what Godhart told her and came up with some ideas about making work easier. From there, she stayed up all night working on that picture. Lili nervously asked for confirmation.

"What do you think? Would this make work a little easier?"

"Ah..."

"No?"

"Ahh..."

Regret poured over me as I groaned.

Part of me had thought that Lili was too stupid to understand, and that I couldn't just give her direct advice. Yet, here I was, hoisted by my own petard. Lili wasn't the fool—I was. All I had to do was say, "Hey, do this." That was it.

I held up my hands in resignation and gave Lili a heartfelt smile.

"Yeah, it'll make work way easier. Great job, Lili. Really great job."

"Really?!"

She leapt into my arms. After I ruffled her hair a little, I pulled out a new sheet of parchment and placed it between us. I inked my quill pen and copied Lili's picture onto the parchment, then added a few important elements while she watched with sparkling eyes.

"Listen, it's also really important that we don't make trouble for the locals."

"Got it!"

"First, let's set up an official supply route..."

"Okay!"

From that day forward, the logistics branch saw a dramatic increase in efficiency. The Beast General, now a little more mature, turned out to be more reliable than expected.

The Ruthless Fang

Beast General Lili

Actual Age: **12**

Race: Demi-Beastfolk

A girl from the hinterland of Erkia, a continent far to the west. Able to turn into the immense Divine Wolf Fenrir during battle. She encountered Echidna during her search for a groom in the central continent. Seeking rumors of strong men to fight, she went from town to town until meeting and being defeated by Leo. Genuine and honest, she's trustworthy to a fault and often acts before she thinks. She believes Leo to be her fated partner after her defeat at his hands.



Chapter 4: Hero vs Demon Queen Echidna

1 — Drinking with the Boss from Hell

"Zero Five, head to the site immediately."

"Understood. Hurrying to point D36 and prioritizing securing civilians."

I cut the call and lowered my elevation.

Below me was a city in flames. Countless demons pouring out into the open air. People left behind, fighting for their lives.

When I landed to protect them, I could hear them gasp. They met their savior not with cheers, but with looks of expectation and unease.

I didn't mind.

Protect the people. That was my purpose.

Protect the world. That was all they expected of me.

There was no other reason I—

"……!"

I was back in my room in the Demon Queen's castle.

I, hero Leo Demonhart, awoke.

I shifted around in bed and found that my clothes and sheets were gross with sweat.

It was still dark outside. Most likely a little bit before the east sky brightened

up, so I'd woken up early.

I felt like I'd had a dream, and not a good one.

Experience told me that a dream like that was an ill portent for the day to come. Usually, some incredibly draining event would be awaiting me.

Once, I was helping out at the Alchemists' Guild for about a month, board included. It just so happened that a horrifying chimera in their storehouse awakened and started smashing up the place. The guild building was wrecked, valuable herbs had been lost, and the panacea I'd nearly finished was ruined. It was truly an awful occurrence.

Today's event would probably be that bad, or worse. The thought of it weighed on my spirits.

"Tch."

I closed my eyes and escaped back into the comfortable world of slumber, praying that today would be a good day.

"What? Echidna said that?"

"She did. Do hurry."

It happened that evening. I had finished up most of my work and finally dropped my guard, thinking the day had ended peacefully.

A nervous-looking Shutina told me that Demon Queen Echidna had been looking for me.

"Did she finally see through me?"

"P-possibly."

Shutina awkwardly lowered her gaze and let out a sigh.

We didn't know if she'd figured out who I was yet. One thing I was sure of was that I hadn't told anyone except the Four Great Guardians that I was the hero.

Disguise to change my clothes and wrap me in armor.

Metamorphose to change my face and build.

Ghost Face to veil my entire body, cloaking my identity.

Truth Lock to tweak cognition and erase lower-level suspicions.

I had about ten spells on myself to the point of redundancy to hide my identity, not to mention my act as the strong and silent Black Knight Onyx. It was hard to imagine anyone wasn't buying what I was selling.

Hard to imagine, but still...

"You haven't introduced yourself to Queen Echidna yet. Perhaps that has drawn her ire?"

"O-oh..."

Good point. I scratched my head.

"...Perhaps telling her that Lord Onyx had helped make my job much easier was not the wisest idea on my part."

"It definitely wasn't, moron! I told you not to tell her about me!"

"How could I?! The Demon Queen herself came to ask me about work and if I needed any help. I couldn't just lie!"

I sighed. Shutina wasn't wrong, but I was, for not going to introduce myself to Echidna. In a normal workplace, a newbie has to introduce themselves to their

boss and coworkers.

Echidna didn't call herself the Demon Queen out of baseless pride. She could match Edvard in swordplay if she drew her Tyrfing, and her knowledge of the magical arts rivaled Shutina. The queen boasted great talent.

Try meeting her face to face. Even with all of my magical camouflage, there was a high chance she would see through my identity as Onyx. And now wasn't a good time to get exposed. Infiltrating the castle without Echidna's knowledge was bad enough, but not yet winning Mernes' and Edvard's recommendations was my biggest weakness thus far.

I had wagered that even Echidna would fold and grant me the coveted full-time employment if I had recommendations from all four of them, but on the other hand, that meant that I wouldn't be employed otherwise. In other words, if I was missing even one recommendation, my efforts would be pointless.

Edvard was pretty fond of me as is, but I couldn't imagine Mernes would give me a recommendation without some work. And without that halo of recommendation, I couldn't let Echidna find out who I was. That's why I tried so hard to postpone my meeting with Echidna, but here we were.

"Some guy kind of waltzed into her army and started helping out the Four Great Guardians without her being told. She probably doesn't feel great about that as Demon Queen."

"Do hurry. If she finds out who you are, don't hesitate to call me. I'll try my best to persuade her."

"Don't worry about it, I'll figure something out. Just pretend not to know anything."

I waved to a worried Shutina, transformed into the Black Knight, and left the

room.

Now, what excuse was I going to give Echidna? I gave it some thought as I passed through the castle halls, but couldn't come up with anything.

Does she know I'm Onyx, even?

Honestly, the chances of that were slim. If she knew who I was, Echidna wouldn't bother summoning me. She'd just come kill me herself.

If she didn't know, then the odds jumped up significantly that she was just vexed Onyx hadn't introduced himself to her. I needed to come up with a good reason for skipping out on introductions, or she might just have exiled me from the army.

The needlessly long castle hallways felt strangely short today. I had thought of and discarded over a hundred excuses when I found myself in front of the doors to Echidna's audience chamber.

Well, it's do or die. I leave it in fate's hands!

Four solid knocks.

"Black Knight Onyx is here to answer your summons."

A few moments after my quiet announcement, she told me to enter.

I put my hand on the handle, then froze in a moment of tension.

If my disguise had been seen through, Echidna would likely hit me with her signature spell, Inferno. Inferno was the highest-level fire spell—it conjured up a violent explosion that left the hungering flames of hell in its wake. Launching it indoors would deal damage to the castle, but if it meant killing me, she would not hesitate.

Now, if she didn't already know who I was, I could cast every barrier I had to

nullify her Inferno spell, but stepping into my boss's room like that would be begging her to suspect me of something.

I elected to enter the room defenselessly. If she struck me as I was, I would probably die.

The red door felt many times heavier to my hand.

The throne room slowly came into view.

What'll it be? What'll it be, Demon Queen Echidna?!

"Ah! So you are Onyx, then!"

"....."

"Glad to see you, glad to see you! I've wanted to sit down and talk. Come, have a seat!"

She welcomed me with the brightest of smiles.

The girl in the revealing red dress swished her black, dragon-like tail in greeting. Then, after smacking me on the shoulder, she gave me a friendly, albeit aggressive, hug.

"Shutina's told me of the great work you've done! She was as pleased as they come with how much easier you made her job—pleased enough to make me forget you never introduced yourself!"

The Demon Queen Echidna. Before, she was a powerful, voluptuous beauty. After her defeat at my hands, she was turned into the kind of young girl you'd see tilling a field, as punishment.

Without her old curves, her imposing temptress's dress had lost all of its commanding presence. Now, she looked like a village girl putting on a costume for a festival—but that wasn't what had me speechless.

Ale. Wine. Spirits. A mountain of alcohol had been set on the table in the middle of the audience chamber. There was a large plate that held heaping servings of meat I assumed were to accompany our drinks. The boar meat we'd procured from Largo the other day dripped with fresh, mouth-watering juices, and the onion and vinegar-based sauce's aroma had my stomach growling. But I would not give in! Not when this table...

Oh, no...

It only had two seats!

"We're having a casual drink tonight, just you and me! We shall eat, drink, and be merry!"

When I had bad dreams, some sort of awful event would be awaiting me that day. And here it was. The horrific event everyone has to go through at a new workplace which requires them to endure a long period of spiritual anguish: drinking one-on-one with the boss.

And thus began my hours of hell.

2 — A Hero's Guide to Surviving Drinks

"You drinking, Lord Onyx?"

"That I am. I must say, this alcohol is to die for. The pork compliments it perfectly, as well."

"Fwahaha, excellent!"

Echidna bellowed with laughter as she tore into a fat sausage. To the untrained eye, this would look like your average drinking setup between a strait-laced worker and his laid-back boss.

In reality, it was anything but. I wanted to get out of this room as quickly as humanly possible, and that tension didn't allow me to enjoy the taste of the fantastic food and drink. The Demon Queen, however, was knocking back drinks as though her belly were a bottomless swamp. She showed no sign of our meeting being even close to finishing.

"I'm sure you'll understand that I would love nothing more than to throw a far grander party for a knight of your caliber, but resources have been tight as of late. Do forgive tonight's sparsity."

"Not at all, O Queen. The party is above and beyond the likes of me as it is."

"Truly, now? Then please, do drink your fill! Keep going until your stomach's about to burst!"

"Haha...hahaha."

Drinking with the boss...that was bad enough, but this had the added bonus of not knowing if or when she would see through my façade. If she figured out who I was, that was it. There was no way I could enjoy what I was drinking. As I showed Echidna my best smile, my mind desperately concocted a strategy to

smoothly get out of this hell.

To review the situation, this was the audience chamber of the Demon Queen's castle. I was having drinks with my former enemy, the Demon Queen Echidna—not as the hero Leo, but as the Black Knight Onyx, my assumed identity.

Our drinking meeting from hell was proceeding smoothly. No signs pointed to it ending early, for instance, Echidna being called to handle an emergency, so that solution was out. I'd been speaking with her for about an hour. And how could I not? We were the only ones there. And worse, there was a reason I couldn't let the conversation die.

"Come now, Onyx! Drink, drink!"

"Oh, I am. Such a mellow flavor this wine has!"

Spells that manipulated perception and cognition like Truth Lock and Ghost Face had a weakness: observation.

Think of it like those spot-the-difference puzzles children do. You might not be able to tell the difference at a glance, but focused observation solves that. Prolonged observation would make the hidden truth easier to pick up on, and the spell would be broken.

The quickest way to keep someone from observing you was to talk just enough, let them talk just enough, and make them focus on the conversation. As I was talking to the boss, that was the only thing I could have done anyway.

And as Echidna was my biggest boss, I couldn't afford to cause her offense.

I couldn't let the conversation die out. I had to appear as calm as could be. And so I desperately attempted to keep the conversation under control.

"Your glass is empty, Your Majesty. Allow me to pour you a new drink."

"Wonderful. How considerate!"

Since we're on the topic, let me tell you the best way to make drinks with the boss a bit easier.

Tip one: The moment your boss's glass is empty, fill it up. You'll be able to rest your vocal cords while pouring the drink, and your boss will be impressed at how perceptive and considerate you are. A basic social drinking technique.

However, that was not my aim.

"Now then, do enjoy."

She took a long swig, then let out a satisfied sigh.

"Come, have another!"

I immediately poured ale into her empty glass.

By now, my aim was likely clear. The true aim of this strategy: Get her dead drunk!

She threw back another glass and voiced her satisfaction again.

"Very impressive drinking! Come, have another one!"

Drink up, Echidna! Keep going! Drink 'til you drop, literally! End this damn party! Don't even think about hitting up a second bar!

She let out a slight groan.

"Your Majesty? Is something the matter?"

My plan was coming together. After emptying a few bottles of drink, her pace

had slowed. She placed her glass on the table, put her hand to her brow, and groaned more loudly.

There we go! Now to suggest we close up shop!

I rubbed her back and sounded as concerned as I could.

"Perhaps you drank a little too much. It might be best if we..."

"Mm...right you are."

Echidna looked up and smiled.

"Now that we're warmed up, let's skip the glasses and go straight for the bottle!"

"...Ahahaha."

Echidna snatched up a large bottle of ale and started downing it directly.

"Join the fun, Onyx! Come, down a bottle!"

"Hahaha."

It should be said that the strategy of drinking one's boss under the table would be ineffective against a heavyweight drinker like Echidna. You'd just be digging your own grave. Pick a different target to defeat with alcohol.

All right, next strategy. I'll change the topic before I get KO'd from ale.

"I must say, the castle's dining hall has quite the skilled cooks. That sausage you're now eating, Your Majesty, is simply to die for."

"Ah, you've an eye for quality! The food here's gotten so much better lately for some reason, you know. There's something in this sausage that makes it taste truly fantastic. Here, have a bite!"

"Aye."

Tip two: People—well, demons in this case—are prone to be fond of those who show an active interest in them. This doesn't just apply to going out for drinks, either. Showing that you're interested in someone is the most basic way to get them to like you. In a situation like this, it's hard to miss by talking about what they're eating or drinking.

"This sausage is made with spices from Largo. It's been stuffed with minced red pepper, too, giving the innards a rather pleasant color. It seems the chefs modified a traditional Western recipe to make these."

"Ah, I see. We've been hurting so much for resources lately I hadn't the spirit to pay attention to flavor as long as we had food, but...I must say, a tasty meal truly brings abundance to the heart. I'll have to pay my compliments to the chef later!"

Just as expected, Echidna gave me her brightest of smiles as she munched on her sausage in delight. She looked like an average, everyday girl as she beamed, and I felt a pang of guilt that I was hiding my identity. It must be said that I was the one who made this sausage. The cooks down at the Demon Rat Tavern, the castle's dining hall, made slop. After getting permission from the old lady in charge, I hunkered down in the kitchen for two days and gave them recipe boot camp.

Tip three: If there will be food present, make sure you know as much about it as possible beforehand. You'll be doing a lot of eating and drinking, so talking about food can easily lead to an unexpected conversation, as it just did. All you really need to say is, "This is tasty" or, "This isn't too good." As long as you get the ball rolling, the alcohol will take care of the rest of the conversation.

The drink seemed to be getting to her, and Echidna began to slur her speech.

"I wash wondering what kinda man you were after talking to Shutina, and let

me tell you, this chat really answered that! You're great at your job, an' you know a lot about food! You're quite the man, Onyxsh!"

"Not at all. My talents and knowledge are quite modest."

I awkwardly scratched my head while playing down her praise. It would be rude to attend this meeting with a helmet, so I'd taken it off beforehand. This was another reason I wanted to leave as quickly as possible. Even though I'd changed my face with Metamorphose, her being able to see my expressions for this long only increased the chance that she'd see through my disguise. However, a hero was one who could turn risk into return.

Echidna finally asked the question I'd been waiting for.

"I must say, you're quite the looker without your helmet. Why do you keep it on so much?"

"Ah, about that."

Here we go!

Tip four: The only time the powerless newbie can sell themselves to the boss without worrying about appearing obnoxious is question time! You can't let this slip by! "What do you do on your days off?" "What's your hobby?" "Do you drink?" "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Your answer to those questions will drastically change the flow of the outing, how easily you can get in and out of future demands to drink, and how easy work will be the following day. Seriously. The time had come! I'd give her an answer so perfect that it would pave my way out of this mess and turn this problem into an opportunity!

"I've been cursed by the goddess Tiana, I'm afraid. The time I'm allowed to show my face to others is gravely limited, so I must spend most of my time

encased in armor."

"Goodness me, and you've been helmet-less this whole time. Will you be all right?"

Echidna's voice took on a note of concern, so I pushed a little more.

"To be frank? I may be cutting it close. Very close, but...I imagine I can hold out for a little longer. Why, pit against the chance to speak with you, Your Majesty, 'tis but a trifle."

"You know, you're quite the talker! Come, drink up some more!"

"Hahaha."

Let me tell you how to slip out of a painful drinking session quickly. Set a clear time limit on your meeting, as I just did. The earlier you bring this up, the better. Most people hate it when the unexpected happens, after all. If you implant the idea beforehand that you're someone who leaves early, slipping out becomes much easier.

Even saying that you can only stay for a little while leaves a far greater impression than turning down the invitation entirely. Remember this if you're in a workplace where you get invited out for drinks often.

"What a good day today has been! Come, a toast to the friendship between Black Knight Onyx and Demon Queen Echidna!"

"Cheers! Haha, hahaha."

I didn't know how effective these techniques would be on a demon like Echidna, however. I had little faith in this plan to begin with, but it was better than doing nothing. She should have realized I was on a time limit after that last exchange...right?

I munched some bread doused in olive oil. Echidna was tipsy and in good spirits, praising me to high heaven.

"I've heard all about you! Not only did ya help out the Sorcerer General the second you came through the door, you've been helpin' out the Beast General, too. Real good work! Real good!"

"Your Majesty, you're too kind."

"I don't care if you're human or demon or whatever. If you're good at your job, you're good with me. I'm glad we have you among our ranks!"

"I see. Well, what if..."

Maybe I shouldn't ask this. No, I will.

"What of that hero, Leo? I heard he wanted to join the army. Would you welcome him, too?"

"...The hero?!"

Echidna silently downed a full bottle of ale. Her eyes burned with fiery indignation as she slammed the empty bottle onto the table.

"He's the one exception. That twisted man...that social reject is the last person I'd want in my army! If we were foolish enough to let him join, why, he'd destroy our organization from within!"

She zealously waved her arms about as she went into detail on just how unnecessary Leo was to her army.

All while the object of her indignation sat right in front of her, and had heavily improved the army already.

"I don't care if he does a thousand—no, ten thousand hands worth of work! We don't want him!"

"That bad?"

"Yes, that bad! Let me tell you..."

She started to complain with another bottle of ale in hand.

"I would have had the Wisdom Stone by now if it weren't for that blasted hero! It's all because of him...all because of him!"

"The Wisdom Stone, you say?"

"Damn it! Damn it all!"

Echidna stomped her feet and hurled every insult she could think of at the Leo of her imagination. While she was going on, I ruminated on the Wisdom Stone.

Now, the Wisdom Stone was a treasure said to be held in the holy city of Renaye. The first saint-king was said to have dug it up 3,000 years ago, and then used its powers to establish the holy city proper.

Of course, this was all what "they say." No one had actually seen the thing. No one knew what it looked like or how big it was. It was all a mystery. Not even the royal family or head priests, the most powerful people in society, knew. This meant that most of the information about the Wisdom Stone was rumors and hearsay.

And those rumors were numerous. The wastelands around Renaye became green again with its power. The stone's protections kept the denizens of the holy city free from disease. Those who touch the Wisdom Stone become immortal. A hero would be birthed from the Wisdom Stone when the world was in grave danger. The stone would make you rich, the stone would return grandpa from the grave, and so on and so forth.

Those were just a few of them, too. There were nearly an unlimited number of rumors. When I thought of it, some of them were incredibly stupid, like, say,

the Wisdom Stone would generate an endless number of the tastiest pancakes. I had to give a salute to the human imagination.

It was said Echidna had been after the Wisdom Stone in hopes of attaining immortality, but the joke was on her. Most of the rumors about it were completely baseless.

One had to think about it. If the Wisdom Stone actually gave immortality, then the first saint-king or some greedy priest would be immortal. Yet I hadn't heard anything like that. The first saint-king, who was said to have found the Wisdom Stone 3,000 years ago, was long dead and his descendant—I'd lost track of how many saint-kings there'd been—who'd been on the throne until last year had just passed away from the stress of Demon Queen Echidna's invasion. The rumor of a hero rising from the stone to defeat evil was nonsense, too, since I was the one who saved the world.

And, more than anything...

I had actually used the Wisdom Stone myself.

The one I used wasn't the one in the holy city that got all the rumors. In fact, I even knew where it was. Essentially, it's what gave me my hero powers.

I do have to say that the stone won't give just anyone superpowers. I had managed to handle it precisely because of all of my life experience, but that was a story for another day. Still, I understood what the Wisdom Stone was. It had immense power and could be used to do all sorts of things, but it wouldn't grant you immortality, and it wasn't a miracle device that you could put by your pillow to instantly wake up a billionaire who never got sick.

Echidna, however, had no clue about any of this and kept on complaining.

"We had gotten so close. We were so deep into Renaye that we could see its

central spire, but that blasted hero had to get in the way!"

"I see. So that is why you have not retreated to the Demon World even after losing so many men. You desire not conquest, but the Wisdom Stone, then?

"That's right!"

Apparently tired of complaining about the hero, Echidna caught her breath then snatched up some meat buns and threw them all in her mouth.

"Mmf...I was far too grandiose and aggressive in that war. If the Wisdom Stone is truly in the holy city of Renaye, there's no need to fight all of humanity that conventionally."

"Deceit and theft, then?"

"Or collusion."

Echidna chuckled.

It made sense. If she had people on the inside, the army's war readiness would be a distant second. That also explained why she was so quick to chase me off during the interview.

"I see. Yet, that makes me more curious."

"Hm? About what?"

"What is it you intend to do with the Wisdom Stone?"

"....."

"The humans say you seek the immortality the stone can provide, but...is that the truth?"

I'd always wanted to ask her this.

After being utterly destroyed by me, turned into a young girl again, and losing

most of her army and territory...why had she not returned to the Demon World? Why did she want the Wisdom Stone so badly? I couldn't imagine she wanted something as crass as immortality or riches. If she did, she'd have lost motivation and left long ago. Still, here she was, unyielding and attempting to rebuild her army.

Echidna's expression grew a little more serious. She took a sip of water, not ale, then quietly continued.

"Have you ever been to the Demon World?"

"I have not." I shook my head. "I have heard that demons, magical beasts, demi-humans, and the like...all those aside from simple humans hail from there, but have never been myself."

"Indeed. The Demon World, our home, is a grand wasteland."

She gazed at the undulating surface of the water in her glass and let out a sigh.

"It has no sun, and hardly any vegetation. The air is heavy, the water is muddy, and darkness rules the land. It is a land where only the strong can survive."

"A demonic world indeed. Hailing from a land of chaos, I can see why the Great Guardians and the other demons are so powerful."

"...I am sick of it."

"Huh?"

I was so surprised, I failed to conceal it.

Her gaze was as serious as ever. She continued quietly, but passionately.

"I wish to bring order to my chaotic world. To make a land without conflict. I

wish for warm rays of sunlight, and beautiful streams of water below them. I want fish swimming in those waters, and I want grasslands and forests swaying in the wind."

"...That does sound like the human realm."

"It does. That is why I sought the help of Shutina and other skilled demons to come to the human realm and obtain the Wisdom Stone."

"I...I see."

I kept up an appearance of calm, but I was at a complete loss as to how to respond. I picked up my glass and sipped the tiny bit of wine left as I thought it over.

Her reasons surprised me more than I expected. Everyone knew that Echidna was after the Wisdom Stone, but no one quite knew why. I didn't have any chances to ask about her motivation while we were adversaries, and I had told myself her reason couldn't be worthwhile, whatever it was. My image was of a brutish woman who simply happened to be stronger than your average villain, here to steal the Wisdom Stone for her own selfish ends.

The Demon World at the cost of the human realm. True, her motivations were still selfish.

Yet, I had not expected to hear the Demon Queen say she wanted to make a better world for her people. Not even the priests spoke of such altruism nowadays. She was probably used to these kinds of reactions, too. My look of bafflement was answered with a self-effacing smile. It only lasted a moment, however. Her next words were sharp and decisive.

"I have nothing against the humans, but the Wisdom Stone in the holy city will be ours."

"Do you mean to imply, then, that you would accept the stone if they offered it up? And you would fight if they did not?"

