I'm Quitting Heroing



Vol. 2

Part 1

Original Work: Quantum

Character Design: Hana Amano

KADOKAWA

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Maze-maker Canaan

Age: 105

Succubus

A succubus born and raised in the Demon World. Part dark elf, she boasts a great aptitude for dark-affinity magic. Easily identified by her long hair and skinny figure produced by repeated fasting rituals. Both characteristics are curse-maker requirements, not things she chose. The numerous harsh precepts and requirements of curse-making ensure that many abandon their training, but Canaan's enduring belief that her talents lie in curses led her to hone her craft so thoroughly that she rose to quasi-executive level in the Demon Queen's army. Her only true flaw is being prone to delusions.



CHARACTER



DH-06 Virgo

Age: 2 (Appears to be around 20)

Humanoid Bioweapon

One of the DH Series, the twelve bioweapons developed in 2060. His design concept is hyper-regeneration. In his view, if he does not die, he will not lose. He has the physical prowess to use his powers to their fullest extent, as well as a technique that spells instant death for his foes. His competitive nature and excessive desire for greater challenges was implanted in him early on to prevent mental breakdown and morale loss from a style of combat that always puts him in harm's way. He loves fighting games as a hobby, but his habit of always charging in and never guarding makes him the weakest player among the DH Series.




“All right, we’ve got a nice variety of weapons here. I’ll teach you how to beat wyverns easy, as a bonus!”
Hero Class: How to Cook Slay a Dragon

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I'm Quitting Heroing Vol. 2

Original Work : Quantum

Character Design : Hana Amano

Translation : Lapin, Inc.

English Edition Design : tomohiro masuda(AFTERGLOW)

First digital edition issued March 31, 2022

ver.001

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First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo under the title "YUSHA,YAMEMASU - NEXT WORKPLACE IS SATAN'S CASTLE-Vol.2".

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2-13-3 Fujimi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-8177, Japan

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Prologue

Where the hell am I?

I woke up feeling really strange. Like I'd been dreaming for time eternal or like I'd blinkered out for just a second.

The only thing I knew for sure was my body was gone. That, and my core was alive. And I was in some strange underground room. But most pressing of all...

"Hm, what...is this? A jewel? No, an orb?"

I was being hugged by some lady, in all of my core glory.

She had these thin, bony hands and wore a black robe. Long, wavy, black hair covered one eye, and both eyes flitted wildly back and forth, betraying a lack of calm.

What shitty luck. Not the first person I wanted to see when I woke up.

Hey. Lady. Hey! Can you hear me?!

I tried to call out to her, but no answer came.

"I-is this mine? I don't think I got this from Master, no..."

Maybe if you'd listen *to my voice, you'd get an explanation!*

Well, damn. I was right there in her hand but she couldn't hear me. What's worse, I wasn't in tip top condition. I'd started to get a bad feeling about it when I realized I was just a core; I couldn't even do something as basic as regenerating the body I'd lost. That meant I was more than a little stuck.

Maybe my power will come back with time?

And I sure as hell hoped it did. I didn't want to be this lady's pet for the rest of my existence. Yet as I fumed, she hung her head and began to cough, none the wiser.

"Gah...dammit!" As she coughed, a streak of blood spilled from the corner of her mouth. She put me on a nearby desk, then wiped the blood while noisily grinding her teeth. "That accursed Hero, Leo! To think that I'd have to suffer the pity of that maggot!"

She slammed her fist against the desk again and again, making my vision bounce each time.

"I can't just go back to the Demon World like this! I couldn't look Master or Her Majesty in the eyes!"

Another round of violent coughing followed, accompanied by blood. I finally noticed just how wounded the lady was. She wasn't on death's door, but her life force had clearly dwindled. And me? I specialized in healing spells.

I wasn't just a mere healer; I was a professional when it came to the manipulation of life. When you got to my level, you could see how alive a body was just by the life-waves it put off.

I focused my senses and probed her body with them to quickly find what I was after. Underneath that black robe, her malnourished figure held countless new cuts and burns.

Now this is some work.

I winced, despite not even having eyebrows to wince with.

No, I wasn't surprised at how deep her wounds were. Quite the opposite. Most of them had clearly been dealt with the intention of keeping her alive. Her

opponent wanted to sap her will to fight, but not actually kill her. Their complete evasion of her vitals was nothing short of a work of art.

The wounds spoke of an overwhelming difference in skill. No matter how many hundreds or thousands of times she fought this foe, she would lose. Hell, I could just see this mystery opponent saying they'd let her go, let her off, time and time again. And if she was going after them ready to win or die, I could think of nothing more humiliating.

Hm?

The strangeness of what I was looking at struck me while I stared at what seemed to be a burn from an attack spell. For some reason, the magic wavelength I sensed from it seemed...impossibly familiar. I checked again to make sure, but there was no mistaking it. I remembered this mana.

"It's always been like this. Ever since King Belial's invasion three thousand years ago, the hero has always gotten in our way. I have to kill him now. I have to wipe Leo out before he can train a disciple!"

More violent coughing.

Wait. You gotta be kidding me. How many years ago?

I couldn't believe it. That "invasion" she spoke about had to mean the fight against Belial, during which I was born. The year 2060, when the Demon King burst into the human world through an open gate in the Himalayas. The Demon World possessed a magic completely different from our science, pushing humanity to the brink and leaving half of Earth under demon control in the blink of an eye.

Then humanity changed its approach. Instead of fighting magic with science, they would *take advantage* of magic. Indeed, by combining the two methods,

they created the ultimate weapon. Humanoid bioweapons, to be exact. And I was one of them.

There were twelve of us, but...that wasn't important. What *was* important was how much time had passed.

Seriously? Three thousand years? So does that mean...she's from a modern demon army? And if the hero's getting in her way, that means humans still rule the surface. And this "Hero Leo" guy's been protecting—

Wait a second. Leo? Hero Leo? Now *that* name I had heard before. Of course. One of the other bioweapons made alongside me was named Leo. Well, code-named, but the fact stood. We each had our special abilities. For example, the British-made Aquarius specialized in ice magic, while I was a master of healing...that kind of thing.

Leo, his thing was hyper self-development. He'd take any enemy's abilities—or an ally's, it was all the same—break them down, analyze them, and emulate his own version as closely as possible. He was a fully automatic copycat weapon.

He was weak as could be at first, but he gained potency as he battled with Belial's underlings. When the final battle came knocking, he