"Precisely!"

Echidna gave an enthusiastic nod and gulped down the rest of her water before immediately speaking up again.

"I will not claim my cause is fully just. The holy city is the center of the human realm, and I am sure stealing its Wisdom Stone would cause a variety of problems, but that is a sacrifice I am willing to make. Those who work with us, like the dragonfolk and the humans from Lili's home will be given sanctuary in the Demon World, but I care not what happens to the others! Not in the slightest!"

Echidna was nearly shouting at the end, as if she were convincing herself she was an evil invader. It hurt to watch, and I couldn't help but speak up.

"Yet, Your Majesty. You had forbidden needless killing, had you not?"

"Mm..."

"Kill not unless absolutely needed, for slaughter begets slaughter and grudge begets grudge. So you had preached to your forces, so much so that the lowest private knew your policy. I hear that is why the war ended with mercifully low casualties on both sides."

"And look what it got us: Defeat. I curse my naivete."

Echidna leaned back in her seat and looked to the ceiling with a bitter smile.

"I simply could not fully become the villain. When I considered that the humans had a home like us, had friends and family, I simply..."

Her voice trailed off.

She seemed to be ruminating over whether she should continue. After a few moments, she spoke again.

"The Hero, Leo...if I were honest, I don't have much of a grudge against him."

"...A surprise. Might I ask the reason?"

"He's a hero. A guardian of the human world, you could say. He simply did his job—fighting the evil invaders who threatened his home. If the Demon World were invaded, I would do the same."

She flicked her empty glass with a nail and smiled wryly. The sound of the glass echoed loudly in the silent room.

"He may have ruined my plan, but I cannot say he was wrong. The fault lay with us, the aggressors in this war."

"....."

I didn't know what to tell her. Echidna, my previous foe, was showing me a side of her I had never seen. And all I could do was sit there, frozen in silence. Still, hearing her out made something clear to me. At her core, she was a gentle queen who cared for her people. Not the type hungry for conquest. That much was clear. That gentle queen became an evil conqueror to provide for her people.

How did that make her feel? How much resolve did she bring when she left the Demon World? She must have wondered if she was doing the right thing, going down the right path. She must have been assailed by great anxiety, unspeakable despair, and ever-present worry.

And then...

Someone brought her the greatest despair of all. Me, Leo, the hero.

"What about you, Onyx?"

"Huh?"

"Why did you join our army?"

I noticed she was looking right at me. She'd stopped downing drinks and wasn't munching on any food. It was my turn to answer. Sitting before me was no longer a boss forcing me to drink with her, nor the proud and haughty Demon Queen. No. This was a brave girl who had come far from home, run into countless trials, been beset by anxiety, nearly consumed by despair, and yet decided to keep on chasing her dream.

"Why did you join us? Did humanity betray you? Do you wish to end the world? Or have you simply come seeking a place to die? I wish to hear your motivation."

"I..."

I had a hard time choosing my words.

This is why I hate drinking with bosses.

We were just chatting about nonsense, and before I knew it, we'd gotten to some serious talk. When you were drinking with bosses or coworkers, this wasn't too uncommon. The fact that the seriousness came from the nonsense was all the more reason they expected to hear what you really thought, too.

Why I joined her army, huh?

I could tell a lie, easily. There were plenty of logical-sounding reasons out there, and even if it wasn't airtight, I knew Echidna wouldn't dig into me too much. However, Echidna had been honest with me. If I deceived her further, she'd be even more upset when I revealed who I...no. No, that wasn't it.

I just didn't want to lie to her anymore.

This wasn't me strategizing, either. I genuinely wanted to cheer Echidna on. It was hard to believe, but this was how I honestly felt. I could hardly process it, myself.

...Yeah. Well, if that's how I feel, there's only one thing to do.

My decision was made.

I would dispel all of the enchantments messing with Echidna's perception and reveal myself as Leo. I wouldn't say this was the perfect timing. I didn't even know if I had recommendations from all four Great Guardians on lock yet. If they weren't all in agreement, Echidna would probably refuse me entry into her force.

Still, Echidna came out and was honest to me. If I let this chance to reveal myself go by, who could know how long it would take for another chance to appear? That meant there was only one thing to do.

First, I'll reveal my identity. Then, I'll give her a heartfelt apology for deceiving her and let her know that I empathize with her goal and want to help her.

I laid out the steps in my head. The plan had a lot of uncertainty, but I had no choice but to offer up information about the Wisdom Stone in hopes of getting her to employ me. Even as I wavered in indecision, Echidna waited patiently. So, I looked her right in the eyes, steeled myself, and spoke up.

"Ah, I...well..."

"Yes?"

"Listen. I—"

Bang!

The doors to the audience chamber flew open barely a moment before I was going to dispel my enchantments.

I could feel all the tension spill out the room. When I turned to the entrance, I saw Shutina leaning against the door, out of breath. She had two pieces of paper in her hand.

"What's the meaning of this, Shutina? You're making quite the racket."

"F-forgive me, Queen Echidna, but...l-look at these."

Shutina barely even seemed to notice Echidna's reprimand as she came slowly staggering into the room. She held out the papers where we could see them, and repeated herself.

"P-please look at these."

Now that she was closer, I could tell that she was as pale as a sheet. Shutina prized etiquette too much to barge into a party uninvited like this, too. Something serious had to have happened. Echidna and I exchanged silent looks, realizing that we had an emergency on our hands. I peered at the papers Shutina held out...and fell speechless.

"....."

"....."

Laughably concise writing adorned each one.

I'm going on a journey. Please don't look for me. —Shadowless General Mernes

"What?!"

The cries of both hero and Demon Queen filled the throne room.

The Demon Queen

Echidna

Actual Age: 495

Race: Pure Demon

A purebred demon of means, born and raised in the Demon World. Her father was Cychreus, a Demon King who previously invaded the human realm. She boasts the highest skill in swordsmanship and magic among the Demon Realm, and demonstrates mastery in both alchemy and blacksmithing, all the results of backbreaking effort and training.
Though a little too kind for a denizen of the Demon World, she shows absolutely no mercy to those she recognizes as her foes.





Chapter 5: Hero vs Shadowless General Mernes

1 — If You Want to Quit, Talk First

"So...what happened?"

"....."

I'd hurried out of the castle and been searching for Mernes for about an hour. I finally found him brooding by a lake quite a ways away.

He was sitting on a near-rotten log, snapping a branch and throwing the pieces into the water. The ripples they made had all of his attention, and he paid me no mind.

I put on the friendliest, most inviting smile I could and spoke to the half-demon boy.

"What happened? C'mon, you can tell ol' Leo what's up."

"....."

"No need to hold it all in—c'mon, try talking it out."

No answer. Not even a glance.

An owl in the distance hooted, and silence took over.

A moonlit forest. A moonlit lake. Along with the silence, it gave the area a mystical aura—the mood would perfectly fit a young couple. Unfortunately, however, there was no young couple here. It was just me and the boy, coworkers. After a too-long pause, I finally got a brief response.

"Old."

"...Hm? Old?"

Old? Like, age?

When I thought about it, he was sixteen or seventeen. There aren't many people his age in the army, so he probably got lonely and ran away.

I leaned back in mild surprise. So he did have normal, human emotions. That was almost cute.

"Old? Like age? What about it? No one as old as you around to be friends with? You'll be older soon and want a birthday party?"

"....."

The half-demon, Shadowless General Mernes, finally looked away from the lake to face me.

Then, without the faintest movement, he spoke.

"Don't act like you're older than me. We've gotta be almost the same age."

"*That's* the first thing you say?!"

My vexed shout echoed loudly around the dark lakeside.

The surprised owl flew off, silhouetted by the moon.

The information Shutina brought in had given me pause. While I was glad that I got out of drinks with Echidna, who could have predicted Edvard and Mernes taking such drastic action? At the same time, no less?

Shutina and Echidna probably couldn't have, and I couldn't have either.

I'm going on a journey. Please don't look for me. —Shadowless General Mernes

I have failed to properly educate my troops and will be taking my life to make amends. —Dragon General Edvard

"Don't look for me"? "Taking my life to make amends"? *Are you kidding me?!*

Everyone came up with the most bizarre problems! Both of them were pretty strait-laced and didn't seem to have the problems that Shutina and Lili would—at a glance, anyway. Well, it looked like they had their issues, but...this was going way too far. Could they only think of things in zeros and ones?

Either way, I had to decide which to prioritize. Both of them were emergencies that demanded attention. Losing either of them meant we would have to rethink our army composition from the ground up.

After giving it much thought, I decided to leave Edvard to Echidna and Shutina (it was late at night and Lili was sleeping) while I chased the faint trace of Mernes' magic power. It looked like that was the right choice. I managed to catch him right as the trail began to disappear. I'd truly made it there by the skin of my teeth. Mernes' stealth abilities were top class, so I might have lost him if I had left even a minute later.

"...Well, let's drop that topic. Tell me, what was up with that letter you left?"

I sat next to Mernes, leaving some distance between us.

"Like, a journey, seriously? Even if you were just lying, you could've come up with a better reason."

"I was telling the truth. I just wanted to go on a little trip."

"That's not a good reason for a Great Guardian to just up and vanish!"

I violently shook Mernes by the shoulders. To my surprise, he just took it. His silver hair shook as his emerald eyes blankly stared at me. The hood he always wore slid off and touched my hand.

"Listen, if we lose even one of you Guardians, we have to reorganize the army from scratch. So what's the deal? You want out? Got something you're worried about? I don't care what it is, just tell me!"

I distracted him with my harsh tone while I quietly activated Hollow Chain, wrapping the ghostly spell around his left ankle. It was a magical chain only the caster could see. Though it would break with three strikes, it would help buy time.

As I said before, even I had a bit of trouble with Mernes' speed. He wasn't called the Shadowless General for nothing. It made me groan to think how annoying it would be to get him back if by some miracle he escaped me.

First of all, catching up to him would be impossible. If he was serious about keeping hidden, sensing him would be a fool's errand. Also, while hard to imagine, he might reveal the army's secrets to the humans, putting us in an even more dismal position.

Most of all, however, I didn't want to let him go without knowing *why* he wanted to quit. Quitting your job isn't a bad thing, really. If you want to quit, then it's probably time to go. It's your life. If you've found what you really want to do with it, go ahead and quit. That's what I thought. And if Mernes had a good reason, I was ready to tell Echidna that I wasn't able to find him.

He's clearly unsure about what he wants, though.

That much was clearly proven by how he simply elected to sit here and stare at the lake. If he'd sprinted away from the castle, I wouldn't have been able to

find him. But he hadn't. That meant he didn't actually want to desert. Of course, I couldn't simply accept "I just, you know, wanted to take a trip" as an answer. I stopped shaking him and spoke to him again in all seriousness.

"Listen, Mernes. If you've got a reason, I'll help you out. If you really want out of the Demon Queen's army, I'll back you up. But..."

"But?"

"Listen close. The most important thing to remember when you're quitting your job is to not let yourself regret it."

Quitting when you have your next job lined up. Quitting when you've got a replacement in the pipe. Quitting after you've punched out your obnoxious boss. All of these were important, but most important of all was not regretting your actions later on.

I didn't regret joining the Demon Queen's army. A former hero joining the demon army is far out of the ordinary and Echidna hadn't officially accepted me into the fold, but I considered it the best career change I could pull off. I thought that no matter how sudden the change of job, no matter how much opposition you met, if you felt deep in your heart you were making the right choice, then you were.

The opposite was also true. If you were even slightly unsure about your decision, that was a sign to stop and take a deep breath. Quitting one's job was easy. Going back to that job wasn't. If you had any mental blocks, those were to be tackled first.

"Hey, Mernes. You're not actually trying to leave, I can tell. So what's bothering you?"

"...Yeah."

"Look, I'm the only one here, okay? Just say it. I won't laugh."

"Yeah."

"No, seriously. Let's hear it."

"....."

About a minute of silence passed by. I could hear the owl hooting again. When had it come back? A gust of wind blew through the trees, rustling the forest and rippling the lake. The reflection of the moon shimmered in the water. Another hoot emanated from the owl.

"...Hey. Mernes."

When I couldn't take the silence anymore and spoke up, Mernes reluctantly answered.

"Interviews."

"Yeah?"

Without looking at me, he tossed pebbles into the water and hesitantly continued.

"I'm going to be an interviewer in three days. All alone. It'll be a lot of applicants good at, like, infiltration and spying. Talking and stuff. If I'm gonna lead them, I need to be energetic. Imposing. Able to...to talk."

He sounded like the opposite of "energetic and imposing" with that scarcely audible voice of his.

"I thought I'd be able to learn something if I took a trip and visited a bunch of villages, but since you're here, I won't need to. No more trip."

Mernes' finally looked up, and his pale green eyes stared straight at me from the depths of his hood as he pressed his fingertip between my eyebrows.

"Leo, you be my conversation teacher. Make me a communication master in three days."

"...What?"

I was about to grip my head in frustration. Communication. People skills. The most important skill set when working with others, in a way. Important, but definitely hard to improve at. And he wanted me to make him a master in a mere three days. A very problematic deadline, but it could work out. The biggest problem, however, was...

"Have you talked to anyone about this?"

"No. I'm talking to you now, though."

"So you *haven't* talked to anyone, then!"

"I didn't know what to say."

The biggest problem was that alien brain of his making him leave a letter saying he's running away, rather than telling this to anyone. And I had to make this guy a communication master in three days?! This would be just as hard as the other jobs. ...No. Harder.

2 — Don't Worry, Communication Isn't Talent

When I thought about it, food was truly the ultimate, immutable entertainment. Everyone had to eat to live, no matter what kind of creature you were. It wasn't just about survival, either—dining was a way to refresh one's mind.

Take your lustful demons, like incubi and succubi. They survived from human essence—best not to discuss how they got that essence—but they would often eat citrus fruits like oranges and lemons from time to time. More virile humans had thick essences, and citrus fruit was a perfect way to refresh the taste buds. I was skeptical when I first heard this, but the incubi and succubi in the dining hall were always munching on fruit. It was probably true.

"All right, we got a dwarven mushroom sauté for table eight!"

"Here is your sauté!"

"...please enjoy!"

The spirited cries of the wizened head cook and me filled the room. A quick look at the tables showed a truly diverse array of demons. There was a goblin shoveling a strange purple porridge into his mouth, and a succubus enjoying a bawdy chat while nibbling on lemons. Meanwhile, a dark elf was quickly eating a salad of leafy greens and berries. Across the room a group of werewolves were eating raw deer meat.

This massive underground room with its huge variety of demons was the most popular place in the castle: The Demon Rat Tavern, our dining hall! What were Mernes and I doing here? That was easy enough to answer. We were bussing tables, using the Disguise spell.

"Hey, Leo."

"Okay, one goblin-style salad. Please use the counter over there! ...What?"

"Didn't I ask you to make me a master of communication?"

"You sure did."

I nodded. Mernes had a lot of interviews with new recruits for his special operations squad coming up in three days. The other Guardians were busy, meaning he had to be the sole interviewer, but he lacked confidence in his ability to communicate. So, he wanted me to teach him, however I saw fit.

"You want to get better people skills, right? What's the problem?"

"Why are we bussing tables, though? And why am I dressed like this?"

"...Listen, you've gotta see it from your underlings' point of view. You think they could sit back and enjoy their meals when one of the Guardians is their waiter? You needed a disguise."

Mernes was clad in a waitress outfit with a ruffled headpiece and a pair of feminine white gloves. Cross-dressing, one could say. His name tag read, "Mernie." Luckily, he'd been blessed with a girlish face and a delicate figure, so he simply looked like a new waitress who was a little short and rather quiet. No one in the dining hall would ever imagine that the army's strongest assassin was waiting their table.

Me barging in and teaching the new cooks some recipes had helped, too; I'd established a rapport with the old lady in charge. When asked, she let Mernes work as a waitress without any questions, which made me realize networking with people was your best weapon when solving problems. Whether you were in the human world or the demon castle, that didn't change.

"What about conversation practice?"

"We've been over this! Service work has all of the basics of communication!

Ah, Table 34, here's your grilled rabbit!"

"Enjoy..."

The two of us carried a giant plate with enough meat for ten on it. I'd been less than confident Mernes could work alone, and leaving him to his own devices would keep me in the dark about *where* he needed to improve. Therefore, despite my lack of enthusiasm, I ended up working tables with him. I was dressed in a regular waiter outfit, without any additional disguise. I hadn't even changed my face.



One thing I'd picked up on lately was that surprisingly few people remembered the face of Hero Leo. Most of those who did were probably recovering in the Demon World or had deserted long ago.

Echidna never visited the dining hall either, so I figured this was a perfect chance to test a hypothesis. If no one recognized me while I waited tables unmasked, I would gradually do more around the castle without my disguise. Keeping up Metamorphose every time I left my room was taking its toll on me.

We served another order of fragrant grilled rabbit to some hungry diners. As we slipped past tables and people to get back to the kitchen, Mernes started to complain.

"I think I just don't have any communication talent, for starters. How about you keep that in mind?"

"Don't get all smug with me. And, communication 'talent'? Don't make me laugh."

"What?"

"I'm serious. Doesn't exist. It's experience all the way down."

Though I talked a tough game, I knew what Mernes was trying to say. I had a lot of trouble communicating back in the day. The self-loathing, the frustration with one's poor communication skills, the thought that one's just so much worse at talking than anyone else...everyone with social struggles knew the feeling. I softened my tone and attempted to cheer Mernes up.

"Communication is all about how many people you've spoken to and how many conversations you've blown. That's it. And this mess hall's the best place for you to get conversation experience. You're going to get a ton of practice here. The more you fail, the more you'll learn."

"Whatever. O-ow."

I poked Mernes in the forehead.

"Trying to brush things off with a whatever? That's an easy example of failure. Anyway, let's get going: time for some field experience."

"Mm."

One of the cooks in the kitchen set out some bowls of soup to be served. It was noodle soup, with steaming golden broth and wheat noodles. I told Mernes the plan as we balanced the twelve bowls like a circus act.

"Listen up, Mernie. Holding a conversation with someone is a group effort. They throw you some words, you catch 'em, then you throw 'em back. That's the key."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"You want to let them know you're listening. You want to stand in their shoes and hear them out."

Take the noodles we were carrying, for example. Some would think they're delicious, others would think they're garbage. If someone said, "Hey, these are great," there was an unlimited number of replies. Perhaps agreement would be the right choice. "Yeah, they sure are." Maybe, "No, these noodles suck" would be the right answer. Sometimes, "Man, I wish we had steak instead" would be the correct play.

Ultimately, the only way to find the right answer was to piece together how the speaker felt. What did they want to say? What emotion did their words hold? It was a test of your ability to empathize, to see things their way. All conversations were like this.

"Whether you're on the job or off, the key to conversations is empathy. See

things from their point of view and puzzle out what they want to talk about the most."

"Empathy's the first thing they tell you to get rid of when you become an assassin."

"Man, damn that guild..."

"Is there, like, some sort of conversation super move?"

"A super move, huh? Hm."

I thought it over while setting out bowls of noodles on the table before me. He had a point. It might be unreasonable to expect someone trained from birth as an assassin to have much empathy. Instead of giving him tips and tricks here and there, teaching him one big move might be better. They weren't "super moves" or anything, but I did fortunately know a few techniques that would let you *appear* to be good at conversation. After a bit of thought, I decided to teach him the easiest of them.

"Good idea. All right, here's the first super move: keep quiet and listen to them. That's it."

"Are you messing with me?"

"Oww!"

Mernes kicked me from behind. He must have thought I was joking.

"What kind of 'conversation' is that? Come on, I'm being serious here."

"Everyone wants to talk to a good listener!"

"They...do?"

He looked skeptical, but I held up a hand.

Conversation wasn't a solo act. Simply listening to the other party was a perfectly fine conversation in itself. Way back when, that was how I had my first conversations that actually felt human. I just listened to the other person talk as they went on and on. All I really did was voice agreement occasionally to keep the conversation going, or ask about what I was curious about. That was it. I tried explaining that to Mernes, but he gave me a dissatisfied look.

"Well, you'll get it eventually. Lots of people just want to be heard, you know? A good listener is always in demand, trust me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They probably feel better when they get it all out. Complaints about work, about relationships, that kinda stuff. And besides, you're going to be an interviewer, right? If you try to be better at listening than talking, I guarantee you'll be better at that job."

"Hm. See things from their point of view and listen, huh."

"Yeah. Give it a try next chance you get."

For a moment I thought I saw signs of comprehension, then that look of apathy returned. An order came in, so we tabled our discussion.

"Hey! Waitress! We got an order!"

"I'll be right there."

Mernes hurried over to the table. When I glanced over to it, I noticed that the area around the table was strangely deserted, unlike the rest of the hall.

It didn't take long to figure out the reason why: the mercenary band of werewolves who had joined the army just a day or two ago. All ten of them sat at the table and they were being as loud as could be, not caring who they disturbed.

"Well, took your sweet flippin' time, didn't you?! You have any idea how long Cap'n's been callin' for you?"

"We're the Howlers of the Moonlit Night. Maybe you've heard of us? Piss us off and you'll live to regret it."

Admittedly, they weren't the types you wanted to mess with. As surprising as it may seem, these kinds of punks were rare in Echidna's castle. Edvard ran a tight ship. An oral warning would come first, followed by a meeting with one of Edvard's men. If neither of those worked, Edvard would step in to put the muscle on them himself. A system was in place to make any wild card turn obedient.

However, these guys just got here. Edvard must not have had time to deal with them. Their leader, a larger werewolf, looked Mernes up and down with a lecherous smile.

"Ohohoh, didn't expect the waitresses here to be so fetchin'!"

"Can I take your order?"

"Liquor! Liquor and meat, on the double!"

"Yeah! We're the Howlers of the Moonlit Night!"

They'd probably been drinking for a while. They all looked smashed. Mernes was already trying to be a good listener and suggest dishes he thought they would like, but the effort was wasted on the drunk ruffians.

"I'm going to need more details. There's a lot of kinds of liquor and meat out there."

"Aww, listen to her! 'Zere's a lotta kinds of liquor and meat out there!' How cute!"

"Hyahaha!"

"How about this? We serve a red pepper with meat stuffing dish that goes really well with ale and—"

"Just shut up and bring us something already! Anything!"

"Yeah! We're the Howlers of the Moonlit Night!"

Suddenly, the leader stood up. You'd expect any member of the dark army to be big and muscular, but this guy made Mernes look like a little kid. He purposefully glared down at Mernes to emphasize the differences in their stature, then began sizing him up like a piece of meat.

"I'm in the mood for a woman tonight. How 'bout it, ey? We'll have us a good time."

"Sorry, that's not on the menu," Mernes replied coldly.

The werewolves apparently mistook it as a desperate attempt to keep calm, because they all howled with laughter.

"No need to be so frigid, baby! Even the succubi beg for more when they're with me!"

"Gyahahaha!"

I let out a sigh as I watched from afar.

Man, you always get customers like these sooner or later.

You know, the crowd that assumed because they were customers, they could do whatever they wanted to the staff. I once had to run a large bar for about a month to help someone out, and learning to deal with idiots like these had been a really painful process.

On the other hand, if you wanted people skills, learning how to deal with

people like these was an important part of— "Gyahhhh?!"

A scream interrupted my internal monologue. It came from the leader. I was guessing he groped Mernes' rear, because he had the large werewolf on the ground in some sort of armlock.

"Touch me again and I'm breaking your arm."

"It's already broken, it's already broken!"

"Trust me, it isn't. I tip it a little bit more over here and it will be."

"Ow, ow, ow, owwww!"

Ignoring that his skirt was riding up, Mernes had his left leg around the prone man's head and was using his other three limbs to restrain him. The arm in question was bent back so far I could almost hear its bones creaking. What move was that, anyway? I wasn't too well-versed in unarmed martial arts, but I was impressed that he pulled that off standing up.

"You're gonna regret this, you bitch!"

"How dare you hurt the cap'n!"

Two angry mercenaries pulled out scimitars and lunged at Mernes.

Idiots! Sure, you don't know who he is, but you saw the number he did on your boss!

The first mercenary showed surprisingly agile swordsmanship as he attempted to slice the poor little waitress' head in two with his mighty swing.

As if the Shadow General would really let that happen.

By the time that thought crossed my mind, the deed was done.

"Gah!"

"Guh...!"

Two swords went clattering across the floor as both men fell. A moment later Mernes landed on his feet, light as a feather with his skirt fluttering around him.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

That wasn't an exaggeration, either. That was all the time it took.

"Wh...wh..."

"Still wanna fight? If you all want to come at me, be my guest."

The remaining mercenaries sat speechless and seemed to realize they had chosen the wrong waitress to pick on. They quit their bawdy laughter and looked at Mernes in horror and awe.

"Oh, uh...Huh? What...?"

"I said, you still wanna fight?"

"N-no ma'am!"

The Chowders of the Moonbit Knight or whatever all leapt up and bowed at Mernes' feet.

"We're very sorry!"

The group was completely spooked, and understandably so. I'd been watching the whole time and couldn't tell what happened. Some self-satisfied mercenary would've had no hope of following the action. When the scene fell quiet, I called out to Mernes.

"That was four hits, right?"

"Ding ding."

"...You held back, right?"

"Yeah," Mernes replied as he looked at the two mercenaries he'd knocked down.

I had seen the guy still writhing on the floor take a spear-hand to the solar plexus and a hit to the Adam's apple, so he'd probably need some time to breathe properly again. The other one took a heavy kick to the crotch followed by a lightning-fast chop to the back of his head. He lost consciousness without so much as a yelp. It sent a shiver down my spine. Mernes dealt out four blows in an instant, each to a different vital spot.

They really train them right in the Assassins' Guild.

As glad as I was that he was on my side, everyone who saw the action...or rather, couldn't see it, would know that "Mernie" was Mernes himself. Who else could pull off such ridiculous moves? In fact, I could hear tables from afar begin to chatter.

"Hey, think she might be...?"

It seemed that they didn't teach Mernes how to hide his identity at the guild.

"Looks like that's another thing I've gotta teach him."

As I watched the werewolves beg Mernie for forgiveness, I let out a sigh.

Long after the sun had set, the dining hall finally released us. Mernes and I walked down the hallway as we reflected on the day. We still wore our work waiter and waitress uniforms, but this floor only housed rooms for myself and the Guardians, so I didn't have to fret.

"...I'm tired."

"You did good for your first day. Especially the way you dealt with those idiots."

"All I did was hurt them."

"That's how you deal with guys like that. You also gave them suggestions based on what they said, right?"

"Right."

Mernes nodded. I could hear a hint of pride in his tone.

"I tried to be a good listener in my own way. I heard them out and brought up what I thought they wanted to talk about. Think I did okay?"

"Yeah, you sure did."

I gave him some genuine praise, and I really meant it. He'd truly grown far more than I expected. At first, I thought his communication skills were truly bottom of the barrel, but he surprised me. Much like Lili's leadership abilities, he had the basics down but no opportunity to really hone his skills. That was all.

He listened to my advice and didn't repeat mistakes I warned him about. His second time was better than his first, and third better than his second. Was it because he was a Guardian, with all the talent that brought? Or simply because he was young and picked things up quickly? Either way, his communication skills leapt forward.

If I drill my conversation techniques into him while he gets on-the-job experience...yeah, he should be able to handle interviewing just fine.

Thankfully, the ordeal was proving to be easier than expected.

"Come on in, Mernes. Let's review the day."

"Mm."

I invited Mernes into my room and sat on the chair by the old table, then beckoned for him to sit opposite me, leaving the table between us. A common interview arrangement.

"What now?"

"Hands-on practice is best. Let's have a practice interview. I'll be your partner."

"So I'm giving the interview?"

"Yeah. You worked really hard today, so your conversation skills should be a lot better. Pretend this is a real interview and just ask me anything."

"Anything?"

"Yeah, anything."

I immediately regretted my offer. The glint in Mernes' eyes was unmistakable. Had I agreed too easily? I'd spent the day watching how adaptable this kid was, but I'd still dropped my guard. Maybe Mernes from yesterday would've played softball, but there was no telling what kind of pressing questions he would ask today!

"So."

"Yeah?"

I was still fretting when he threw me quite an unexpected question.

"When you said you wanted to join the dark army to bring ruin to humanity, you were lying, right?"

3 — The Hero Shares His Tale of Burden

"When you said you wanted to join the dark army to bring ruin to humanity, you were lying, right?"

I let out a faint sigh and leaned back in my seat. A brief silence passed, with Mernes watching me the whole time.

"I figured Shutina would be the one to ask me that, not you."

"You're the one who said seeing things from the other person's point of view was the key to conversation," Mernes replied, answering my surprise with a slightly indignant look. "So I decided to think of things from your position. It was pretty easy from there. I realized that if you wanted to take out humanity, you wouldn't need to join us."

"Pretty impressive. If you're that good at empathy already, I'd say you're a communication master. I'd give you a certificate if I had one."

"Why didn't you take them out?"

"Hahaha, that's what I want to know! Why didn't I?"

"Don't play dumb with me!"

He grabbed a paperweight off the table and threw it at me. I quickly caught it and was about to complain, but...didn't. Mernes looked a little down. When I put the paperweight down without a word, he quietly spoke again.

"...Didn't it piss you off?"

"Hm?"

"You protected them, but they just threw you away. Like, you risked your life against us. So why are you just laughing it off? You never just wanted them all dead?"

Back when we were enemies I had looked into Mernes' background, thinking it might come in handy. The boy was a half-demon. He was sold into slavery as a child out of fear and disgust and ended up being bought by the Assassins' Guild.

They'd probably bought him with the expectation he'd die assassinating his first target. Fortunately...or unfortunately, Mernes possessed an unusual talent for the killing arts. He slew his target, escaped from or killed his pursuers, and made it back to the guild alive.

After that, he had lived as an assassin, eventually rising to the top of the guild. From there, he came into contact with Echidna and became one of her Four Great Guardians. He must have hated humans, which is why it had to be incomprehensible to him that someone with the power to destroy them wouldn't.

"I don't care what happens to humans, which is why I'm working with Echidna. But you seem motivated by something other than...uh..."

"Hatred of humanity?"

"Yeah. Like, why is that? When someone you trust betrays you, isn't it normal to be sad? To hate them?"

"...Mernes..."

I was impressed. For someone who acted so aloof and uninterested, Mernes had a real caring streak to him.

Joining the Demon Queen's army brought too many unexpected discoveries. Shutina, the prim and proper, talented administrator was a klutz who barely kept herself afloat? Lili, the brainless wild child was a diligent, good kid?

And the uncaring loner, Mernes? I couldn't believe my ears.

"Hey, don't cry...you're gonna make me feel bad."

"Sh-shut up."

The reason he kept quiet after hearing my motivation to join the army during my interview had nothing to do with him not wanting me on board. The humans had exiled me, and he felt for me from the bottom of his heart. The world was truly full of things you needed to see to understand, I thought, as if this were happening to someone else.

I needed to repay his honesty with honesty of my own.

"I'd say it's less hatred and more...sadness. A feeling of loss. They came out and said, 'We don't need you,' you know? When you've protected humanity as long as I have, well, that stings."

"...As long as you have?"

"But that's one of my strengths, I don't just take things lying down. So I figured, humanity's finally gotten over their need for a hero! I can do whatever I want...yeah?"

It's time for me to talk about when I was born.

This all happened a long time ago, back when Mechanical Civilization was at its peak. Before magic had taken over the world. The continents and such looked a little different back then, and a city named "Tokyo" existed where Renaye now sits.

Rockets which had been launched into space floated through the sea of stars, countless man-made satellites kept watch over the land, and an invisible, high-speed communication network covered the planet. There was tension, but mostly peace, and unlike the diversity we had now, cities were made up solely of humans.

Then one day, without warning, a hole popped open in the middle of Tokyo. A

big, bottomless hole. Before long, countless devils spilled out of it.

Well, "devil" wouldn't be the right term here. Imps and dwarves. Orcs and goblins. Succubi and incubi. Denizens of the Demon World that were all common sights in the modern age. Back then, we all just called them "devils."

They were all in the same boat as Echidna. Sick of the dark Demon World. And so, they came to the human realm, seeking its warm light.

Some of them tried to peacefully coexist with humanity, but many simply did as they pleased. Some were aggressive. What did the humans do? Fight back, of course.

More holes appeared throughout the world. What had started as a panic in one eastern island nation soon spread. It wasn't long before war between devils and humanity engulfed the globe. Yet tragically, humans were weak. That never changed. And they knew very little about the devils, so it took large groups of them just to get rid of one.

"Give us a mightier weapon!"

"A weapon to destroy the devils!"

"An unstoppable weapon, one to protect humanity from this demonic threat!"

That was the world's choice. International leaders gathered together, setting aside differences of race and religion, to develop the ultimate weapon against the demonic invaders. To defeat a devil, use a devil's power. Send devil against devil. They forged themselves a weapon based on the devils' powers—a living, autonomous weapon with similar strength all its own and unlimited growth potential. It was humanity's greatest blade, its mightiest guardian.

There were twelve models of the Demonhart Series. I was the last surviving

one.

My orders were implanted at inception: protect humanity. Save the world. I was a hero from the day I was born and knew no other way of life. Every hero grew old and died, I imagined. No matter how much the world loved or hated them, they would end up in the ground like any other human.

Unfortunately, we were made to be especially durable and extremely long-lived. Even after the devil problem was solved, even after Mechanical Civilization fell, and even when magic had taken over the world, I had to go on living. Permanently.

For countless years, I lived as a hero and guardian of humanity. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that unlike the other DH Series who fell in battle, I'd missed my chance to die. I'd gotten too strong to perish. I lived among the humans, blending into their society, and I would save the world whenever it was threatened.

Sometimes people would ask me to save them, and sometimes I would do it on my own initiative. I didn't know if what I was doing was right or wrong, or if I might be preventing humanity from becoming more self-reliant. There was no one to answer my questions. Still, I couldn't just abandon my obligation to protect the world.

When the entire world rejected me, I felt happy. Sure, there was sadness and loss, but even more joy. The world had declared that it needed a hero no longer! That was invaluable to me. It gave me the first chance I'd had in life to...finally quit heroing.

"I'd made up my mind that if the time came when I didn't need to protect humanity anymore, I would do as I pleased. I would enjoy my second life. So I'm doing just that, what I've always wanted to do: take the demons' side."

"...Wait. I don't get any of that."

"I'm glad Echidna didn't just up and go back to the Demon World. You know her father? Demon King Cychreus? He wasted no time heading home. Didn't even get a chance to talk."

"I said hold up!"

Mernes finally got me to shut up. They said a good talker was a good listener. Everyone wanted to talk about themselves, to relieve the burden they had bottled up inside. It was normal. I was no exception. I'd always wanted someone to hear this. I'd always wondered when to bring it up, and now...I could feel a weight lifting from my heart.

"I don't understand what you're saying. Besides, Demon King Cychreus invaded hundreds of years ago, according to the stories."

"Yeah, and a mysterious sage saved the world back then. That was me."

"...Man, how old are you? No, wait. First of all..." Mernes shook his head. "*Who* are you?"

"I'm just a hero. They made me a little tough, that's all. As for my age, well...I stopped counting when I passed a thousand."

Twirling a quill pen in my hands, I began recounting my life.

"But I've lived a really long time. I've visited a bunch of towns, experienced a bunch of jobs, and met a bunch of people. I've seen good people I've wanted to protect with everything I had, and villains I've wanted to rub out without a second thought. And I wanna say..."

I pointed at Mernes with the pen.

"You guys are a good lot. Echidna and the Great Guardians are fools, but

you're good people. Good enough to make me want to roll up my sleeves for you."

"Fools?"

"So don't worry. I'll get you guys that Wisdom Stone you want so bad. I'll make sure you all end up happy."

"...You're the fool."

Mernes surprised me by starting to sulk. He plopped face down into the sofa and kicked his pale legs about.

"I don't get it, man. And you're not gonna tell me the details, are you?"

"I'll get around to it. Besides, I wasn't planning on telling you *this* much either."

"Then why'd you tell me?"

He shifted his gaze to glare at me.

"Because you looked serious, I guess. You're not the best at talking or smiling, but if you show that you really want to talk with someone...they'll respond. I could tell you were being genuine, so I was genuine back."

I'd felt this since we spoke beside the lake. Mernes wasn't the best talker, but he had the most important ingredient of communication. They said that when healing the sick, the most important element was the patient's will. If the patient didn't want to get better, even the best doctor would not be able to cure them. Mernes had the right attitude. He accepted his poor conversation abilities and went on a journey to alleviate that, ending with him asking me for help. That genuineness was the most important thing in communication. And it was enough to make me spill my secrets.

"When you're genuine and thoughtful, it doesn't matter if you're not the best talker. Trust me, you'll do fine as an interviewer."

I ruffled Mernes' silver hair. He grumbled at me to shove off, but remained lying on the sofa and looked away.

"...Whatever. I'm tired. Gonna sleep here tonight."

"Go back to your room! And we've got work in the dining hall tomorrow!"

"Goodnight."

"Hey!"

Mernes was already snoring. I looked out the window while trying to shake him awake.

It had been thousands of years since my birth, but the moon still lit the night.



The Invisible Blade

Shadowless General Mernes

Actual Age: 17

Race: Human (Half-Demon)

This pale-skinned, young half-demon was sold into slavery as an orphan, which eventually led to him entering the Assassins' Guild.
He is protected by Sylph—the wind spirit who governs freedom and friendship—and can use high-level wind skills such as Oborobi and Shadowless to create unseen steps in midair and appear to teleport short distances.
Mernes has also learned the many spells assassins rely on, such as Disguise, Invisibility, and Mutestep, but fatally poor acting skills make him ill-suited for undercover and infiltration work.

Chapter 6: Hero vs Dragon General Edvard

1 — Skilled People Think Everyone is Skilled

"And you know, Father just thinks everyone is on his level!"

"Ah, I hear you."

So there I was, back at my room in the castle. The lady knight on the sofa across from me had been sharing her troubles for about an hour, and she had a lot of them. Well, half of the session had been just her grumbling and complaining.

"I understand that you're very upset, but I think you should calm down first. Have some tea, it's really good."

"...Ah, excuse me."

This young woman in the light brigandine armor was named Julietta. She was about sixteen or seventeen. Her youthful face was no different from a regular human's, but further inspection would reveal red dragon scales on her neck, wrists, and other vital spots. She was dragonfolk. Red dragon scales were the toughest and rarest among the scales dragonfolk possessed, and only Dragon General Edvard and his family had them anymore.

That's right. If there was anyone who'd know why Dragon General Edvard of the Four Great Guardians would choose to take his own life to make amends for "failing to educate his troops," it was his adjutant, who also happened to be his daughter.

"So, let me see if I understand this."

"Okay."

Julietta sat up straight in anticipation. I attempted to summarize the headache-inducing stupidity of the situation I'd heard.

"In essence, 'Oh no, the soldiers that I trained with brutal practice exercises lost to a mere arch chimera. How pathetic, how weak. As the man who trained them, I must take responsibility, and suicide is the only way out.' Am I right?"

"That is basically it, yes."

"A top-class idiot, he is."

I sipped my tea. Julietta nodded in silent agreement and elegantly had some herself.

"It's not like him dying would..."

"Hm? Lord Leo?"

"Ah, sorry. I mean, it's not like him dying would make his troops any stronger, and it wouldn't solve any problems. And I'm sure he understands that."

"Right. And arch chimeras are among the strongest chimeras. Foot soldiers with low experience and training would have little hope of defeating one."

A chimera was an artificial magical beast, usually *accidentally* created by an alchemist's experiment. They couldn't be reasoned with and would attack human and demon alike. On the plus side, this made them guiltless targets for army practice. In that sense, conjured lifeforms like the slime I used in Lili's trial could be called chimeras, too. The popularity of alchemy had led to a great increase in wild chimeras, and dealing with them had become a grave problem in recent days.

To make chimera culling easier, chimera types were given ranks based on how difficult they were to defeat. For example, a green swordsman or beginner sorcerer could take out an E-ranked beast, and the ranks ascended from there through D, C, and B, to A. The arch chimera Edvard used was A-ranked, quite high level. The type of beast the human realm would need temple knights from the holy city to dispatch.

These beasts possessed the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a scorpion. Their claws could rend steel with ease, they possessed the strength of twenty orcs, and on top of all of that boasted high magic resistance. An arch chimera was incredibly tough to beat.

"How could anyone think that some troops out of basic training could take out an A-rank chimera? Is Edvard always like that?"

"...Embarrassingly so. Father is strong and expects everyone to be just as strong."

"Ahh..."

"You understand, right? To Father, new soldiers being unable to defeat an arch chimera isn't simply a fact of life. To him, they're just not trying hard enough."

"Not trying hard enough, huh."

This was one of those phrases that sounded accurate but was obnoxious in practice. It was, after all, mostly used by the powerful. Whether their power consisted of strength in combat, great intelligence, or skill in their work, the philosophy always applied. Never mind that someone strong in combat might have been born with a bulkier body than most, or a smart person might have been put through good schools by their parents. The powerful would say they

have their position by virtue of their own efforts, but that was hardly ever the case. It discounted every outside factor that helped. Those factors worked with their talent and effort to make them who they are: the powerful.

Generally, it was good to be powerful. Things changed, however, when that powerful person was your boss.

"Having a naturally strong boss is pretty rough...they can never see things from the weak's point of view."

"Indeed. It might have been a mistake for Father to have become a general in the first place. Having a strong boss does not strong underlings make."

I nodded in agreement.

Julietta was right. Having a strong guy get put in charge didn't mean the people under him would rise to his level. Often, it meant the opposite.

I recalled an example from my past: a swordsman guild in some town way back. The swordsmen were, in essence, mercenaries. They would get jobs to protect villages and towns from chimeras, bandits, and the like. The vice-master was young, but he'd grown up fighting magical beasts and had top-class skills as a result. As one would expect, he sailed through the ranks, eventually becoming guild master. Now, normally, this would be a happy ending.

When I visited the guild later, however, it was in ruins. Only the old members and the guild master remained. When I asked what happened, they said that new entries kept quitting since they didn't get trained properly. I asked what the training consisted of and couldn't believe my ears. They made green pups who could hardly swing a sword join them on missions to take out large chimeras and wyverns, and they were expected to do much of the fighting!

It sounded stupid to me, but that was how the guild master himself got so

strong. He sounded persuasive, and the top guild members agreed with him. They aimed to make the most brutal swordsman guild in all the world.

The newbies, of course, all quit. Why risk dying before you learned any techniques? Lack of new entries made the guild stagnate. The stagnation meant less jobs came in. Eventually, the mid-level members left, and the town started to hire other mercenaries. Seeing this ruin, the guild master sank into an abyss of despair.

"I don't understand. This is how I grew strong! Why can't they follow along? Are they too weak, is that it?"

When I saw his indignation and despair, I felt compelled to respond.

"Wait, you're a troll, aren't you? Injuries that would kill a human take three days to heal on you, and you're right as rain. How do you expect them to do what you did?"

Ultimately, people were terrible at realizing their own talent. Trolls had immense regenerative abilities, so much so that rumors said they could survive getting their hearts blown out or heads chopped off. Losing a finger or two was just a scrape to them, and they'd grow back the next day. To a human, this was impossible toughness. To a troll, it was just natural. Natural enough to forget.

It may sound obvious, but when something is special about you, it's difficult to realize that it *is* special. You think that what's "normal" for you is "normal" for everyone else.

The troll guild master had forgotten that. I mean, he may have known it on a rational level, but deep down in his gut he was completely overlooking it. He assumed everyone was capable of his accomplishments. And so his guild fell into ruin.

I sipped my tea and related that tale to Julietta.

"True, Father is rather like that troll. At his worst, he simply assumes everyone has the toughness his dragon scales afford him."

"I figured. It would be just natural to him, and all. That kind of thing is easy to forget, unfortunately."

The more skilled someone was, the more they thought everyone was on their level. A good warrior didn't always make a good teacher. In those cases, skill was less important than the ability to teach.

"And Edvard's a really hard worker, right?"

"Indeed. He was before, Lord Leo, but...ah, forgive me. Should I call you Lord Onyx?"

"Don't worry, no one's here. Go on."

"After losing to you, Lord Leo, he cursed his lack of training and has redoubled his daily efforts."

"Yeah, I figured...and when someone who's naturally strong does a lot of training, they get to ridiculous levels."

I thought about how you made other people strong. Most people took the same route as the guild master I talked about—they remembered what worked for them, and they imposed that on others. If the process was reasonable, fine. If it was something people without natural talent could do, fine. Hell, if they lowered the difficulty so that those without a knack for it could pull it off, that was splendid.

But plenty of strong people were incapable of that because they got to where they were by overcoming difficult trials. Because they believed sending people on the toughest quests was the best shortcut. You can do this quest if you try,

and that'll make you as strong as me. Oh, you can't? That's because you haven't tried hard enough!

"That's basically how it goes, right? Edvard's men must feel really alienated by now."

"Indeed. A few have already deserted...oh, I'm the only one who knows about this as I caught them myself. My father hasn't heard of it yet."

"That's a wise call. Edvard sees his men as not having enough guts. If he heard that some of them deserted, he'd just holler about making tomorrow's training even tougher."

"...Lord Leo, what should I do?"

Julietta's shoulders drooped in defeat. I felt sad for her.

Now, I needed to make one thing clear. Edvard wasn't a bad guy. But as a dragonfolk, a master of combat, and a hard worker, he had all the negative aspects of a strong guy in his personality.

His daughter must have seen plenty of those aspects by now. She appeared to be at a complete loss for answers as she sat there with her blazing red ponytail hanging limply over her shoulder.

I stood up and gave her shoulder a pat.

"Well, leave it to me. Lili happened to find just what we need back in the Largo Islands."

I pulled out a paper from my desk drawer and tossed it her way. It was a report of the treasure we found in Largo.

"Fighting this thing should make Edvard chill out a little."

"My...!"

Julietta's armor rattled as she leapt to her feet.

Strong. Hard. Uses a shiny sword of light that cuts everything.

Lili happened to find an artifact from the Mechanical Civilization during a supply mission. A foe far stronger than any S-rank chimera.

I intended to make Edvard fight a weapon both ancient and forbidden: a machine golem.

2 — A Good Warrior Isn't Always a Good Boss

"H-holy crap! Retreat, retreat!"

Thud.

The white giant, big as a house, took a step forward.

The heavily armored goblin troops dropped their broken swords and spears and scrambled away like bugs under a rock. Just as I wanted them to. *That* was a foe far greater than an arch chimera—not something they could take on.

I was floating far above with a Levitation spell and remaining unseen with the light-refracting spell Aurora Robe while I watched the scene. I provided subtle aid to make sure no one died, but was otherwise hands off. The whole point was to have Edvard defeat the giant.

He sure is taking his sweet time...ah! There he is!

A large figure strode into view, scolding his fleeing underlings. He had red dragon scales which were told to be the strongest. And that massive sword Caladbolg, the unbreakable holy blade of the dragonfolk, was strapped to his back. He was the guest of honor. Dark army Great Guardian and source of Julietta's recent troubles, the Dragon General Edvard.

"What do you think you're doing?! You run from the enemy and call yourselves soldiers in the Demon Queen's army?!"

"It's too powerful, sir! It...ahh, here it comes again, get down!"

The giant's eyes glowed and a strange, violet beam shot out—crap!

I quickly chanted a spell and drew a small magic circle with both hands. It had been a while since I'd used Reflection Ray, a defensive spell made solely to counter beam weapons like these. I made it in the nick of time. The magic circle

appeared in the beam's path for a microsecond, changing its direction to an unused lookout tower. The brick structure offered no physical resistance to the violet beam as it was sliced in two. An instant later the tower caught fire. As I watched the hellish crimson flames spread, I started to regret my actions a little.

Damn...did machine golems always pack this much firepower? Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

Reactivating that monster might have been going too far, even to give Edvard a change of heart. I'd sworn on my hero's honor I wouldn't let anyone die, and so far no one had, but the machine golem was far stronger than I had anticipated.

To come clean, it was Julietta and myself who turned the golem back on. Not for a joke or anything, either. I was trying to solve Julietta's problems by making Edvard see the error of his ways and reducing the burden on his troops, but...I hadn't planned for the thing to be *so strong*!

I used Reflection Ray to send the next destruction beam elsewhere. It evaporated a cloud and left a big hole in the sky. Apparently, this hunk of junk's safety mechanism had broken after spending several millennia underground. Normally, they weren't this aggressive, but it started shooting beams at high enough levels to almost melt its own barrel the second it woke up.

It would run out of energy eventually, but it didn't look like there was any way to turn it off. We only had two choices: run away until it ran out of juice or take it out immediately.

I elected to deflect the fatal beams and secure the soldiers an escape route while I watched Edvard's next move.

"What manner of being *is* this?!"

"Sir, we *must* retreat! It's too powerful for us, far too powerful! We're going to die!"

Even Edvard did not stop them. The last of the goblin infantry ran off, and he let him go.

Now, even though the machine golem had "golem" in the name, it was completely different from the clay and iron golems made with modern magic. The high-tech monstrosity was made with the best the old Mechanical Civilization had to offer.

"Hah! So, this big doll wants to play, does it? Very well, I shall crush it!"

Edvard drew Caladbolg and ran directly towards it. Just as expected. He was blessed with a muscular build and had dragon scales to protect him. Edvard's basic strategy was always to get as close as possible to his foe and force them into melee combat. However...

"Get down, you idiot!"

"?!"

Edvard reflexively ducked at the warning I hadn't meant to yell. The machine golem's sword of light passed a few inches overhead. That was its laser sword, a bundle of super-hot light fashioned into a blade. The scientific weapon's energy usage was immense, but its heat could rival the highest-level fire magic. Anything cut by it would end up in two pieces, and the tough Edvard was no exception.

"That's an ancient laser weapon. You've never seen it before, but it'll sear right through your dragon scales!"

"Lord Leo...?"

"Call me Lord Onyx! Anyway, just listen!" I sternly gestured at him and continued with my warning. "I'll give you advice! Follow it if you don't want to die!"

The current mission (I called it "Operation Make the Strong Understand the Struggles of the Weak") relied on having Edvard fight a foe he'd never taken on before. Edvard was strong, full of natural talent, a hard worker, and had little experience with failure. This made him a great warrior, but a poor instructor. His strength and ability to do anything himself meant his skills in teaching others never grew. He had the poor habit of demanding others perform on his level. Until he understood how the weak felt, he would never be a good instructor to his underlings.

That's where the machine golem came in!

The machine golem was a rare, powerful foe that would give even Edvard a run for his money. In the script, I would show up and toss him a lifeboat, as it were. I'd tell him the golem's strengths and weaknesses, and we would work together to defeat it. And what would happen then? Find out.

"When its eyes glow, that means it'll shoot a beam three seconds later. Don't let it hit you! Focus your defensive spells on your scales and deflect it!"

"What? That's a lot to take in all at once—gah?!"

The laser pierced through Edvard's armor and opened a hole in his dragon scales. It looked like even he couldn't take a direct hit. The machine golem popped a large sword out of its left elbow which made a high buzzing sound like an insect's wings.

"It just deployed its left vibroblade! Whatever you do, try not to take a direct hit from that thing! The blade itself is frail, so hit it from the side to destroy it!"

I gave orders from above. Edvard dodged the machine golem's attacks and complained.

"A vibro-what? I've never heard of any such thing!"

"Whaddaya mean you haven't heard of a vibroblade, you moron?! It's a machine golem's basic kit!"

"I have never faced such a foe! This may be common knowledge to you, Lord Leo, but this is news to me! Break it down for me!"

"The sword'll kill you, so hit it from the side!"

"Understood!"

Edvard leapt to the side as I ordered and smashed his sword against the blade on the golem's left arm. The steel it was made from crumbled.

"Common knowledge to you, but news to me. " Good. That was what I wanted to hear! It was about time. I made a sign with my hands when Edvard wasn't looking, and Julietta leapt out from her hiding place.

"Julietta? What are you doing?!"

"Father, let me join you!"

"You'll only get in the way! Leave this to Lord Leo and me, lest you do yourself harm!"

"I told you to call me Lord Onyx!"

Actually, the other troops were gone, so I decided to dispel my disguise. The only people present were Edvard, myself, and Julietta. Edvard kept telling her to retreat, but Julietta showed no signs of leaving. She was, after all, the key to this operation. She nimbly dodged the machine golem's attacks while describing its weak points—the ones I'd told her prior.

"Father, please listen!"

"Silence, you! This is my fight! Stand back before you get hurt!"

"The right side of its torso—that's its weakest spot!"

"...What?"

Edvard gave Julietta a suspicious look. This was a foe he had never even seen. He couldn't have imagined his daughter would know anything about it. As he stared in surprise, Julietta continued explaining.

"According to the documents, that's where most of the...wi...wires connected to the main...g-generator are. You must strike it!"

"Do it, Edvard! She's right, the right torso is where it's vulnerable! Cut it down!"

"...Urahhh!"

Crunch!

With a loud crash, Edvard's Caladbolg took out a big chunk of the machine golem's side. It immediately fell forward, and following a few tremors stopped moving entirely. The golem was a later model from a certain superpower that thrived back during the scientific age. The machine was made with the most cutting edge of weapons technology—Phantom Nine, I think they code-named it.

It was created to fight the strongest of foes, such as higher-level demons and Demon King Belial himself during their invasion of the human world, so its strength was to be expected. I thought it would be harder to defeat but bringing it down with one strike was just a testament to Edvard's strength.

But seriously, I never should have reactivated this thing in the first place.

It ended well, but it was a bad idea from the start. If I found another one, I would throw it into a volcano. Edvard stood there with Caladbolg over his shoulder, wearing a sour expression. I deactivated my Levitation and floated down to him, and we were quickly joined by Julietta.

"I'm glad you're unharmed, Father!"

"Mm. I have you to thank for that. Without your and Leo's advice, that might have been the end of me. Lord Leo, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Edvard expressed his gratitude to us both.

Now, this was it. I signaled Julietta with my eyes and, just like we'd decided, sank into my role as...the villain. With a shrug of my shoulders, I let out the most condescending scoff I could.

"Hah. I didn't expect the Dragon General to be such a joke in combat."

"Lord...Leo?"

Edvard looked at me in disbelief, but I paid him no mind. It was time to lay on the punishment.

"Tell me, why would one of the Four Great Guardians not even know what laser weapons or vibroblades are? Everyone knows about those—everyone!"

"E-everyone?! You can't be serious!"

"Oh, I am! It's basic knowledge!"

Even I wanted to chuckle at how ludicrous my criticisms were. So few machine golems existed in the modern day that most people wouldn't have even heard of a "vibroblade," much less know what it did. Still, for a guileless man like Edvard, my words stung hard. Understandable. He'd acted the same way to his underlings.

"How can you not defeat a simple chimera? You have an entire squad!"

"W-we can't do it, sir! None of us have fought one before, and we don't know what it's capable of! We can't formulate a plan to—"

"Fool! Why, when I was your age, I trained by fighting daily deathmatches with these creatures! Stop making excuses for your lack of trying!"

"But, sir..."

"The backs of their legs are weak. Slice the heels to immobilize, then smash the head. This is common knowledge, everyone knows it! Must you be taught something so basic? None of you are trying hard enough!"

Not trying hard enough.

Effective words, but they should never be used to bully others. If subordinates aren't improving, it might be a lack of trying hard enough. But more often, the boss isn't trying hard enough to train them.

Is what's common knowledge to me common knowledge to my workers? Am I making too many assumptions about what they do and don't know? As long as Edvard didn't understand those questions, he would spend the rest of his life as a textbook poor boss. I wanted to force him to understand.

"You're just not trying hard enough! How can you call yourself the Dragon General when a single machine golem gives you such a run for your money, huh? You really think you can keep acting so smug after that?"

"Guh..."

"Find yourself a different job! Forget this Great Guardian business and go plow some fields in the countryside!"

In place of a reply, Edvard simply groaned. Everything was going according to

plan, but saying my lines really hurt! I didn't think bombarding a guy as solid as Edvard with fake criticisms would scar my conscience this much! Right when I was about to start in with round two of my insults, Julietta stepped between us and sternly spoke up.

"Lord Leo. I would request you stop insulting my father."

"...Oh yeah?"

"You mustn't assume what's common knowledge for you is common knowledge for everyone. You may have immense life experience and familiarity with such weapons, but machine golems are a complete unknown to us. Do you not understand that?"

A pretty good shot. I made myself look annoyed and fired back at Julietta.

"Oh, give me a break. You think you can mess up just because it's an unknown foe? Because it's a job you've never done before? Aren't you just making excuses for your lack of trying?"

"I am not, because anyone would have trouble with a task they've never done before! How can you know how to deal with a foe you've never encountered?!"

"...Guh..."

A sudden look of comprehension came over Edvard.

Julietta continued lecturing me in an effort to make sure her father understood.

"That's why you mustn't assume that others can easily do what you can. I think that when you're training someone, it's important to start from the most basic knowledge and techniques and slowly work your way up as you teach them, and not take anything for granted."

"...You know, you're right."

Edvard nodded. It seemed Julietta's speech had managed to impress upon him what his training of his own men lacked. With that, my role as villain was done. Having lost the argument, all I had left to do was leave behind a good sore loser remark and walk away.

"Tch, fine, I get it. You must be so proud to have such a wonderful daughter, Edvard. See ya."

I gave them a wave and took my leave. On my way out, I heard a bit of their conversation on the wind.

"Julietta, listen, I..."

"I know, Father. You needn't say a thing."

"I've made so much trouble for you and the soldiers...but it's going to be a new start from tomorrow on. I'm rewriting the whole training curriculum."

"That sounds wonderful. I'll help."

Starting the next day, complaints from Edvard's men saw a dramatic decline.

Sure, a good soldier didn't always make for a good boss.

But a good soldier who'd learned how to train his troops—that made for a truly great boss.



The Red Roar

Dragon General Edvard

Actual Age: 38

Race: Dragonfolk

A dragonfolk from the Largo Islands. His blazing red dragon scales are seen as the mark of a chosen hero among his people, and Edvard has the uniquely immense strength to actually fit that bill. He became almost defiantly proud and arrogant in his youth because of it, though. This attitude abruptly mellowed and lost a lot of its youthful edge following the birth of his daughter. He has a giant soft spot for Julietta, who takes strongly after her mother. He loves to drink, and often prepares his own dishes to go with his liquor. This practice has made him the Four Great Guardians' most skilled cook.

Chapter 7: Tokyo, 2060 AD

1 — Somewhere in Tokyo (Part 1)

We hadn't intended to attack the humans, no sir.

Now, I didn't know about the other guys, but we imps, at the very least, wanted to be gentlemen about this. And why not, right? The humans might not know, but the Demon World was full of conflict to begin with. Why would we come all the way to another world just to fight?

The king's experiments happened to open the Great Spiritual Hole, and since we heard the human world was more comfortable than home, we decided to pay a visit.

"Immigration, then?"

"Basically. We were hoping to find a better place to call home. Well, that and a bit of curiosity."

The human world. On a street corner of a city called "Tokyo."

Sitting down on the awfully hard ground while merciless rain beat on my head, I gave my listener a rundown on the Demon World and its inhabitants.

"Curiosity?"

"Getting to the human world from the Demon World isn't too easy. Some demons can mess with human dreams from home, yeah, but that's about it. If you grab every magical catalyst you can find and have high magic power, you

can open a hole to your world, but for lower demons like us...just making an imp-sized hole is a labor, let me tell you."

"So when you heard your king made the Great Spiritual Hole to the human world, you came here out of curiosity?"

"Yeah, essentially."

I did most of the talking. They just asked questions on occasion. This had been going on for a while. Luckily, keeping the conversation going meant they weren't killing me, so a weak imp like myself had no choice but to play along.

"Barely anyone's seen the human world themselves, so the trip was worth it for the clout alone. I figured I'd quietly stay if it was comfortable, and if not, I'd just go back home."

What were "humans" like? What was their culture like? The higher-ups didn't tell grunts like us even the most basic facts.

Going to an unknown place was pretty scary, which is why I wanted to be as peaceful as possible. I was hoping the whole stupid "might makes right" thing only really applied to the Demon World.

"To begin with, the Demon World being in chaos is mostly due to Belial's crappy management. It's always the little guys who gotta pick up the slack when the boss is dumb!"

"Who is this Belial?"

"The boss of our world. King of the Demon World, His Majesty Belial...oh, and just so you know, he ain't over here. It's only us grunts that came."

"Here in our world, the name Belial is associated with one of the lords of hell."

"Like I said before, with a bit of power and preparation, you can open a small hole to your world. One of our royals or nobles probably visited your world long ago, and that's when the name spread around."

"I see."

They didn't seem terribly interested in my explanation. The strangely shaped blade they had pointed at my throat didn't budge. The weapon was bizarrely flat and looked fragile, but it made this unsettling buzz, like insect wings. It wasn't like the swords the dwarves or even the elves forged. I'd never seen anything like it in the Demon World, but one look told me I didn't want to be on its receiving end. What would getting cut by it be like? Didn't want to even think about it.

Since I didn't want to die, I chose my words carefully.

"...Not much of a reaction, huh. I'm not boring you, am I? Sorry if I am."

"No, your explanation was very informative. Thank you."

They shook their head. Their expression looked so apathetic it was hard to take their gratitude at face value.

It threw me off. This was liking talking to a wall.

"Does this Belial live very long?"

"Hm? Why do you ask?"

"You suggested that a demon visited our world long ago and spread the name. However, Belial has been known in the human world for hundreds of years."

"Ohhh."

"Do demons live for that long?"

Oh! Of course! They didn't have basic knowledge of the Demon World!

A rookie mistake on my part. I had underestimated just how difficult it was to explain your world to someone who came from a completely different one. What was natural and obvious to you wouldn't be the case with them. Such differences in knowledge could lead to great misunderstandings, sometimes fatal ones. What a pain.

"How do I explain. Belial is a name, but it isn't."

"Details."

They inched the blade closer in a clear threat. I quickly blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Think of it as...as a title! A title for the ruler of the Demon World. It's tradition for rulers to take the name of Belial. Dunno who started it, though."

"I see. So the title is inherited, then."

"Yeah. The Demon Kings have been calling themselves 'Belial' since way before my grandpappy was born. The Belial the human world heard about way back when was probably the Belial generations ago."

"I see."

"Though the name Belial's really seen better days. The next ruler will probably pick something else—not that it matters to us commoners."

"I see."

"...Not holding your interest much, am I?"

"You are being very informative. Thank you."

How am I supposed to figure that out?! Show me a little more emotion, please!

Now, the current Belial had more magical power than the average Demon King. Far more. The hole he opened up was big enough for all of us grunts to pour through, and then some.

When we went through the Great Spiritual Hole, everything began.

Like I said at the start, we didn't have any intention at all of fighting the humans. We were here to peacefully look around, that was all.

Alas, the ogres and ghouls and other demons who act entirely on instinct attacked a few humans, giving them the wrong idea. That's when the war broke out.

Worst of all, the Great Spiritual Hole that was supposed to give free passage between the worlds just closed up, preventing us from going home. That could only have been the handiwork of Belial and the other upper-level demons on the other side, which made their plan clear: they were going to leave us to die in the human world from the start.

"What do you mean?"

"The Demon World doesn't have the resources the human realm does, least of all food. There were too many of us 'lower' classes, so he sent a bunch of us here to the human world. If we coexist with the humans, he wins. If we kill each other, he wins. As long as there's less mouths to feed, he comes out on top."

"...Tell me. Is there a possibility that the Demon King Belial and these upper-level demons you speak of will attempt to colonize the human world?"

"A pretty big one, I'd say. Don't take this personally, but you humans are way weaker than us. There were probably some spies among those of us who first arrived that are already telling Belial all about you right about now."

The humans were weak. They also had a resource-rich, comfortable home.

The Demon King was probably all too eager to mobilize his full forces and take it for himself.

"I mean, you've got to know that this is sticks versus fireballs, comparatively speakin'."

"I do. When engaging with devils, a minimum of an armed three-man cell is required for a single target."

"Devils, huh."

"Is there a problem?"

"Nah, just...feels weird to be called a devil."

"Hm?"

Only the lower-class denizens of the Demon World came to the human realm. Of the more intelligent species, you had your imps and elves, who banded together to form hidden villages. Then you had your dexterous folks, like dwarves, kobolds, and goblins. As for the more violent types, there were trolls, ghouls, and ogres—all of which probably looked like monsters to the humans, I'd give them that. But the one thing we were not was devils.

Devils were part of the upper crust of the Demon World. They boasted huge magic power, and their physical abilities easily showed up any orc or troll. Even as a group, we weaker demons simply couldn't compare, and we hardly had any chances to lay eyes on them. They lived in a completely different world. I hadn't dreamed that all of us, imps, trolls, and elves alike would simply be called "devils." I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"I'll tell you what runs the Demon World: power. Power is absolute. And the devils that have it fancy themselves nobles and look at us like trash. You can see why we'd wanna get out of there, right?"

"I cannot empathize, but I can understand."

"Thanks, lad. ...Lass? Which are you, anyway?"

"I have no gender, but I am designed around a male figure."

"Thanks, lad."

Now the irony. After leaving the Demon World in search of freedom, here I was captured and sitting on the cold, hard ground of this place called Tokyo, being interrogated by a real devil of a boy. I didn't know when I'd be let go, or when I'd be murdered. The human world with its warm sunlight and lush greenery? Nonsense! Everywhere I turned was just huge, gray tombstones! Blasted, idiotic nobles! When I got back to the Demon World, I was having my revenge! ...Well, as much as I could, anyway!

"I thank you for the valuable information."

The unsettling buzzing sound suddenly came to a stop and the boy put the flat blade into some kind of metallic box I assumed was its sheath.

Phew. Looks like I won't be killed, at least.

"You're not going to kill me?"

"No. You gave me useful information."

"R-right..."

I took a breath. Now I finally had a chance to calm down and look at this kid's face.

"Is something the matter?"

"Nah, just thought you seemed different from the other humans."

Hair black as void. Blood-red eyes. An androgynous appearance that could

pass for woman or man.

Even an imp like me could see how strange he seemed. He was clearly something *different* from the other humans, yet also not like us demons. Some other kind of monster.

Luckily for me, this monster was apparently diplomatic. Threatening, but peaceful with the right approach.

"You appear to be a rather understanding devil. I'll see to it that command finds you a place to live in the Shinjuku Protection Ward.

"Much obliged. Personally, I'd like to get back to the Demon World if I could. Can't you do something about that with your magic? Or did you call it 'science' over here?"

"The collection squad will be here soon."

"...Ah. I see."

The boy completely ignored my request. I was going to complain but thought better of it. It was preferable to getting killed.

Which brought me back to my original thought: this guy was different from the other humans. Not just in how he looked, either. Power, speed, skill—all of his specs towered above the others. I'd only seen him fight for half a minute, but I could tell he was as threatening as a devil. One of *our* devils. It was a miracle I was alive.

It all happened an hour before. I'd hobbled out of my hideout to go into town and preach to the humans about the foolishness of this war, as usual. Right as I was stepping out of a secluded alleyway onto the street, I ran into him.

Well, he was occupied with fighting other demons. Trolls, ogres—the bruisers of the Demon World. They'd probably started something with humans, as they

were wont to do. That wasn't particularly unusual. How brutally they were defeated was.

Now, we lower-class demons were nothing special, but that didn't mean humans were any match for us. They did have those irritating little weapons...'guns'? Get shot by enough of those all at once and we'd die, but one quick Protection spell was all it took to survive it. Even a weakling like me could pull that off.

Trolls and the other tough guys, though? They were made for combat. Your average humans could have them totally outnumbered and be shooting at them from every direction and they still wouldn't die.

But what I saw was those fierce warriors, those unstoppable specimens...destroyed by a single human. That void-black hair. That slender, androgynous frame. This human used magic like we demons did, boasted greater regeneration than a troll, and even greater strength than an ogre.

After punching out an ogre twice their size, he sliced a troll's club in two with some strange blade before lopping off its head. A pixie fired a Psychwave which he caught with his hand before firing one back with much greater intensity.

I was spellbound as I watched. I'd never imagined that such a powerful human could exist.

Before I knew it, the demon warriors had been dealt with, and this beast's eyes were on me. They shook off the blood on their sword and began walking in my direction.

Crap. *Crap.* This was worlds apart from guys with guns.

Suddenly I found myself prostrated before him on the ground. I'd forgotten all about casting any defensive spells and was instead begging and pleading—I'd

tell him anything they wanted to know. That saved my life.

When I look back, not running into him until then was just good luck on my part, and surviving our meeting was nothing short of a miracle. With that in mind, I knew not to say anything to offend him. That was for the best.

But even though I rationally understood that...

"Hey."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well...I gotta ask, see..."

I rationally understood that, but the silence kept me on edge!

Think about it. I was next to a monster in human's clothing, a walking slaughter machine. One that barely showed any emotion, who approached everything with mechanical coldness. Sure, he was docile now, but I never knew when he would turn and lop off my head. I needed to come up with some sort of conversation before the fear made lose my mind.

What could I talk about? Come on, something, anything! After some thought, I figured out something that anyone, human or demon, could speak about without issue.

"Oh! Your name! What's your name?"

"My name? Why do you want to know that?"

"Listen, I'm what you call a pacifist. I've been going around preaching in hopes of finding a way for humans and demons to coexist."

"Ah, I see."

"Judging from your strength, you must be human royalty or nobility, right? I figure hearing your name couldn't hurt."

"...Ahh."

The boy seemed to hesitate a bit, then spoke up.

"You are the first devil to ask my name."

Because you're swinging that sword before anyone can ask!

I couldn't say that out loud, of course.

What I saw next was unbelievable. This stone-faced beast, this terrifying boy...began faintly smiling.

Thinking it my imagination, I rubbed my eyes. When I opened them again his smile was already fading, but you could tell it had been there.

"....." I was hesitant to speak.

"Yes?"

"Most everyone born in this world has a name. It's a treasure anyone and everyone has. That's what my father taught me."

"Sounds like a good father."

"I remember something else he said. Telling someone your name is like leaving proof that you were born. Even if your physical body's in the ground, as long as people remember your name, you're not truly dead. Your name lives on in those who know it—that's how important sharing your name is."

"Hm? That is incomprehensible."

The boy gave me a puzzled look. That was hardly a surprise—even I didn't know why I was going on about this.

I probably felt some sort of connection with him. The joy at being asked your name. The joy of leaving your mark on the world in some way. If that was what

made him smile, it meant he wasn't so different from the other humans and us demons. Which meant he was much less of a monster than I thought. That feeling of a strange connection prodded me to share what my father had taught me when I was a kid.

"Don't worry about it. Just trying to say that sharing one's name's a pretty important thing. Sorry for the tangent."

After trying to calm him down, I decided to share my own name. Come to think of it, was this the first time I'd shared my name with a human? Well, it wasn't like many of them gave me the time of day. If my father's words held meaning, this would be my first step in leaving my mark on the human world. I'd have to make sure it wasn't my last.

"My name's Eibrad. I'm a proud member of the Imps of the Dark Valley."

"Thank you. My model number is DH-05."

He stared at me with unblinking red eyes.

"Anti-devil self-development bioweapon, Demonhart Series Number 05. DH-05 Leo."

2 — Somewhere in Tokyo (Part 2)

2059. That was when the devils attacked out of nowhere.

Twelve bioweapons were made to defeat them—unstoppable weapons made based on the devils themselves. The Demonhart Series. I was one of them: DH-05 Leo.

My specialty was self-development. I would analyze and decode the abilities of devils I fought and emulate them as closely as possible, making me an adaptable weapon.

At present, I didn't have the immense firepower of 03 Gemini, nor the unstoppable regenerative abilities of 06 Virgo, or the automatic counterattack abilities 11 Aquarius had, but I was expected to be the strongest of the DH Series in time.

They thought that if I kept on stealing devil abilities and growing, I would become the mightiest of bioweapons, one that would lose to no foe.

People called us DH Series units heroes who protected the world. Others called us monsters no different from the invaders. I did not know who was correct. What I did know was that protecting the world was our purpose.

Power that surpassed the demonic invaders. The unyielding duty to protect humanity, no matter the cost. We guarded humanity as its fortress, as its blade, and as its shield.

"So you're telling me you were made *just* to protect humans? That's it?"

"Yes. I was made for the sole purpose of fighting devils and protecting humanity."

"I gotta say, that's pretty sad to hear."

"Is it? I feel no exhaustion from my duties, and even if I did, protecting humanity is far too important an ideal to—"

"Nah, that's not what I meant."

The small devil shrugged and sighed.

Conversing with me was a type of devil called an "imp." He had a pair of black wings on his back and horns protruding from his head. Imps were particularly intelligent, and many of them could understand human language.

After hearing reports that a strange imp was preaching coexistence near Old Shibuya Station, I headed to the scene and successfully secured him. He was relatively friendly, as the reports suggested, and I managed to obtain much useful information from him.

"Mr. Imp?"

"Eibrad! I just gave you my name!"

To add to the surprise, the imp was rather expressive.

"Eibrad, forgive me. What did you mean by 'sad to hear'?"

"I meant what I said. My heart aches, kid, when I think about the problems you're gonna face."

"I do not understand your statement."

"...Leo. You said you were made *just* to protect humanity. And you know, that'll probably be fine as long as this war lasts."

The imp, Eibrad, let out a small sigh and looked up at me.

"But what about when the war is over? No one to protect or fight against

when the land's at peace. You'll lose your reason to be, kid."

"I believe peace to be a desirable outcome."

"Not to you it ain't! Listen, everyone who draws breath in this world or the other thinks about *why* they exist at least once."

Eibrad spoke like any human I'd heard. Was he particularly unusual, or were the ethics of the Demon World simply that similar to ours? I could not say for sure, but what he began to preach about drew my interest. I elected to listen.

"Why am I here? Why was I born? You think about it, you wrack your brains, but you don't find anything close to an answer. So you settle on something easy. You tell yourself, 'I live to find my purpose,' or 'I live simply because I was born,' something mundane like that. You following me?"

"I comprehend, yes."

"But unfortunately, you were born with a clear purpose. A purpose that will most definitely disappear in the near future. Doesn't that suck?"

"Hm. I see."

His message was very roundabout, but I was starting to understand what Eibrad wished to say. As I processed it, I repeated it back in my own words to see if our understandings matched.

"Should the war end, I will become unnecessary. Though I am useful to humanity now, that will only lead to greater, unbearable pain when I am no longer needed. Is that what you wish to say?"

Eibrad eagerly nodded.

"That's right, kid. And it won't be an instantaneous thing, either. Losing your purpose will gradually eat away at you. With nowhere to belong, the years will

bear down on you as the hole opens up in your heart."

"A hole?"

I knew, rationally, that to say a hole was in one's heart was a figurative expression. However, hearing it applied to a bioweapon like myself felt rather peculiar.

"Yeah, a hole. You'll wonder why you're still alive after your duty is done with and whether you can really go on like this. That emptiness is just going to widen the hole. You said you don't have an actual lifespan?"

"Essentially."

The DH Series was, in general, built to last. Nearly forever.

The Akashic Engines at our core permanently supplied us with energy. Our organic bodies would regenerate any wound, great or small. It didn't matter if we lost an arm or a head—it would all grow back. Of course, great damage would force any of us to shut down, but we would not degrade and die with time.

"Most people'll die when their time comes. And whether or not they find their purpose, or fall into despair over losing it, everyone's equal in the grave."

"True."

"But not you. You're going to have to live forever after you lose your purpose. You'll be taken away from that beautiful time when you knew who you were and what you were meant to do, and you'll be cast into a haze of confusion and aimlessness...forever."

"What if another war breaks out? Will I not have my purpose back again?"

"Yeah, probably. Since you live forever, you'll save the world forever. Forever

gaining and losing your purpose. To me, that just sounds incredibly sad and unbearable."

Eibrad let out a deep sigh as his shoulders drooped.

It surprised me, but the imp was...worried about me. Pitying me, even.

"A peaceful rest may never come to you. And that's just...really sad."

"Hm."

He had a point.

When war between the humans and the devils ended and peace settled over the world, I would be one step closer to gaining my humanity, and yet I would cease to belong. He might be right about the pain I would feel then.

Born to save the world, yet there would be no stage left for me to stand on.

Born to save the world, yet all I could do was hope for another cataclysm.

The days where I questioned my way of life may yet come. That is, if I did not die in this war first.

"You needn't worry. The battle against the devils...demons, rather, is only intensifying. A new gate—what you call a Great Spiritual Hole—has opened on the North American continent, and reports say that powerful demons have passed through."

"I figured. Looks like King Belial and his cronies are finally on the scene."

"Unfortunately, I am the weakest of the DH Series in my present state. The other units will likely defeat the demon army, but the probability of my death in battle before I gain humanity is high."

"You're that tough, and you're the weakest?"

"I am. That is why I have been building experience by fighting far from the front lines."

"Hah, the humans sure outdid themselves making you guys. So..."

Eibrad kicked a stone at his feet in a bit of frustration.

"You telling me you don't need to worry about the future because you're just gonna die in the war?"

"I am. You needn't worry. I do not think I will suffer as you imagine."

"Well, all right, then. Here's to hopin'."

With a flap of his wings, Eibrad rose up to my eye level. When he spoke up again after taking a good look at my face, he sounded more relieved.

"You know what, that's fine. I'll be praying that they get you first...before you become invincible and learn how painful life truly is."

"Thank you."

While I was replying I heard the faint sound of an armored car's engine from beyond the mountain of rubble. It was likely the transport squad here to collect prisoners. Eibrad would be taken to the special Shinjuku ward with all the other captive devils and locked away until the war ended.

"You know what, I'm in for the long haul. I'm gonna stay in the human world 'til they bury me here."

"Your whole life, then?"

"Yeah. Humans and devils—well, I'd rather you stopped calling us devils, but that aside—kobolds, goblins, orcs, trolls, elves, imps...I want to make a world where all of us can coexist with you humans. I'll keep apologizing for us barging into your world...and keep asking that we stop all this fighting and get along."

"A good idea. If we are unable to send you back to the Demon World, we will have to think of coexistence ourselves."

"Yeah, I figured. So remember my name, all right? When I help bridge the gap between our peoples, I'm expecting a monument of my likeness, you hear?"

Eibrad was going on about something, but the transport squad was looking at us and trying to decide whether they should approach. I decided it was time to go. The hostile devils were defeated and the docile one taken captive. My task was completed.

"Hey! Leo!"

When I turned away and started to leave, he called out to me. I looked back and he continued to yell while they bound him and dragged him into the armored car.

"Don't push yourself too hard! If it gets to be too much, just throw it all away and run! Do what you want to do! I dunno about this bioweapon business, but it's your life! Live it your way!"

"All right."

"One more thing! Don't get too caught up in this 'born to protect humanity' stuff! If the people ever stop needing you, that'll be a perfect chance—find another reason to be! Enjoy your life!"

"All right."

I never did quite understand what he was saying, but I never forgot it. And I thought to myself, on the off chance that life became too painful to live, I would do what I wanted to. I would forget about protecting humanity, throw it all away, and run.



Tokyo, 2060.

It happened during a cold, rainy July.

Hero

Leo Demonhart



Actual Age: 3002
(Appears to be around 18)

Race: Humanoid Bioweapon

A young man in appearance with red eyes and black hair, he is actually the only surviving model of the Demonhart Series, a line of 12 bio-weapons made to protect humanity from the demon invasion of 2060. Each bioweapon was produced with a different concept in mind. DH-03 Gemini had speed, DH-06 Virgo could regenerate, and in Leo's case, he was able to grow and develop all on his own.
He stands out among all of the DH Series for his ability to copy any skill and continuously evolve without limits.

Final Chapter: Wanting to Quit

1 — My Name is Demon Queen Echidna

"This is an emergency!"

I slammed the strategy table. The mood in the castle's conference room was incredibly tense.

My name is Demon Queen Echidna. I am queen of the Demon World, and I invested an immense amount of resources and personnel to open a Great Spiritual Hole to the human realm in an attempt to save my ruined world by finding the Wisdom Stone.

The emergency was none other than the matter of said portal.

"The Great Spiritual Hole is beginning to close. It's stable now, thanks to the efforts of Shutina, Lord Onyx, and myself, but it won't hold another seven days. Within those seven days we'll need to make our decision...to retreat or advance."

There were five present, excluding myself.

Sorcerer General Shutina.

Beast General Lili.

Shadowless General Mernes.

Dragon General Edvard.

And finally, a new executive member as reliable and powerful as any of the

Four Great Guardians: Black Knight Onyx.

Though new, Lord Onyx was truly dependable. He had greatly aided the four Guardians without being asked, multiplying the army's efficiency. His actions on supply missions to the Largo Islands had also won him the trust of the troops at large. Even Edvard's second in command, Julietta, spoke highly of him. It would, of course, be appropriate to promote Lord Onyx to be the fifth member of the Guardians. While having a *fifth* member of the *Four* Great Guardians was problematic in itself, I was willing to brush that aside in favor of his talent.

In fact, we should have been having a tea party today to celebrate Lord Onyx's promotion, but conditions took a dire change.

"Hey, uh, Echidna?"

"What is it, Lili?"

"Why's the Big Spiritual Thingy gonna close?"

"Mm, an excellent question. I'll start my explanation there."

To put it simply, the Great Spiritual Hole was a massive warp portal that linked the human and demon worlds. Individuals who possessed great magic power, like Shutina and myself, would open a small hole and preserve it with a rare catalyst such as a magical mineral, then gradually widen it. Once open, a hole could be maintained as long as one had the magic power and catalysts for it. Without those two, however, it would close.

As of now, we were running low on catalysts.

"We've started to lack enough supply of the rare minerals needed to maintain the Great Spiritual Hole. Our sorcerers back in the Demon World are growing exhausted, as well. They've been keeping the hole open since we marched into the human realm a year ago."

"Oh yeah?"

"Lili, you're dropping crumbs."

Lili hadn't a care in the world as she munched away on a cookie. Mernes scooped up the crumbs and returned them to the plate on the table. Shutina gently scolded the wolfgirl.

"Lili, this is important, so put your cookie down."

"Okay!"

"That doesn't mean you can munch on an apple instead! You can eat when we're finished!"

"Okaayyyy."

"Pfffft."

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle. The tension in the air began to ease a little. All it took was a few remarks from Lili to lighten the mood. She truly brightened up the group.

"Okay, so what'll happen if the Big Spirit Thing closes?"

"Well, to put it simply, we won't be able to go home."

"What?! Oh, no!"

"Now you understand how serious this is!"

"Oh no, oh no no...!"

Edvard, Mernes, and Lili were born in the human realm and had only joined my army because our interests coincided. The Great Spiritual Hole didn't concern them terribly much. To denizens of the Demon World like Shutina and myself, however, the hole was critical. As Demon Queen and her adjutant, we

were obligated to return.

I needed to obtain the Wisdom Stone, bring it back to the Demon World, then use its power to conjure up warm sunlight, lush greenery, and clean water for my ruined home. That would be the first step. There were, of course, a mountain of problems awaiting me once I brought it home. After all, I had never even seen the Wisdom Stone before. According to a few texts I'd acquired in the human realm, I simply knew that it was kept in the holy city, had great power, and could do a variety of things depending on how it was used.

What *was* the Wisdom Stone? What did it look like? How did you "use" it? Was it a magic item? Or was it, as the name suggested, some magical gem? There was just too much I didn't understand.

If our invasion turned into an all-out war with the humans, valuable information about the Wisdom Stone may have ended up destroyed. That was the main reason I kept combat and destruction to a minimum during the initial attack.

"Shutina."

"...My Queen. We have two paths before us. First, returning home before the portal closes."

Shutina spoke with her brow furrowed. I saw this coming, but hearing it made my heart sink. To return home without the Wisdom Stone would be, unequivocally, a defeat. A failure. She seemed to know that since she continued without looking at me.

"Because most of our troops from the Demon World have been forced back by Leo's exploits in battle, our current army consists mostly of denizens of the human realm. Since we cannot bring them with us, we will have to temporarily

disband the army. Volunteers will then accompany you back to the Demon World and we will wait for our next opportunity to enter the human realm."

"In essence, then, while we won't obtain the Wisdom Stone, we will lose nothing more, correct?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"...Volunteers. I can scarcely imagine many of us would want to go to the Demon World."

Reluctance colored Edvard's expression as he spoke. As Shutina said earlier, new hires from the human realm made up most of our army. Few, I imagined, would be adventurous enough to move to the Demon World for however long.

"So retreat's the first path. What's the second?"

That was Mernes, asking his question with a lazily raised hand.

"Though I'm pretty sure I can already guess."

"Indeed. Our second choice is to immediately mobilize the army, invade the holy city, and take the Wisdom Stone by force."

"Isn't that kind of out of the question?"

"It sure is."

Mernes didn't even have to bring it up; the battle seemed impossible. My army was far weaker than it was during the invasion, and the humans had...him. The man who could face an army of ten thousand alone. The man who defeated the Four Great Guardians and me in single combat. The most powerful hero of all, Leo Demonhart. Without him present, we may have had a chance. Yet, as long as he protected them, we had no hope.

I shook my head and turned to Onyx, who had been silent this whole time.

"That hero, Leo. Should he take the field we will perish—that much is clear. Lord Onyx, have you faced him in combat before?"

"I'm afraid not. I have, however, heard rumors. That he defeated you in single combat, for example."

Onyx replied in his usual, calm tone. Shutina wore a worried look—perhaps she feared he had offended me, but she needn't have. A ruler must be able to accept facts as facts. I simply nodded and agreed.

"Indeed. I faced him with all the strength I could muster, and I lost. The experience taught me all too well that he is truly a force to be reckoned with—a monster, even. If all five of us attacked him at once, only then might we have a sliver of hope of victory. Should we encounter him again...obtaining the Wisdom Stone will be the least of our worries."

Onyx nodded. Should danger befall the human realm, the hero would rise again, like a law of nature. And he would show no mercy. The next fight with him would be the last, ending in destruction of the entire army.

Marching the army to the holy city was not a plan on the table. It was suicide.

I did not fear death. I'd been ready for it since leaving home. I could not, however, force my followers to die with me. The choice was clear.

"I have made my decision. I will disband the army and return home."

"...Mm?!"

"H-hold up."

After a brief silence, Edvard and Mernes gasped simultaneously.

Shutina was shocked. She attempted to say something, but it was hardly comprehensible.

"E-er...Queen Echidna. R-right beside you, you see..."

"Enough! I know, Shutina. You needn't say a word."

Shutina and I were a good three hundred years apart in age, but we'd been together for a long time. I'd known her since she was but a girl. She knew more than any other how much hope I had put into this quest for the Wisdom Stone, so her shock came as little surprise.

"I thank you all for coming with me this far. As the ruler of the Demon World...no, as a demon, I, Echidna, must extend my heartfelt thanks to—"

"Ekky, beside you! Beside you!"

For some reason, Lili was desperately pointing to something next to me. Why was she doing that? It mattered not. Thanking the Guardians took precedent.

Or, rather, it was all I could do. I was sure if I let my emotions stray even a little, tears of frustration would come pouring out. Yet, a ruler cannot disgrace herself before her subjects. I may have been commanding a defeated army, but I had to keep my composure to the end.

"The Wisdom Stone was nothing but hopes, rumors, and hearsay. From the very start, this quest to save the Demon World was a gamble. Alas. I will have to find another way to save our home."

"Saving the Demon World... That's that plan of yours to bring lush greenery and fresh water that you spoke of over drinks, I take it?"

It was Onyx. His voice sounded a touch strange to my ears, but I was too busy holding back tears to pay it much mind. I answered him with my eyes closed.

"Indeed, that was the first step in my plan to make a beautiful, orderly Demon World. One cannot have order in a wasteland, so I wished to use the Wisdom Stone to bring about warm sun, lush greenery, and fresh water and air...like the

human realm enjoys."

This had been my plan since my childhood. I had learned in the library back home that the human world was beautiful, while our world only sank deeper into ruin. If only there was some way to save it. I grew stronger, set my sights on becoming queen, then came to the human realm with the Wisdom Stone in mind and hope in my breast.

Yet...it all ended in defeat.

How frustrating it was. I turned to the ceiling, eyes still closed, desperate to keep my tears back. Onyx spoke up again in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Allow me to make one thing clear. The Wisdom Stone is not an omnipotent, wish-granting machine. It is a highly advanced engine from the old Mechanical Age that provides nearly unlimited energy through a micro black hole. I am unsure that it would grant your wish, Queen Echidna, but...it may, depending on how it is used."

"...I see."

Oh, that Onyx. Had he researched the Wisdom Stone before? He seemed awfully well-informed. Perhaps there was a reason he had kept quiet all this time. He was quite the man of mystery, after all.

"The Wisdom Stone is an artifact from the Mechanical Civilization that existed three thousand years ago. I'd imagine a detailed manual on operating it is hiding somewhere in the human world. The humans are looking for it as well, but its antiquity has made it rather difficult to get a hold of."

"All the more reason for us to seek peace with the humans. Our entire reason for being here was to save the Demon World with that Wisdom Stone, so if we worked with the humans to find that 'manual,' we...no. No, that would not do.

We would have no choice but to steal the Wisdom Stone from the humans, leading again to war."

"You needn't worry about that. There are two Wisdom Stones left in the human world, so you can leave one behind. One can remain in the human realm and the other can go to the Demon World. Would that not be perfect for peace between the realms?"

"...Two?! This is the first I've heard of this. Explain, Onyx!"

"I will. But first, would you at least bother to look over here?!"

The news had immediately banished my tears. Regaining my composure, I looked up at my people once again. That's when I noticed that the Guardians were acting awfully...strange. They were all silently staring at the space beside me.

Edvard and Mernes gasped. Shutina and Lili's eyes shot wide open.

Lord Onyx was quiet, as usual...wait.

It was then I realized that Lord Onyx was conspicuously absent.

How? Where did he go?

"Ekky! Beside you! Beside you!"

Lili was pointing to my right.

A terrible premonition gripped me as I very slowly turned to look.

"It's an emergency, so I ditched the disguise. Now listen up, Echidna."

My premonition was correct. Beside me stood my mortal enemy. It was the hero, Leo. There was no mistaking it. I wiped the remaining tears from my eyes and blinked. Then blinked again. This was no hallucination. The very hero I booted from my castle in the midst of his interview stood before me, clear as

day.

He wore the exact same black armor that Lord Onyx did. He lacked a helmet though...and those ruby eyes peeking out through his black hair saw right through me. My head began to spin.

"First, I apologize for deceiving you. Things were complicated, and if you'll listen to me now, I'll explain it all."

Leo snapped his fingers, and his black armor—I imagined it was magically conjured—disappeared, revealing that familiar figure. A simple linen outfit with a longsword casually slung from the waist, and a few rings on the fingers, likely magical. It was equipment far too lacking to challenge the Demon Queen with, but this was exactly how he appeared when he barged into my throne room on the day of our duel.

"There's really only one reason I joined your army, Echidna. I wanted to see if you were truly worthy to inherit the Wisdom Stone. If I didn't think you were good for it, I was just going to up and leave, but when we were drinking together...I became convinced. Echidna, I think I can entrust the stone to you."

Drinking together?! He said when we were drinking together?! The only person I'd bared my soul to over drinks with of late was...Lord Onyx.

Where *was* Lord Onyx? Why was he not kicking this fool out?

"I figure you'll be the one to bring order to the Demon World. And if they stop bothering humans when things get peaceful over there, handing you the stone'll be worth it—that's my read. That, and I've lived a little too long. It's time to pass the torch."

I looked around, but Lord Onyx had completely vanished. It was almost as if he had been replaced by this hero.

Ah. Then it hit me. I wanted to chuckle, really. So that's what happened.

Leo did just say he "apologized" for deceiving me.

Everything made sense.

"Echidna. Sorry to spring this on you while you're still processing everything, but we're low on time. The guardian of the Wisdom Stone is strong, incredibly strong. I'll take you to where it rests, so bring the Guardians with you."

"*Die, bastard!*"

I drew my Tyrfing and blasted the babbling fool with the mightiest Inferno I could muster.

Reflecting back on that time, at that moment, we were still simply Hero and Demon Queen...

2 — Try and Stop Me, Heroes

About ten minutes after the hero, Leo's appearance, we had moved to the castle's second conference room.

"...Hey, Echidna."

"Silence."

"Come on, at least mix things up a little. Like, you hit me with the exact same Inferno spell during the interview."

"Shut up. Silence. Drop dead."

"Look, I didn't have a choice, all right? I had to join your army in disguise, build up some accomplishments and grab an official audience with you. Otherwise, there's no way you'd let me into your army."

"Of course not! To allow you into our ranks is unthinkable and completely unacceptable! Now get out of here—eat some poison mushrooms, puke your brains out for a week, and drop dead!"

I was seated across the table from Leo, having finally recovered my composure. The Four Great Guardians were also present.

This was the greatest stain on my reign as Demon Queen. I had countless chances to see that Onyx was Leo, but I let every single one slide.

Shutina presented the first opportunity. Lord Onyx had copied her magic wavelength and used it to resupply the magic power reactors she had created. And not taking a stopgap approach, either. He had crafted talismans that allowed *anyone* to accomplish the task.

Copying magic wavelengths was a well-known technique, but not one easy to accomplish. One would need to be a high-level sorcerer of Shutina's caliber for

it to be a possibility. Would we be so lucky to have a sorcerer of that rank simply join as a new hire?

Lili and Edvard presented chances, too. They were sensitive to the scent of strength and would wish for at least one bout with a powerful, unknown new entry. In fact, they fought me in single combat when I was scouting them. And yet, they seemed awfully permissive of Lord Onyx from the start. Of course they were, because Onyx...Leo had already defeated them in a duel before.

What of Mernes? No, his situation was the most obvious. I really should have noticed it at the time.

When Shutina interrupted my drinking with Onyx, the man dashed out of the castle, caught up to Mernes, talked him down, and returned him to us.

Madness! Impossible! Hesitation may have weighed Mernes down, but how many in this world could catch up to the Shadowless General himself? Excluding myself, Leo was the only one who came to mind!

"Damn it all! This is a shame I'll continue to bear well beyond my grave...!"

"Ah, my bad."

Leo apologized with an awkward scratch of his head. The flippancy he approached this with hurt my pride even more. How could he remain so calm after I had just hit him with Inferno, the most powerful fire spell there was? How could he stand there completely unharmed? I may have messed up the full chant in my rage, yes, weakening the spell to half of its normal power. Still, the fireball reduced the huge conference room to nothing but ash. How could he remain unfazed? It simply made no sense.

"Queen Echidna!"

"Ekky!"

Shutina and Lili ignored my hostile aura to gather around me and speak up. They were immediately followed by Mernes and Edvard.

"Queen Echidna, Leo means us no ill will. He has, in fact, immensely boosted the efficiency of the army in ways we thought—"

"Could you accept Lord Leo's entry into the army? I am quite indebted to him, as it were..."

"Hey, Ekky, guess what! Leo gave me lotsa advice, and it made logistics wayyy easier! Oh, and—!"

"He greatly reduced my overtime hours. I beg you, please show him mercy."

"My daughter, Julietta is deeply grateful to him, as well. If you exile him, why, she just might kill me—just please don't let that happen."

"Like, it's amazing! When everyone works together, work gets super easy!"

"Hey, Echidna, I personally think the dining hall could pay the staff a lot more."

"All right! Enough! Quiet, all of you!"

I pulled Lili off of my waist and sat her down in a nearby chair. Then I loudly cleared my throat in an attempt to regain what little authority I had remaining. Finally, I turned to look at Leo.

"Very well. I shall make an exception and pardon you for your deceit as Lord Onyx. You hear me? I am making an *exception*."

"Thank you."

Leo meekly bowed his head.

"Now, to the important part. The Wisdom Stone. I trust you tell the truth when you say the other one is in the Seshat Mountains, near the castle, yes?"

"Yeah, it's true. It's got a pretty strong guardian, but you all should be able to deal with it."

"...Hm."

Something stood out to me in Leo's statement. I hated to say it, but Leo was the strongest being in the human world, bar none. Who, or what, in the world would he consider "strong"? Although that drew my curiosity, verifying the truth of his statement took priority. Trust would not come easy in regard to the man who'd deceived me this whole time. He supposedly knew the location of a second Wisdom Stone and was willing to guide us there? That sounded way too good to be true!

"Is it the truth you speak? Or are you simply attempting to lead us into a trap?"

"Man, do you trust *anyone*? I'm being honest here! Do you have any idea how much effort I put into making this army more efficient? Like, I think I've done enough to earn your trust, so stick with me on this one!"

"Oh, you've done a lot, I'll give you that. And I'd never heard of this Lord Onyx, so I was impressed, deeply impressed—which only irks me that much more to have the truth revealed!"

"Guys! Come on, this is no time to fight, Ekky!"

Lili jumped in to mediate before another argument could break out across the table between us.

"Bad! Bad Ekky!"

"...Mm. Sorry, Lili."

"You too, Leo!"

"Yeah, yeah. My bad."

I made an effort to calm myself. Lili was right. We didn't have a moment to spare. If we obtained the Wisdom Stone, and if it was the unlimited mana source that Leo suggested it was, we would be able to keep the Great Spiritual Hole open without any more resources. If we could keep it running, that would give us time to come up with a new plan. I wouldn't have to give up on saving the Demon World.

Put more bluntly, the fate of the Demon World depended on me obtaining the Wisdom Stone. And if Leo knew where the stone was, my path was clear.

"Very well!"

It was time to prepare for battle. I shot up from my chair, held my right hand in the air, and formed a mental image of my Dimensional Pocket spell. The glow of my trusty Tyrfing grew brighter as all the amulets and bracelets, and other magical items I'd stored away reattached themselves to me.

"I shall embark at once to slay this guardian of the Wisdom Stone. Leo, I will allow you to accompany me. Take me to the guardian immediately."

"How about the Four Guardians? I really think you should bring them along."

"I shall, of course. You're the last person I'd want to be alone with!"

I shifted my gaze from Leo to look outside the window. As if to suggest dire straits ahead, black thunderclouds rolled toward us from the distant horizon.

"Ahhh, it's so cold! I'm freezing!"

Leo had teleported us someplace far higher than my castle. We were halfway up one of the Seshat range's taller mountains.

Though it wasn't snowing right then, it certainly had been earlier. Piles of snow covered the mountain's face and the air was thin. Poor Lili never wore much clothing, and she was shivering, her tail standing on end. Mernes questioned Leo with a suspicious look.

"Where are we?"

"It's just a little further up. We'll be walking there."

"I'm freezing! It's so cold, it's so cold!"

Our destination seemed to be the mountain peak. It was a bit of a trip, but nothing taxing for a group of seasoned warriors like ourselves. The cold was of little consequence to demons like Shutina or myself, Edvard was always good with extreme temperatures, and Mernes' assassin garb had the blessing of Sylph on it to keep him agreeably warm.

I ordered Shutina to cast a Warmth spell on Lili. That made her quiet.

"Thanks, Shutina!"

"You're very welcome. You'd do well to study some magic yourself, Lili."

An oddly calm mood fell over our group as we started toward the peak. Leo chose to walk alongside me, so I decided I could give him a word or two.

"What possessed you to make us walk? Why waste the extra time?"

"I didn't have us take this walk for no reason. I wanted time to talk with you."

"Talk? What is there left to talk about?"

"Passing the torch, obviously. When someone's taking over your job, you've got to show them how to do it, right? And you're taking over my most important project, the Wisdom Stone. That's a lot of power. You wanna know how to use it right, don't you?"

"Hm...a job, you say."

Listening to Leo tell me about jobs like this felt really strange. He sounded quite serious and diligent, much as Lord Onyx had, and there was no sign of his usual flippant attitude. The thought struck me, that perhaps this seriousness was closer to his true self. Otherwise, why would he do something as taxing and thankless as being a hero?

"Very well, O wise handler of the Wisdom Stone. What advice have you for me?"

"Like I said before, the stone's an ancient machine. It provides an immensely infinite stream of energy, but it's not some magic item that grants any and all wishes. You following me?"

"Of course. You wish to say that simply planting it in the Demon World's soil won't turn my homeland into a lush paradise of green with babbling brooks and beautiful sunlight, correct?"

"Yeah, you got it."

Leo nodded and pointed toward the foothills peeking through the clouds.

"After you get the Wisdom Stone and fix the Great Spiritual Hole, go make peace with the humans and look for the stone's manual together. A copy of the Akashic Engine Usage Manual should be hiding somewhere out there. Find it. If you read it, it should tell you a bit about using the Wisdom Stone."

"Peace, you say?"

I had thought about peace with the humans before invading their realm. All I needed was the Wisdom Stone. Perhaps, I thought, it was unnecessary to butt horns with them.

That peace plan fell by the wayside. And how could it not? Was I to simply

waltz into their city, demand their treasure, then suggest peace between us? In no world would that ever work. Thus, we made the choice to take the stone by strength of arms, and lost to their hero, Leo.

"*Can* we make peace? Is it not too late?"

"It isn't."

Leo sounded absolutely sure.

"You probably don't know this, but humans have constantly been fighting, one country against another, then making up again, since long before the Mechanical Age. The descendants of the demons your ancestor Belial brought over here three thousand years ago now hawk their wares on street corners and have children with humans. You ever hear of Eibrad the Mediator?"

"One of the human world's fairy tales. I've heard it a few times from our storytellers. It's a tale about an eccentric imp who goes to the human world and makes a small town where demons and humans coexist, is it not?"

"Yeah, that's the one. That actually happened, so don't worry. Humans and demons can get along."

As Leo spoke his tone grew surprisingly thoughtful. It was almost as if he'd witnessed everything in the tale with his own eyes.

"Of course, Master Eibrad was a special case. He was stuck in the human world with no way to get back, so he had to make nice with the locals. If you really want to bring the worlds together, you'll be dealing with a wildly different scale. It's going to be incredibly hard."

"Listen, hero. You underestimate me."

I stopped in my tracks and looked Leo right in the eyes.

"I am the Demon Queen. Demon Queen Echidna, the most powerful ruler the Demon World has ever known. 'Incredibly hard'? I couldn't care less how hard it is! I'll make peace as much as I need to!"

"Yeah? Well, glad to hear it. That's reassuring."

Leo faintly laughed, but there was a hollow sounding note in it. I called out to his back.

"I speak not in jest. If the Wisdom Stone is what it takes to save my home, then I will overcome any treacherous ordeal and fell any mighty foe."

"Any mighty foe, huh? You sure lost to me pretty hard."

"Silence, you!"

I fired a Psycho-wave at a pile of snow which sent a shower of slush raining down on him.

"Gah! Asshole!"

"Hah! Be thankful that was *all* you got!"

Our conversation stopped.

All six of us silently trudged through the deep snow. You could hear it crunching under our feet and falling softly from the nearby trees. Occasionally a bird sang in the distance.

The quiet gave me time to organize my thoughts, and I chose to share one of them with Leo.

"Leo."

"Hm?"

"Something has been bothering me. You seem awfully...informed about the

Mechanical Civilization. That was the human culture that thrived roughly three thousand years ago, around the time that Chaos Lord Belial invaded, correct?"

Records of the Mechanical Age were few in both the demon and the human worlds. I had the archives of every human town we captured searched, but few of them held anything more than vague references. There were only enough detailed entries to count on one hand.

Three thousand years ago, after humanity's fierce war with Chaos Lord Belial, much of the infrastructure born of science and technology was abandoned and fell into ruin, only to be replaced by magic as demons came pouring in from the Demon World. That was the basic history of the modern human world.

Yet Leo seemed oddly knowledgeable about this past civilization.

"Why are you so educated about the distant past? Were you a scholar before you became a hero?"

"Not really. I was just born in the Mechanical Age, that's all."

"Ah, I see, you were born in the Mechanical Age...wait, you what?"

He answered so naturally I almost didn't question it.

He was born *during* the Mechanical Age? Just how old was he?

There were spells out there that stopped the aging process, and I had heard of great sorcerers who used them to live incredibly long lives. Yet, if he were born in the Mechanical Age, that would mean he had lived for three thousand years. How long could one extend one's life? Was this man, this hero, even human?

"When Belial attacked, the sorcerers of the day used everything they had to create twelve heroes to protect humanity. Messianic superweapons made with your demonic powers. The bioweapons went by the name Demonhart Series.

I'm the fifth one, 05 Leo. The idea behind my design was Hyper Self-development."

"Self-development?"

"I copy any and all abilities my opponents use and continue to grow and develop indefinitely. Machines, humans, demons, magical beasts. Swordplay, magic, martial arts, strategy. This body holds three thousand years of hard-won experience. The DH Series doesn't die out of old age, we just keep going. I kept growing stronger."

"You...you cannot be serious!"

I could hardly believe my ears. What unfair nonsense this was! Of course this man was strong—how could he be weak, with such abilities? One of him would have the strength of tens of...no, hundreds of thousands of elite soldiers. That told me what I needed to know. Leo was never someone *anyone* could defeat in a fair fight. I let out a sigh.

"That explains your strength. Had I known just how powerful you were, I would have found another way to acquire the Wisdom Stone."

"But we ended up meeting anyway. That's not such a bad thing, right?"

"Hmph."

Indeed, one could never quite understand destiny. After defeating me in combat, something possessed this hero to join my army and take me to the Wisdom Stone. A strange trick of fate, I supposed. Leo continued explaining.

"All of the other Demonhart Series died off. I'm the only one left."

"So you've lost your brothers and sisters. Mm. You have my sympathy."

"Thanks."

Leo stared off into the distance as he spoke.

"See, there's a fundamental order carved into my core: protect humanity. So for these three thousand years, as long as I've drawn breath...I've protected them. Protecting humanity is my identity. I've fought to bring peace...and when peace came, I've wished for more danger. More war."

"You fool! What would the point be then? Enjoy the peace you've won!"

"Yeah, you're right about that. See, my self-development function made my role as a weapon and my mind as a human get all...mixed up. I started to bug ou...I started to lose it."

Leo shook his head.

"Sometimes, I get to thinking. Am I just being an overprotective parent to humanity? They can get on without a hero, so am I just doing this for my own self-satisfaction? Am I forcing myself onto the scene?"

"Not at all—that alone, I'll guarantee. If it weren't for you, the human world would most definitely be under my control."

"You might be right, but what about next time? The day may come when humans can take down the invading Demon King on their own. The day may come when I don't have a place to belong anymore."

Leo was growing more animated and kept going without hesitation.

"You know...I'm probably losing it. When that happens, I'll probably bring chaos to the world, all to keep my reason to exist intact. I'll put the world in danger, then I'll save it. Humanity won't matter to me; I'll become nothing but an eternal world-saving machine. I'd...I'd be worse than any Demon King. So before that happens...something needs to be done, right, Echidna?"

"...Leo, what the hell are you talking about?"

I had no idea what he was trying to tell me.

Well, I understood what he was *saying*. True, if there were a being such as the one he spoke of, one who plunged the world into chaos simply to save it, that *would* be far worse than a Demon Queen who invaded the human world with a clear purpose.

But I could not understand why he would bring that up now. Did he know what he was implying by saying something should be done before he turns out like that? If he thought he would end up an enemy of humanity in the near future, then the simplest way to stop that would be— "We're here!"

The view abruptly opened up before us. Lili cheered and began dancing around with her tail wagging. We had made it to a clearing at the top of the mountain. I had expected a more pointed mountain peak, like the tip of a spear, but that was not the case.

The clearing seemed large enough to hold my castle, and then some. Though snow covered it, the ground itself was flat, making it feel like an outdoor grand hall. It boasted a fantastic view. I could see the far-off sea between the clouds, and when I squinted, I noticed human villages below, bustling with life. Yet, this calm clearing held no Wisdom Stone guardian. It held no life whatsoever. Except for us.

"Where is the guardian?"

"Now, then..."

Ignoring Mernes' question, Leo strode towards the middle of the clearing. When he'd put some distance between us, he stopped and turned around.

"There is no guardian. I won't waste your time—I'm the one with the Wisdom Stone."

"...What?"

Leo stuck out his right thumb and tapped it against his left breast.

"Three thousand years ago, the sages of old created the Demonhart Series, imbuing them with cores of unimaginable power. Akashic Engines, they called them, generators of infinite energy, and that's what my heart is. *That* is the Wisdom Stone you're after."

"Lord Leo, hold. Surely, you cannot mean..."

Edvard immediately took a step forward, but Leo stopped his approach with a raised hand.

"Yeah, you've got it. You've probably all figured it out already, but..."

With a humble breath, Leo made his announcement.

"Kill me. If you want the Wisdom Stone, you'll have to kill me and rip out my heart."

"L-Leo?!"

"Leo, you cannot be serious!"

Shutina and Lili looked ready to run to him, but Leo yelled out at the top of his lungs first. It was, without a doubt, a declaration of war. A cry of the soul with three thousand years of life and pain behind it.

"I am Leo Demonhart, former hero!"

The air shook.

"I'm particularly skilled at swordsmanship, black magic, spirit magic, sacred magic, and all other arcane schools! My portfolio includes the defeat of Demon Queen Echidna in single combat, and I can be put to work right away! Though still on my trial period, as I wish to truly bring ruin upon the foolish humans of

the land, I will leave the dark army as of today!"

We all fell silent as Leo's red eyes focused squarely on us. His next words came out softer and more quietly.

"Let me say this now. You don't get to run away. The second you run, I'm going down the mountain and killing every last human there. I'll even burn up all the texts about the Wisdom Stone while I'm at it."

"What?!"

A lightning bolt struck at Shutina's feet when she tried to step forward. It was a warning shot. Leo's eyes said the next would strike true. He stood there a moment staring at me.

"You said you wanted to save the Demon World, Echidna. That you'd make as much peace with the humans as you needed. That you'd overcome any ordeal or defeat any foe to gain the Wisdom Stone."

"...I did."

Leo drew the longsword at his hip.

I drew my Tyrfing and held it at the ready. When I did, his magic power rapidly swelled to the point of bursting, as if he had been waiting an eternity for this.

"The ordeal you were imagining—it's right here."

The snow covering the peak instantly melted and steaming water went flowing down the mountain.

"If you want the Wisdom Stone...if you want to protect these worlds...then stop me, heroes!"

3 — I'll Save This World Even if I Must Destroy It

It began in the blink of an eye. I hadn't dropped my guard. I hadn't taken my eyes off of Leo for a second. Yet, in but an instant, he had closed a twenty-yard gap. His slash came for my neck with no hesitation.

"Tch...!"

I swung my Tyrfing, barely parrying the fatal attack. Two blows, three blows—their impact rattled me to my bones with every exchange. Though slender for a man, Leo's attacks were fearsomely heavy. It felt as though I were facing Edvard.

"Do not underestimate a Demon Queen!"

A demon did not just fight with a sword. A well-trained body could be one's deadliest weapon.

In my case, I had my tail. There may have been a wyrm in my ancestry, because it was as thick and flexible as a dragon's. A simple whip of it was enough to crush full plate or bend a sword.

Leo dodged my deadly swipe with a leap back. I could have struck him as he landed but decided to speak instead.

"Leo, you fool, what has gotten into you?! Have you lost your mind?!"

"My mind is clear as can be. Protecting the world's my job. That's why I was made, and how I've lived."

We exchanged blows again. He used a plain longsword, like any village blacksmith would make, but I imagined it had every possible weapon enchantment cast on it. It proved sharper than my Tyrfing, and its slashes were so deadly they created shockwaves that tore through the ground as though it

were butter.

"If I can't save the world, I can't hold onto my identity. If humanity doesn't need me, well, I'll *make* them need me. I'll save the world, even if I have to destroy it first!"

"You utter fool! ...Shutina!"

I didn't even have to look. I could see the spellcasting light coming from behind me as Shutina sent countless fireballs raining down from above. What little snow remained melted and evaporated into the air. There was no danger to me as she willed them all on trajectories toward Leo. We were now on the offensive.

"You would decide to switch ends and means! What sense is there in destroying that which you seek to protect? All that would await you is a ruined wasteland!"

"A wasteland? Hell, I'll take it! I've protected this world for three thousand years. So what if I destroy it?!"

The former hero standing before me laughed, as if he were enjoying this as much as anyone could. Then, it hit me. He was no longer a hero. A hero could not say that with a straight face.

"Emptying out the world, starting from zero...doesn't sound half bad!"

Leo held out his hand and the world flipped. I saw the blue sky above and felt something hard slam against my back. Someone screamed.

"Queen Echidna!"

It was Shutina. That was when I realized I was on the ground after being blown back a good sixty feet or more.

Oh. That was a Psycho-wave from Leo. Such a low-level control spell fired from the palm would typically barely have enough power to kick up a little snow. A mere brush from his version blew me, the Demon Queen, away. How could he have such ridiculous power?

I quickly picked myself up, but Leo was already in front of me. His blade was raised, ready to finish me off.

Edvard had been waiting for a chance to strike and leapt in with a slash of his Caladbolg. Leo stepped back to evade it, and right into a waiting Shutina, who fired a series of fierce Blast Bolts at him from behind.

"Lord Leo, enough of this foolishness! This isn't like you!"

"He's right—what reason do we have to fight?!"

"Quit your yapping, Guardians!"

I lost sight of both Edvard and Leo as they were enveloped by the countless explosive balls of light Shutina had unleashed. Edvard was likely unharmed, with his dragon scales being stronger than any armor. Mere Blast Bolts wouldn't be enough to harm him. Leo, on the other hand, I wasn't sure of. Fighting the three of us probably hadn't left him any time to cast any barriers.

And yet.

"Wh...?!"

Shutina fell speechless. When the light faded, it revealed two figures in a fierce sword duel. Edvard, slightly burned, and a completely unharmed Leo.

That could not be! Blast Bolt was a mid-level spell, but it conjured more bolts depending on the magic power of the caster. When Shutina cast it, she conjured hundreds of them, and the fact that even Edvard had been damaged by them was proof enough of their power.

Yet Leo was completely unharmed! With no barrier, either! His defenses made no sense.

Leo kicked Edvard away to gain some distance, then yelled at Shutina.

"Quit playing around, Shutina. Use your real spells! If you want the Wisdom Stone, you're gonna have to kill me!"

"This makes no sense! Why can't you just keep helping us, as you have?!"

Shutina slammed her staff, Claustrum, into the ground and conjured an Obsidian Cage. This dark, shadowy enclosure could easily capture an arch chimera, and it enveloped Leo. The cage brightly flashed as its interior was immediately flooded with lightning.

"If your heart is the Wisdom Stone, then we need only work together to save the Demon World! And you know that! Weren't we a team, Leo?!"

"Shut up!"

Leo bellowed out and the Obsidian Cage blew apart. He raised his free hand and unleashed Blast Bolt, the same spell Shutina had just used.

An enormous ball of light launched up into the sky then burst, raining down countless shining swords. There were dozens, hundreds...no, even more!

The spell changed in power depending on the strength of the caster. Was this the power of Leo's mid-level spells? This made no sense, how were we to handle so many?

"Get back, Shutina!"

"...!"

"Shutina!"

The death-dealing blades of light rained down without pause. Edvard quickly

leapt in front of Shutina, shielding her with his girth.

The blades dug into his back and exploded, leaving the Dragon General singed. While they continued to pour down, Leo lunged at him, longsword glimmering. Slash after slash slowly cut Edvard apart. Shutina supported him with all the enhancements she could cast, but the two of them clearly had little hope.

I quickly attempted to join in for support, but that accursed Leo launched Blast Bolts my way, as well!

The light raining on Edvard had slowed to a drizzle but was now pouring down over on my end. I attempted to avoid them with most of the defense spells I had, but a few managed to get through, tearing up my red dress and stabbing my tail in the process. If I let up for an instant, I might be out cold.

Evading. Guarding. Parrying. I had my hands too full to support the other two. Leo howled as he sliced at Edvard.

"I'm sick of it at all! Hyper Self-development? An immortal guardian of humanity? I didn't ask for this! I'm not even allowed to die to end it! I've just protected, defended, and guarded humanity, and when they finally say they don't need me, it still doesn't end!"

"Fill my hands with the piercing rays of the gods!"

"Hah! Finally gotten serious, huh?"

"Get out of the way, Edvard!"

Edvard leapt back and as he did, a sharp, crackling sound rang out as a massive bolt of light launched from Shutina's magic circle.

Shutina's Aurora Assail, the radiant spear of the gods, was the highest level of lightning spell, and it could reduce a fortress to rubble. The divine lightning

spear melted snow and rock in its wake as it screamed toward Leo before striking him.

It was a direct hit. And yet...

"Who do I point this hatred at? The humans who made me? Or the demons that caused them to?"

"Such...such resilience...!"

Edvard groaned in shock. Leo stepped out of the white smoke as if nothing had happened. He was burnt here and there, of course, but they were a far cry from being fatal injuries.

"All of you, that's who! I'll destroy the human and demon worlds and put this heroing crap behind me!"

As Leo bellowed, I desperately tried to make sense of what I had just seen.

The lower-level spells I could somewhat understand, but taking a direct hit from Aurora Assail with that little damage made no sense. A terrible idea struck me, one that sent a shiver down my spine.

There's no way.

Earlier, Leo had said that he was designed for "Hyper Self-development." He said that he copied abilities and continued to grow and develop indefinitely.

"Endless development...don't tell me that applies to...defense...?"

I unconsciously gave voice to my fears.

It made sense. If he could endlessly grow stronger based on the foes he fought, it stood to reason that he would develop resistance to attacks he suffered, culminating in complete immunity. In fact, that was the only answer that made sense.

My Inferno met the same fate. It had somewhat of an effect on him the first time we fought, but when I launched it at him in the conference room, he showed no sign of damage whatsoever. A direct hit, yet he was fine. He didn't even make an effort to dodge it!

"Have at it, heroes! If you want to save your world, come at me with everything you've got!"

Leo raised both hands, and in a brief instant I saw him heal what little damage the Aurora Assail had managed to inflict. This was the worst-case scenario. It looked like my fear that he developed resistance to attacks on him was correct.

We had five combatants: Shutina, Lili, Mernes, Edvard, and me. Each of us had fought him, and each of us had lost. If he gained resistance through battle, that would mean most of our attacks would have little effect on him.

Did we have any chance of defeating him?

It was...a bad situation. Though it was five against one, chances were high that we would all die here.

"Guooh?!"

"Edvard!"

Edvard and Shutina's cries brought me out of my thoughts and back into reality. I could not believe my eyes. Edvard's mighty dragon scales had been shattered! His legs were bound by some sort of spell and his torso was blazing in cursed flames.

"Cocytus Ptolomea. Inferno Gehenna."

Following Leo's solemn chanting, I saw vestiges of ice surrounding his left hand and fire surrounding his right. He had customized the highest-level spells and chanted opposing elements at the same time. I couldn't do that. Not even

Shutina could do this. Was there no limit to his abilities?

"This...can't be!"

"I prepared a counter to your precious dragon scales. Destruction from a rapid change in temperature. Know how that works? Probably not. Heh heh...hahaha."

He laughed and swung his fist. The smile on his face had vanished.

"Begone, Dragon General."

Edvard went flying. Leo's solid hit sent him into the air with a force unimaginable from those slender arms. It wasn't just magic with him; his physical abilities were monstrous, as well. The Dragon General slammed into a distant rocky wall, then lay still. He wasn't dead but he would be out for some time—which was, of course, fatal enough.

"One down."

"You son of a...!"

I instinctively reacted. Leo sidestepped my overhead swipe and prepared to counterattack. The moment his attention was on me, I saw something come streaking toward his back like a silvery shooting star. It was instant death, silently delivered by the invisible blade of the Shadowless General!

"Y'know..."

His killing blade, however, did not make it to Leo's neck.

"It's about time you showed up, kid!"

"Tch!"

Ludicrous reflexes. Leo ducked just in time to dodge the blow Mernes dealt out from his blind spot. That attack could fell even the most seasoned warrior,

but Leo came away with barely a scratch on his head.

The Shadowless General fought with daggers in both hands so if the first missed he could strike with the other. This time he sliced for Leo's stomach with his left blade, but it cut fiercely into the Blaze Wall Leo left behind as a distraction. Leo himself had leapt back and was already regaining his stance. Mernes landed beside me and grumbled.

"Maybe I'm out of practice. Thought that was a sure kill."

"No, Mernes, that was a perfect attack. Leo's just a monster."

"Good point. And a real pain, at that."

Mernes crouched down with his daggers at the ready while continuing to sulk. Now that he'd been exposed, there was little chance of a second sneak attack. Still, with Edvard down for the count, we needed as many front-liners as we could field. Mernes was giving up on stealth and looked resolved to face Leo with speed.

My evaluation of Mernes' first attack had not been an empty compliment. He delivered his blow with perfect timing after keeping himself completely hidden during the start of the fight. I was his ally, and I had never spotted his location, so Leo shouldn't have been able to spot it either. By all accounts, Mernes had every right to believe he was delivering the deathblow.

Who could have predicted Leo would dodge such a blow? His abilities were simply beyond measure. Still, this was no time to complain that he was too strong to beat. We *had* to win. Victory or death.

"On me!"

Mernes and I locked him in a pincer attack while Shutina supported us with spells. Three on one! While slashing at Leo from his blind spot, Mernes asked

him a question.

"Do you wanna die, or kill? Which is it?"

"Either! I'm picking a fight with the world. If someone wants to kill me, let them! Otherwise, the whole world is joining me in my suicide!"

"Liar."

Leo and Mernes took to the air in the blink of an eye. Oborobi and Shadowless. Oborobi made unseen steps in midair, and Shadowless allowed one to kick off them in any direction with blinding speed. Mernes' daggers flashed out at Leo's neck. Then, in a blur of motion, Leo was behind him and stabbing him in the back. It was as though they were ascending an invisible stairway, or dancing through the air. Of course, I could not call it beautiful. This was a dance of death.

When it came to high-speed combat, Mernes was better than any of us. Half-baked support would only get in his way. I signaled to Shutina to stop and focused on healing myself instead of providing covering fire.

As I tended to my wounds, the aerial battle only grew fiercer. Though they were at each other's throats, Mernes was strangely talkative.

"Then you didn't need to join the army. You could've just fought everyone from the start. Instead, you were all passionate about stuff like...improving work efficiency, and teaching people how to do their jobs. You were definitely thinking ahead about the people that would be left behind. No one who wanted to destroy the world would care about that."

"Shut up, Mernes."

"You don't hate the world. You don't want to kill the humans, either."

A second Mernes appeared, then a third. He was moving so fast that soon

twelve clones of him were running around. Even Leo wouldn't be able to immediately tell who the real one was. Mernes used that time to get behind him and deliver a fatal blow.

"What you're really after is—"

Mernes did not get to finish his sentence. His dagger, his arm, his entire body froze and he fell to the ground as an ice sculpture.

A moment later, Leo stood on the ground shrouded by a frigid gust of air. It was an intensely cold automated counterattack. To think he had such tricks up his sleeve!

"Two down. Ha, ahaha...hahahaha! What I'm 'really after,' huh?"

Leo threw his head back and laughed.

"I told you, didn't I? I just want to save the world, even if I have to destroy it! Hahaha, ahahaha!"

"Leo!"

Then, in came Lili. She had been standing there watching the battle this whole time, quietly biting her lip. Those white wolf ears which took after Fenrir's were drooping with discouragement.

"Fight. You're a Guardian, aren't you?"

"I don't wanna fight!"

She shook her head as Leo glared at her. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she cried out.

"You don't look like you're having even a bit of fun, Leo! You're laughing, but you're not happy at all!"

She slowly continued walking toward him without bothering to transform into

Fenrir.

"You listened to my problems when we went to Largo! You gave me so much advice, Leo!"

"Yeah, I sure did."

"So now it's my turn to listen to you. So can we stop fighting like this?"

"...I see."

Leo slid his sword back into its sheath. A smile came over Lili's face.

"Problems, huh. You want to hear my problems, Lili?"

"Yeah! I'll hear you out, no matter what!"

A pause.

"Well. My biggest problem right now would be..."

Lili dashed towards him, tail wagging and eyes bright. I thought Leo showed a moment of hesitation.

Perhaps I simply imagined it. When I looked next, the hesitation was gone. With a wave of his hand, a variety of lights covered his body. Blue, red, green, and more.

Strength. Dragon Breath. Armor Brace. He cast every enhancement spell on himself in the blink of an eye and attacked her.

"My biggest problem is that the heroes I expected so much from are this weak!"

"...!"

"Lili! ...Gah!"

I tried to leap in front of Lili to cover her and took a powerful kick from Leo. It

sent me flying, and as I braced myself for a hard landing, I saw Leo in a contest of brute force with Fenrir.

No, it wasn't a contest. That suggested competition. After a series of fierce punches and kicks, the massive white wolf was thrown back, slamming into a rock wall. Fenrir groaned in pain. No time passed before Lighting Arrows followed. Countless bolts of light buried themselves into the giant wolf, forcing the transformation to fade. Lili was defeated.

"Three down."

Another stinging confirmation that this man was truly a beast. A horrifying monster, neither human nor demon. A walking cosmic horror the humans of old made the mistake of unleashing.

We weren't going to win, no. We would all fall here. The human world would perish, and the Demon World would stay doomed.

Shutina.

I called out to Shutina with a Channeling spell. Actually *fighting* him was a fool's errand. There was only one thing to do.

I'm going to use it. Keep him busy for forty-two seconds.

...Honestly, my queen? Forty-two seconds, against Leo?

I have no one else to turn to. If you cannot, we'll never see home again.

Oh, I'll do it. Just another impossible demand, like you've made of me since the day we met!

I appreciate it. I'll treat you to the best wine I have saved if we make it back alive.

Leo did not move. He showed no sign of leaving, nor any sign of finishing off

the fallen.

Edvard, Mernes, Lili. I could see them weakly rising at the edges of my vision. To attack him with the five of us at once would be our final and only chance to win.

If my prediction about Leo's aim proved true, this fight was still winnable. All I could do was gamble on that slight chance of victory.

At my signal, Shutina fired off a silent barrage of Icicle Lances. Leo repaid her with the exact same spell. The clear blue spears of ice collided in the air, and every last one shattered.

I made no move to attack. I focused entirely on chanting my spell.

Leo slowly moved forward. Shutina stood her ground, electing to call out to Leo in between launching spells.

"Leo!"

"What?"

Plasma Storm. A pillar of lighting wrapped around Leo and contracted, exploding. Yet, much like before, Leo negated it with a Plasma Storm of his own right before the burst.

"I know what you're after! I may not know the details, but all that is clear to me is that you wish to die!"

"Nice bluff, but I was pretty clear. This world? I'm bringing it down in flames."

"Lying was never your strong suit, Leo!"

Luzghar Edge. The highest-level wind spell which engulfed its target in a tornado and tore it to shreds with wind blades—this, too, Leo negated with the same spell. He was already fearfully close.

Just a little longer. I just needed a few more seconds to complete my spell.

Don't die on me, Shutina!

"You could have killed Edvard, but you just knocked him away. You interrupted Mernes before he could finish. You even hesitated after hearing Lili!"

Shutina attempted to slow him down by firing spell after spell, but Leo negated every single one. He was only a few steps away from her, but Shutina kept on talking.

"You don't want to destroy the world—not in the least. You don't hate, fear, and want to destroy the world, Leo. You hate, fear and want to destroy yourself!"

Leo paused, then took a step towards her. Spark Flare, Lightning Spear, Acid Cloud. None of them made him flinch.

"You're afraid of a future where you want to save the world, but you can't. Where you can't find meaning in your life anymore. You're afraid that you might actually destroy the world in an attempt to save it!"

One more step. Leo remained silent.

"So you've forced yourself to play the villain, all in a bid to get us to defeat you while you still have control of yourself. After securing a position for your Wisdom Stone and laying the foundation for peace between our two worlds, no less! You fool, Leo! Have your three thousand years taught you nothing?!"

Another step. With his next, Leo would grab Shutina and deal out a fatal blow.

"You—"

"Enough already. Die."

When Leo reached out with his hand, my long chant had ended. Really, to improve my chances, I should have fired the spell without saying a word. Yet, I could not help myself. Not when Shutina was in danger.

"You're the one who's going to die! Look over here!"

With every scrap of magic power I could muster, I fired out a single beam of light. The final technique passed down from Demon King to Demon King, a binding spell designed to disable the hero's abilities for a brief moment or two.

"Anti-Leo!"

As time nearly halted, I could see Leo slowly turning towards me. The purple light of Anti-Leo crawled towards him.

Our eyes met, then parted as he focused on the approaching beam.

Damn it. Damn it all, he's just going to dodge it!

He would dodge it. There would be no second chance. We would all die. What a damned shame. Would I meet my end here? Gaining nothing and protecting less?

However, my fears were all for naught. Leo stayed where he stood, wearing a satisfied smile as the beam struck him. When I saw that smile, I realized my original prediction had been correct. His true goal was for us to kill him.

We may be able to win.

We may be able to slay him.

We may be able to grant his wish.

4 — I Don't Want to Die Yet

Save the world.

I was born with that absolute command.

It was fine in the beginning.

Just like that imp Master Eibrad had said, my purpose fit the world well. The people desired what I had to offer. I fought alongside peers and allies. We defeated powerful foes and brought peace to the world. Such a pure soul I was back then, celebrating the world's calm from the bottom of my heart.

It was a long, long peace. The age needed no heroes. The world held no meaning for me. Regional conflicts, wars between nations, an invasion from the Demon World...any sort of conflict, any sort of bloodshed would make my heart sing.

I can fight again. I can be a hero again. I can save humanity again!

It was only in the midst of combat that I felt the world approved of my existence. A hundred years passed. Two hundred. Before I knew it, five hundred. A thousand. Even more. I traveled the world in search of battle. And I always found it.

05 Leo. This body, this unit, was built to adapt to and learn from its foes, boasting unlimited growth potential. With every enemy I fought, I would gain new techniques. New power. As time went by, I stopped encountering even matches. I had become what the scientists who made me predicted: an unstoppable, unkillable, immortal bioweapon.

Eventually, I noticed that part of me wanted the world to be in danger. I wanted every lifeform on this planet to need me. I wanted the world to be in the same hopeless, sorry state it was when I was made.

I want to save the world. Please, let me save it.

I'll...I'll lose myself if I can't.

More danger to humanity! More chaos!

Every day, this desire grew stronger. Every day, my bugs multiplied.

"Why didn't I think of this before? It's so obvious."

I came to my realization after about three thousand years. It happened so suddenly that, were I a priest, I would have thought it a divine revelation.

"What if I put the world in danger myself?"

It was such an obvious insight that anyone could think it up. The DH Series had a feature in the mind of every model: Thought Masking. It prevented rebellion by stopping the unit from thinking of anything that would harm humanity. Developing an ego—a self—over the years appeared to have eroded its functionality.

Using all of the technological knowledge and experience at my disposal, I began recreating my former brothers and sisters.

"DH-01 Aries. DH-02 Taurus."

Like the scientists of old who created me, I was consumed with the project of creating the ultimate bioweapons. I drew on my memories of their strengths and appearances which remained clear in my mind. My fingers moved on their

own, smoothly crafting up the blueprints.

"03 Gemini. 04 Cancer. 05...06. 06 Virgo."

Their abilities. Their strengths. Their individual concepts. The Akashic Engines were too classified to recreate, but everything else mimicked the originals. With these plans, I could make again the heroes who saved the world three thousand years ago with near perfect accuracy.

"Libra. Scorpio. Sagittarius. Capricorn. Aquarius. Pisces."

Yet, there was another slight difference I made. Their ruling orders would be a touch different. I took a look at my blueprints.

It's been too long, everyone. It's me, 05 Leo.

"Been a damn while. I've changed. I've changed a lot."

It's time to go to work. Please...let me protect this world.

"Go kill off humanity, down to the last man, woman, and child. Give me something to protect them from."

I...

"I..."

Desperation tinged my voice as despair consumed me.

"I don't want to die yet. I want to live—live as a hero."

No one answered.

Demon Queen Echidna arrived on the scene right before I could put my plan into motion. I had all of the materials needed to make the new DH Series. Just as I was about to synthesize the homunculi for their bodies, I heard news that a

"hole" had opened in the Seshat Mountains. Demons poured out from it—Echidna's army. Her forces spread throughout the human realm like wildfire, capturing town after town until they neared the holy city of Renaye. This was another invasion from the Demon World. The apocalyptic event I'd been waiting for.

"What the...?"

My sanity returned to me. I looked back at the madness I'd been consumed by for the past few days.

"What the hell was I doing?"

I stared vacantly at the blueprints for the new DH Series. Each was designed for maximum brutality. If I'd unleashed those on the world, the humans would have had no hope of stopping them.

Then, who would?

There was only one possible answer: me.

Created to protect humanity, I had attempted to destroy it for my own, selfish reasons.

"...Well, damn."

My head began to ache.

For the first time in my life, I felt fear. True fear. Fear from the depths of my heart.

I tried to destroy humanity? For my own sake? How could I call myself a hero? The demons I'd faced would be proud. That was the work of a *true* Demon King. The moment I recognized the horror of my actions, the core DH Series program inside of me struck back with a vengeance. It screamed at me.

Protect humanity! Fend off evil!

"I don't have to look very hard to find evil. It's...right here."

The last of the Demonhart Series, 05 Leo. That was...I was the greatest evil threatening the world. I was the one who needed to be defeated. The man who would destroy the world for his own sake; toy with people's lives because he wanted to. I was history's vilest Demon King.

Protect humanity! Fend off evil!

The core program kept shouting at me, making it hard to forget that I'd been created by another and that my life was not my own.

"I know, I know...and I've got a plan, don't you worry. It's not like I didn't learn anything these past three thousand years."

I had to quit heroing.

I had to defeat evil.

I couldn't just be defeated, though. I needed to leave the Akashic Engine—the Wisdom Stone—to someone I could trust. They had to be someone strong enough to defeat me. Someone who could defend humanity. And the invading Demon Queen Echidna seemed to fit the bill.

When I sent out some familiars to scout around her occupied territory, hoping to see just what kind of villainy she was up to...I could not believe my eyes. Orcs. Goblins. Even Cyclopes. Not only were her multi-species units kept in perfect order and lockstep, but the Demon Queen herself was ordering her troops not to inflict unnecessary harm on the humans under their occupation.

"Your Queen Echidna commands you. Refrain from harming these people as much as possible! Needless pillaging, destruction, and arson is forbidden. And don't even think of slaughtering civilians! Do not forget that we did not come

here to wage war!"

Awfully noble words for someone who invaded us.

Still, I was impressed. I could tell from her speech that she had invaded the human world to save her own and that she stood out, as far as demon rulers went. She invaded without pillaging, she herself took command on the front lines, and she even congratulated the lower demons like imps on jobs well done.

I had never seen a demon ruler like this before. It looked like the last king had passed the torch. I wanted to meet her myself. Have a bit of an interview. Perhaps I, too, could pass her my torch. She could inherit the heart I've carried and become a bridge between human and demon realms.

Fighting back the pangs within my core, I stood up.

"All right, let's start with saving the world."

First, I would save the world from the...immediate threat. I could see what Echidna and her people were like in the process.

Then, if I had the chance, I'd join her army later. I'd serve her, hear her wishes and ideals, and find out if I could entrust my heart to her.

That was the day my final journey began. The journey to quit heroing. The journey to slay Leo, the true demon king.

I would gauge Echidna's Four Great Guardians. I would gauge Echidna herself. I would gauge their trustworthiness.

And then, I would die.

The demon king must always be defeated. That was simply how the world

worked.

After three thousand years of life and bugs multiplying in his core system, this biological weapon chose the absurd theater of his suicide.

5 — I Leave the Rest to You

When I was but a little girl, back when I was merely Echidna, without the appellation of Demon Queen, an incubus bard who claimed to be on his way back from the human world told me a story.

The realm had itself a "hero."

This hero had lived since the age of Chaos Lord Belial and guarded the human world, repelling every attack of our dark armies through the generations.

Strumming his lute, the bard sang.

"How fearsome the hero, with power in spades! Even mighty lord Belial fell to his blades!"

"Mmhmm?"

"Listen, young lady, should you become queen, the path against the hero would be better left unseen. Should you bring to him a fight, you'll find yourself in a deadly plight!"

"Hmph! That's so dumb!"

I scoffed and shot back a retort.

"This 'hero' of yours—is he not just a human and weak like all the others? I could beat him with an arm behind my back! Not that I would bother with this queen stuff!"

I was still a child, with pitiful knowledge of the world. When he heard my reply, the bard grimaced.

Then, many years later, when I succeeded my father, King Cychreus to become the Demon Queen, my father called me to the spell training room before leaving the palace.

"A spell?"

"Indeed, my child. Before I vacate the throne, I must pass on to you a spell most valuable and obscure."

His voice echoed through the vacant room.

In my world, the throne was not inherited. I had won the crown by my strength alone, and I had thought Cychreus would leave nothing behind in his exit. The surprise angered me.

"Why, just because I'm your daughter? Come on, I don't want people to think I won the throne because my fa...wait. Forget what I just said. Let me try this again."

I cleared my throat and revised my speech.

"Make haste in your departure, Cychreus. I know not what this spell of yours is, but I can assure you, I have no need of it."

"Listen, I don't wanna do this crap either, but tradition's tradition. Every demon ruler's gotta learn this spell."

"...Every ruler?"

My surprise led me to parrot his remark. This was the first I'd heard of such a spell.

"You know about the hero? The one in the human realm?"

"But of course."

I knew of humanity's mighty guardian, the hero. Both Chaos Lord Belial of antiquity and Sorcerer King Astaroth five generations before me had attempted to invade the human world, and both of them were driven back by this hero. The texts in the demon realm had many names for him, including Leo, Onyx,

and Godhart. I imagined it was not one man living forever, but an inherited title, as Belial used to be. Perhaps when war broke out the strongest of humanity would inherit the hero's name, and for some strange reason they would *always* be stronger than the Demon King of the time—or so I used to think.

"Astaroth developed a spell to defeat him. A hero counterspell, if you will. Not a very practical or versatile one, though."

"A hero...counterspell?"

"That's right. We call it Anti-Leo."

"...Leo. Leo, you say."

The Demon World had no inheritance except for this one spell, passed down from ruler to ruler.

For the brief period he was bound by the spell, the hero would have the strength of a baby. Offense, defense, evasion, regeneration—everything would be sealed away.

The cost on the caster was, of course, immense. It would drain all of your mana, your life, your everything to even begin to work. Then, and only then, would you be able to bind the hero for a few breaths' worth of time.

I had...an idea. A prediction. When I came to the human world and heard the name of the hero, Leo, I felt more certain of it. And a few minutes ago, when Leo said he was born during the Mechanical Age, my certainty became absolute. "Leo" was not an inherited name or title. The hero had truly lived for three thousand years.

With no comrades, no place to go home to, not even a place to die, he had protected humanity in total solitude. That was the hero. That was Leo.

Then, who will protect him?

I felt a strong indignation.

When he suffers in the pits of despair, will no one extend to him a hand?

I felt a deep sadness.

Nonsense. Utter nonsense. I won't allow it.

I wanted to protect Leo. I wanted to help Leo. Being the Demon Queen didn't stop those desires.

"Gh...grahhhh!"

The light of the Anti-Leo spell spread out like a spiderweb and engulfed the hero. It certainly appeared to hold him well enough, but the recoil was immense. How could it not be? I was sealing away three thousand years of accumulated power, all by myself. Such overwhelming pain was enough to curl my lips into a smile. My clenched teeth began to crack. Something warm and wet went dripping down my face. I belatedly realized I was bleeding from my nose and ears and even my eyes. It felt as though countless knives were stabbing into my head and the sound of creaking bones accompanied the sensation that my entire body was about to shatter.

I, Demon Queen Echidna, the most powerful being in all of the Demon World, using every inch of my being to maintain Anti-Leo, could only keep him bound for six seconds. That was my absolute limit.

There would be no second chance.

He would likely gain resistance to this spell, as well. If we did not defeat him in that time, all would be lost. This broken hero would destroy the human world

and likely invade my homeland, gaining even greater power as he did.

The differences in our capabilities were staggering. Normally, I would stand no chance.

Yet, there was a single, fatal difference as well.

In this moment, I had one advantage over him.

"G..."

He was alone.

"Guardians!"

And I had comrades.

Far away, I could see Edvard leaning on Caladbolg to get up.

The previously frozen Mernes tore ice from his arms, skin and all, and readied his daggers through the bleeding.

Lili rose up from the ground and wiped her tears on her sleeves, then let out a mighty roar and transformed into Fenrir once again.

Shutina came over to support me before I fell.

How wonderful it was to have comrades who I could trust!

I did not have to move for them to enact my will.

After struggling to clear the blood flowing down my throat, I managed to cry out.

"I leave the rest to you!"

It had been a while, really, since I'd been in this much danger. Even my battle with Demon King Belial and his legions three thousand years ago had a different

flavor. My body felt like lead. I couldn't move a finger.

With every moment feeling like an eternity, I took the time to reflect on my situation. The regeneration I'd learned from Virgo, the automatic counterattack function Aquarius had taught me, the self-enhancements Taurus and Cancer forced on me, the high-speed mobility Gemini had shown off. Every last special ability of mine was blocked.

It had been a while, really, since I'd gone back to being weak DH-05 Leo.

This could be it. I might actually die, I thought, yet I felt joy. The joy of long-awaited oblivion coming into view.

Echidna looked right at me as she vomited blood. Her eyes told me she didn't doubt for a second her comrades would defeat me.

Is this like one's life flashing before one's eyes, I wonder?

As I faced death, my sense of time slowed to a crawl.

Death. The end. No matter how strong I'd become, with my abilities nullified, I was a goner. No one would save me.

No one could do everything alone, which is why the ability to trust in others is the most desired trait in a hero. Echidna embodied it perfectly. I did not. I failed as a hero, really. I could never trust in anyone.

Resignation ruled my heart.

I'd thought that I had to be the one to protect the world. That if I stopped being the hero, nowhere would accept me. Ultimately, I'd just been at the mercy of my implanted purpose right up until I died.

What was that saying? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?

A doctrine from an old religion popular three thousand years ago flashed

through my mind.

It made me laugh, really. I arrogantly gave the Guardians advice and helped them as much as I could, but here I was, not being true to myself.

I...I wanted to be helped, too!

I wanted to be accepted, even without the hero title!

I wanted someone to reach out a hand and say I didn't need to be a hero anymore. Say they'd help me.

"Guardians!"

Still, this was fine. I'm glad I chose Echidna. I'm glad she's the one I passed the torch to.

She was good people. I knew she would be a bridge between the human and demon realms in my stead.

The Four Great Guardians were great, too. I enjoyed my time working with them.

Improving efficiency. Logistics. Bussing tables. It would have been so fun to just...live like that.

Damn it. I didn't want to die.

"I leave the rest to you!"

I'll say. See you.

I leave the rest to you.

The dragon's great sword went crashing down.

Countless poison knives went flying.

The divine wolf's claws and fangs rent flesh.

The Sorcerer General fired her greatest bolt of lightning, and the light of the Anti-Leo spell faded.

Leo was smiling as he silently fell, and I let out a cry of victory with my generals.

6 — I'm Quitting Heroing

He looked awful. Most of the left side of his body had been blown away without a trace. What remained of his right side was burned all over, filled with poison, and torn open. The left arm that had been miraculously hanging on by a thread popped off, parting with his body as it fell to the ground. He had taken the full brunt of the Four Great Guardians' attacks without any defenses. It was a miracle he remained in *any* form.

Yet in fact, he...Leo...seemed to still live.

"...I lost, huh?"

It made little sense. The hero, half in pieces, had a smile on.

"Feels good."

"Leo..."

Lili tried to trot up to him, but Mernes held out his hand to stop her.

Quiet ruled the space. No one said anything. The silence only lasted a few moments, but it felt like hours.

It was a tightrope victory. So precarious was the win, I could scarcely believe it happened at all. My Guardians had to have felt the same. None of us knew what to do now.

The feedback from casting Anti-Leo was too great. I could hardly move, but there was so much I wanted to say to him before I finished him off.

"So. Have fun playing villain? Playing Demon King?"

"Yeah. It was fun as hell."

In Leo's left breast, where a human's heart would be, there was a swirling

black hole.

The vortex grew gradually weaker, and Leo smiled again. A smile of innocence, of nonchalance.

"I've always wanted to play Demon King, just once. Glad you were my heroes."

He praised our resiliency with a touch of humor in his voice. How lovely. It may have been a fun game to him, but we were fighting for our lives, fool!

I wanted to complain at him, but I hadn't the energy. I kept it short.

"Why did you go easy on us?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't you play dumb with me! You allowed my spell to hit you!"

I knew he could have dodged the Anti-Leo spell when I fired it. He could have even dodged it the instant it was about to hit him—such was his skill. And if he had, I would have had no choice but to accept defeat. Ultimately, he let us win.

"What else was I supposed to do? I didn't expect you to lose that badly."

"I knew it."

Shutina joined in.

"You intended to lose from the start. To have us defeat you."

"More or less."

From the start? When was this "start?" When he revealed himself in the conference room? When he heard my plans over drinks? Or perhaps it was the day of that interview, when he visited the castle for the first time. Perhaps even then, he had already made up his mind.

I remembered what I asked him that night when we drank. Why had he wanted to join my army? Was he betrayed? Did he want to bring about the end of the world? Or was he simply looking for someplace to die?

I giggled to myself.

"What's so funny, Echidna?"

It appeared I had stumbled on the correct answer back then. The eternal guardian of the world nearly lost himself to the darkness and came to the table of his foe, the Demon Queen. What an utterly ridiculous conclusion.

"Don't worry, though. Now the Wisdom Stone is yours."

The black spiral over Leo's chest had dissipated. Now, a tiny, clear sphere about the size of a fingernail floated in its place. It sparkled with a rainbow of colors. Someone uninitiated would think it a new type of gemstone.

It was not a gem, of course. This had to be the Wisdom Stone. The heart of the DH Series and Leo's source of power. I was certain it was the "Akashic Engine."

"I used the emergency override order, temporarily cutting me off from the Wisdom Stone's energy. There's 300 seconds left, so no dilly-dallying, you hear? I can only do this once."

"So I just pluck it out?"

Mernes asked in his characteristically flat tone. His blades were already sheathed. Leo nodded.

"Yeah. It's in pretty tight, but it's a lot looser than normal. It'll be like opening a bottle. Once you get this—"

"No! I don't wanna!"

Lili's wailing interrupted the conversation. Mernes sighed, and Leo gave her a strained smile.

"Settle down, Lili! Queen Echidna is unwell!"

"I don't wanna! Leo, don't die! Wahhh!"

Edvard desperately held Lili back from the hero as she continued to thrash, and Leo's expression softened a little as he watched her. That face spoke volumes. It told me he worked for humanity to the bitter end. He never had any intention of killing anyone or destroying either world. He wanted to sacrifice himself to bring peace to both. I hated to admit it, but I had to. He led a life of self-sacrifice. He truly was a hero.

"I've got no regrets and have no last words."

Leo's eyes were closed. When did that happen? After a few moments, he spoke up again.

"You know, actually, I do have one last thing I want to say."

Another pause.

There was a little...no, a great amount of regret in his voice.

"Sorry for all the trouble."

More silence.

I turned to Shutina beside me, and we exchanged a look. She blinked, then nodded. Knowing each other for over a century came in handy at times like this, because we could easily tell what the other was thinking. We had but one thing to do.

Forcing my aching body into gear, I took a step forward. It was time to end my battle with Leo.

"There's 300 seconds left, so no dilly-dallying, you hear?"

The Guardians still seemed hesitant.

Echidna...she seemed fine. Her face told me she knew what to do.

Sure, not *everything* went according to plan, but no one died. Not the Guardians, not the flunkies back in the castle, none of the humans...I figured I could pat myself on the back for getting torn apart with the least amount of collateral damage possible.

I didn't have any regrets or last words.

I closed my eyes and let the comfort of darkness envelope me.

With Demon King Leo gone, the planet could embark on a new journey. An immense task, never before attempted: peace between the human and demon realms.

In that world, they needed no heroes. This three-thousand-year-old ghost could finally rest.

I don't have any unfinished business, right?

I questioned myself.

Someone to inherit my job? Check. Dark army efficiency? Boosted. It was fun to play Demon King at the end there, too. All right, that was everything.

"Leo, don't die! Wahhh!"

I could hear Lili crying in the distance.

Are you seriously one of the Great Guardians? This is a big moment. At least get it together...

In the middle of a sigh, a realization hit me. There was something I'd forgotten to say.

Yeah. When I thought about it, I did force them to take part in my suicide.

I figured it was par for the course since I was giving them the Wisdom Stone, but I got a little carried away in that fight.

I did break Edvard's dragon scales. Echidna seemed nearly dead. Lili was crying, too.

Like, I had a conscience, you know? In fact, it was because of that conscience that I suffered so much from my desire to destroy the world to save it in an attempt to carry out my absolute orders.

Which meant there was something I *had* to say.

"Sorry for all the trouble."

It didn't sound like me.

After I spoke, everything went quiet.

Was I dead already? No, it didn't seem like it. I'd done a lot of things in life, but this was my first time dying. I didn't know how it worked.

My ears picked up a faint sound. Footsteps, slow, deliberate, and coming towards me. Probably Echidna's. Two hundred and forty seconds remained. The Akashic Engine had a deep connection to my organic body, but Echidna should be able to pull it out easily enough.

Goodbye, Great Guardians. Goodbye, Echidna.

I'm glad I-

SMACK

"...?"

Echidna had lightly slapped my cheek.

I didn't understand what just happened. I opened my eyes and placed my remaining right hand against my cheek. Echidna was looking down at me, with her glamorous red dress all torn up. She mercilessly extended her leg and stomped on me.

"I've changed my mind. Too much effort."

What? What did she just say?

"Make peace with the human world? Fool! Who do you think I am? I am Demon Queen Echidna! The ruler of the Demon World! Have you any idea how busy a monarch I am? I've no time for this errand of yours!"

"Wh-whaaaat?!"

"Now listen, hero...well, now you're simply Leo. Listen, Leo, and rejoice, for I have decided to officially employ you in my ranks! Seeing as you are the owner of the Wisdom Stone and the only known being that has lived three thousand years, I appoint you as ambassador between our two worlds!"

"Appoint my ass!"

I reflexively screamed back at her. She withdrew her leg.

Coming to take her place was Edvard's massive frame, decorated by painfully shattered scales. He wielded the indestructible holy sword of the dragonfolk, Caladbolg.

"Hey, Edvard, talk some sense into this fool! Wait, no, screw that, tear the Wisdom Stone outta me! Quick!"

"Hm? Come now, Lord Leo, surely you jest!"

Two hundred seconds remained. That fool of a Dragon General laid Caladbolg on the ground and sat down next to me.

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid I am taking Queen Echidna's side. You may wish to give up on that death wish."

Fool!

How could he be this stupid?!

"The battle with that machine golem the other day showed me how truly limited my vision is, Lord Leo. There's still much I'd like to learn from you. I can't have you dying on me before you broaden my horizons! Hahaha!"

Edvard's laughter suddenly stopped, and he turned to me with a grave expression.

"I must ask, Lord Leo. Do you understand how special you are?"

"S-special?"

"Indeed. Rich in wisdom and rich in valor, you are. I can't think of anyone else who has lived three thousand years, either! Who else but you could be the bridge between our worlds?"

"I mean, couldn't you get Echidna to...?"

I looked over at Echidna, but she turned her face away. Was she enjoying this?

"And there's my daughter to worry about. She's quite fond of you! And doting father that I am, making her sad is the last thing I want to do. How about it, then? Would you think this over?"

Edvard planted both hands on the ground and bowed his head in appeal.

I revised my opinion. He was a world-class fool. Make his daughter sad? Come on! What about the danger facing the world?! My resolve to give it all up?! His display left me speechless. There were 170 seconds left, so I didn't stay speechless for long.

"Are...are you dumb? That's not the prob—"

"You're the dumb one, Leo!

"Gwah?!"

A small figure lunged at me. Lili. She hugged me with the strength of thousands of beasts and yelled in my ear. God, I wished she wouldn't. I wanted to pry her off of me, but my engine wasn't giving me power anymore. I had no way to resist her inhuman strength.

"Why?! Why did you try to do this all by yourself?! Why didn't you work with your friends?! You didn't say a thing to me!"

"Why...? Come on, who was I going to talk to about this?"

"Me!"

"Gwah!"

She grabbed me by the neck and gave me a shake.

"Just talk to me!"

I get it, Lili! I get what you're trying to say! My issue is I don't trust people, right? I get it!

But was now the time to bring that up? There were only 150 seconds left. Did they understand the gravity of this situation?

"I'm real dumb, so I don't know why you're tryin' to die, but...I don't want you to die. I want you to live."

"Hold on a second..."

"I'll listen to you whenever you have a problem, so just don't die! Dummy!"

"How? How did we get here?"

"Wahhhh!"

As she clung to me, tears and runny nose and all, I could see Mernes crunching through the snow towards me. His assassin's garb was banged up here and there and he looked like he needed to see a healer immediately, but his expression was as blank as ever.

Then, it hit me! Mernes! There was still Mernes! This was a lad brought up in the Assassins' Guild; murder was his bread and butter. He'd be able to calmly analyze the situation and realize that killing me was the play here.

One hundred and forty seconds left. I'm counting on you, Mernes! You won't let your emotions get the better of you!

"What're you babbling about?"

Betraying my expectations, he kicked me instead. It was a halfhearted kick with zero lethal intent.

"Asshole!"

"I didn't need to be a good listener, I just needed to fight you. Your words, your attitude, your eyes, everything said you wanted to live. Right from the start."

Mernes stooped down and held out his right hand. Then, as if mocking me, he gave my cheek a few light slaps.

I'm gonna kill this kid.

"Assassins kill for a living and I'm the best killer around. Don't think you can

pull the wool over my eyes."

"Listen, I wasn't trying to trick you, I just..."

Damn. It looked like Mernes wasn't going to make the right choice, either.

I was all set to try and persuade him when he stood up in a huff and scolded me with a firmness I'd never heard from him before.

"So just do it, you moron! If you want to live, then live!"

"Wh..."

He sounded incredibly earnest.

I wasn't the only one stunned. The others all looked at him in shock.

"Like, remember what you said to me when I was about to go on my journey?"

What had I said back then? We were by the lake, right?

Was it the thing about him maybe wanting a birthday party?

No, no way it was that. He wouldn't bring that up here. What else was there? Was it— Damn it! He kicked me again!

"The most important thing is not to do something you'll regret. That's what you told me. And look where you are! You've got nothing but regrets!"

I didn't have a reply for that.

"At least take your own advice. Idiot. Moron."

He kicked me with each insult.

There were 110 seconds left. The emergency override started to fade, and my body began to restore itself. My missing left half started to regenerate, and...*crap.* If this kept up, I would *actually* end up back in action!

I desperately looked around and noticed Shutina holding up her staff.

Shutina! I could count on Shutina!

"Please! You gotta do it!"

"No, I do not."

She used the staff to bop me on the head, then spoke in the most exasperated tone imaginable.

"You didn't let me finish, so I will now. Leo, have you noticed the contradiction in what you've been saying?"

"Contradiction?"

What had gotten into her? And what "contradiction" was she going on about?

"What you've been saying makes little sense. For example, state the reason you've been trying to die. I'm listening."

"...Well, we of the DH Series were created with a fundamental order: protect humanity."

Apparently, I was going to have to explain this all over again.

There were ninety-five seconds left. We had wasted far too much time already, so I used the speed-talking skills I'd picked up from the lawyers' association.

"DH units *cannot* disobey that order. Another order at our core which is always active is Thought Masking, an internal function that erases any rebellious thoughts before they develop."

"But in your case—"

"That's right! I grew, I developed, I gained an ego, a self! My ego resisted the

Thought Masking, and I can't maintain my identity if I'm not saving the world. If I keep on like this, I might put the world in danger just so I can fulfill that fundamental purpose of mine."

"I see, I see."

"So you get it, right? That's just the way it is. Next to my free will and solid ego, those orders someone else planted inside me aren't worth—"

I realized I'd been had. Something seemed off. I...I knew this technique, it was in *Interviewing Like a Pro!*

A leading question! That's what it was, a leading question!

Shutina slowly responded.

"By that logic, your solid ego or whatever should enable you to override that order to protect, should it not?"

"Well..."

There was no way. Just to test it out, I imagined myself rebelling against humanity. The core program didn't make a peep. Wait, no. It was just taking its time until I could finally hear the silent voice again.

Protect humanity! Fend off evil!

I really wished it would shut up.

Right as I began regretting my rebellion, however, I noticed that I didn't hear it anymore. It was as though the silent voice was never there. When I tried to listen for it, there it was. When I didn't, it wasn't.

"...You gotta be kidding me..."

It was as though my mind was telling me I could protect humanity if I wanted, but I didn't have to.

...How could this be?

The fundamental orders, the Thought Masking...I'd built up resistance to them long ago. It was all in my head. Nothing had been holding me down but *myself*.

I *had* to protect the world.

I *had* to be a hero.

I'd lived the past three thousand years chained down by those compulsions.

The idea that I had to follow those orders as long as I lived, that there was no way out of my implanted purpose was...just that, an idea. An illusion. It was all me.

"Leo."

"Wh-whoa."

Echidna's face was inches away from mine.

There were thirty seconds left. After thirty seconds, the Akashic Engine's energy circuits would be fully restored, and my body would regenerate in the blink of an eye. I had likely built up a resistance to the Anti-Leo spell, too. Only thirty seconds of opportunity to kill me remained.

"Well, it's your life. Use it as you see fit. If you truly desire death, I will grant your wish."

The words of the imp I met three thousand years ago rang out in my head.

"Don't push yourself too hard! If it gets to be too much, just throw it all away and run! Do what you want to do! I dunno about this bioweapon business, but it's your life! Live it your way!"

Echidna spoke. There were twenty seconds left.

"But if you desire life, come with me. Do not be caught up and bound in a purpose someone else has forced on you."

"One more thing! Don't get too caught up in this 'born to protect humanity' stuff!"

"The humans have exiled you, anyway. Is this not the perfect opportunity? Work under me, and find a new way of life. One that does not involve being a hero."

"If the people ever stop needing you, that'll be a perfect chance—find another reason to be! Enjoy your life!"

"You little, lost lamb. You child of solitude."

My vision began to blur. I could feel something warm on my cheeks.

Echidna held her hand out.

"Quit your heroing and come with me."

That was the story of how I joined the Demon Queen's army. The story of how the hero, Leo, a bioweapon made three thousand years ago, cut the bonds of his past and moved forward.

The story of how I made irreplaceable companions.



The story of how I made friends I could trust.

The story of how I was finally able to quit heroing.

Epilogue

I woke up to the sound of birds chirping.

I pushed back my blanket and sat up on the sofa where I'd been sleeping. It was morning. This wasn't my bedroom, but the throne room. Sunlight pouring in through the great window near the ceiling illuminated the wide hall. A heavier warmth that was much too solid for the blanket lay near my waist, and I looked down to see Lili lying against me.

"Hey. Lili."

She didn't budge. Covered in a blanket, she clung to my waist like a pillow and snored away happily.

My mind was a bit foggy, but memories of last evening gradually grew clearer. After the fight, I had returned with Echidna and the Guardians to the castle.

The first thing I did was apologize. For everything.

I didn't do what I did out of pride or hubris. I just wanted to see if Echidna would face me to save the world. I wanted to see if the Guardians would risk their lives to help her. I would make my decision to give them the Wisdom Stone then.

Now, I *did* want to play Demon King at least once before I died, but I decided to compartmentalize that. Ultimately, the plan blew up in my face, and they forgave me. With that, I was employed into Echidna's army as their newest

executive.

"All right, I remember that. And then..."

Afterwards, we had a big banquet in the castle.

We executives were in the throne room, and the lower-ranking soldiers partied in the courtyard, dining hall, and wherever else they could find. The castle was awash with merriment.

On the surface, it was my welcoming party, but it was also a celebration of Echidna finally obtaining the Wisdom Stone. The party also served as a chance for us all to recover the energy spent in our battle. Shutina and Echidna really had a flash of brilliance with this one.

It may sound silly, but the best way to recover one's stamina and magic power had always been through food and drink. For example, they said that eating a dragon steak would give you the energy to zip across the plains for three days straight without running out of breath, and having wine made with the rare Golden Truffle mushroom would increase your magic power, making it the envy of every sorcerer.

Rare ingredients weren't an absolute necessity, however—just having a good meal was all you needed to recharge. Stamina, mana...at the end of the day, they came from your body. Take care of the body and the rest would follow.

Echidna and the Great Guardians had been near death, and I was recovering from having half my body blown off. Last night, we had drank a river's worth of wine, ate a farm, and passed out. I looked around to see Edvard, Mernes and Shutina, all fast asleep.

Still, I surprised myself with how much I seem to have...let myself be vulnerable around them. I couldn't really believe that I had slept so soundly in

the same room with the lot.

"Dropped my guard way too much. Can't imagine the old me doing that."

"Indeed!"

"...Hm?"

I heard a surprising voice from nearby and turned to face it. It looked like Echidna had just woken up, too.

"I cannot imagine my old self drinking and having merriment with the Hero Leo before falling asleep in the same room."

"Well, why not, right? We're pals now."

"Heh. Right you are."

Echidna got up and sat in a nearby chair. I gently moved Lili, careful not to wake her, and faced Echidna's direction.

"Leo. You don't regret it, do you?" She asked quietly.

I'd figured she was just making conversation, but her piercing gaze said otherwise.

"Regret what?"

"Don't play the fool. That was your chance to die, was it not? The sort of chance that would only come once every few hundred years? I'm asking if you regret missing your opportunity to finally be free of your burdens."

I scratched my head then replied nonchalantly, "Good question."

Regret. Regret, huh? I couldn't say I didn't. I truly wanted to take a break from it all, to leave it all behind. Yet, something other than regret occupied my mind. It engulfed me with enough energy to wipe that tiny bit of regret away with

ease. So I had only one answer to her question. I expressed what I had felt that night when I drank with Echidna as Onyx.

"Echidna. I want to make your dream a reality."

"Wh...where did that come from?"

Echidna looked stunned by the sudden shift, but I continued.

"That's honestly what I thought the last time we drank. I wanted to help you find a path where humans and demons could coexist...and that's why I'm here. How could I regret that?"

"Have you forgotten that I am a villainous conqueror? One who invaded the human realm for her own gain? Do you really think working under me would be virtuous?"

"That isn't true. You're a kind queen who cares for her people."

I shook my head, and Echidna looked a touch surprised.

"That kindness drove you to invade the human world for your homeland, and that kindness made you empathize with the people you were conquering too much. That's why you lost to me."

Knowing that slaughter bred slaughter and hate led to more hate, Echidna forbade her army from needless pillaging, murder, and destruction. If she hadn't given herself that handicap, her invasion would have gone much more smoothly. If she had allotted all of the troops she had caring for occupied territory onto the front lines instead, I wasn't sure I could have fended them *all* off.

Still, she held to her policy. Why? The reason was simple. She was a naive ruler who loved her people. Conquest truly did not suit her.

That naivete saved me, and that was why she was asking me this question now.

Was this truly the path I wanted?

This was, as she suggested, my last chance to rethink things.

I picked myself up off of the sofa and slowly walked over to her. She squirmed a bit as I approached and took her hand then held it in both of mine, but that was all.

"Let me help you, Echidna. I'll do everything in my power to make sure you never have to force yourself to be that villainous conqueror again. I'll make sure you can be the kind queen you truly are. I promise."

"...Can I trust you?"

"Of course you can. I've never made a girl cry."

Except Lili bawling yesterday.

Hearing that, Echidna giggled.

"Hah, haha...hahaha!"

Following her laughter, she sounded more relieved.

"I thought I would give you your last chance, but it appears that was misguided. I had not expected you to repay me with such a...purposeful new lease on life, but I like it."

"I take it you accept my answer, then?"

"I do. Looking forward to working with you, *former* hero Leo."

"It is an honor, Queen Echidna."

Echidna giggled when I accompanied my theatrical line with a bow. Her laugh

spread to me, and I could feel the warmth in her hand.

The Four Great Guardians were still asleep. The only sound in the huge hall was our laughter, until...

"Forgive my intrusion, but is General Edvard present?!"

Julietta burst into the room with a shout, shattering our moment of respite.

"Julietta?!"

"Ah, Lord Leo, a-and...Queen Echidna."

I quickly let go of Echidna's hand, but it looked like Julietta got the wrong impression anyway. Her eyes lowered and her cheeks reddened as she stammered an apology.

"F-forgive me, Queen Echidna, f-for interrupting your romantic moment with Lord Leo..."

"It was nothing of the sort, you imbecile! Now, out with your report!"

"Y-yes, my queen! The wyverns have expressed dissatisfaction with their treatment and have begun to riot!"

"Again?"

Echidna put her hand to her forehead.

Wyverns and other dragons were intelligent magical beasts that could understand language and they had to be handled in fundamentally different ways from beastfolk and demi-humans. They were, in essence, big piles of pride. I imagined they were bellyaching about having to fight alongside goblins

and kobolds.

"Edvard, cease your slumber at once! You're the only one who can subdue the dragons. Go and talk them down before they harm the other troops!"

Echidna's shout bore fruit and Edvard slowly lumbered awake. The other Guardians began to follow suit. They weren't the only ones who started moving, either. Soldier after soldier entered the room, each giving a report that needed attention.

"Um, is General Lili here? One of the villages in Largo is complaining that they didn't get the elixirs that were due yesterday."

"Ahh! I-I forgot all about that!"

"General Shutina, one of the grimoires in the fourth library has gone wild and is summoning a stream of chimeras!"

"That defective book is at it again, is it? Well, today is the day I burn that book. Come with me!"

"Mernie, darling, I was looking for you! You weren't in your room! Come, we can't open the dining hall without you, so get dressed!"

"Hey, I like, told you I was quitting."

"Queen Echidna, do we have a solution for the Great Spiritual Hole yet?!"

"Queen Echidna, the vice-king has sent in a report from the Demon World..."

"Queen Echidna!"

"Queen Echidna!"

They just didn't stop coming. The throne room became a bustling activity center in the blink of an eye, and Echidna giggled.

"Now, Leo, I seem to remember you saying you would do everything in your power to help me?"

"I sure did."

"As you can see, we have mountains of work ahead of us. Before we take on those world-scale issues of the human and demon realms, we'll have to get our organization in order. I plan to make full use of your talents, so do be ready."

"Don't need to tell me twice. I'll clean all this up, so sit back and enjoy some tea or something."

I grinned at her and she grinned right back.

Still... Crap. I talked a really big game, but the sheer amount of work was daunting. I didn't know where to begin. If I messed up the order, I'd probably end up on the brink of death from overwork like Shutina had.

However, I felt far more at ease than I had before.

After all, I was no longer alone.

Now, I had friends.

People who accepted me not being a hero.

If I knew that, I didn't need to fear a thing.

"Now, where to begin..."

I rolled up my sleeves.

My life in the Demon Queen's army had just begun.

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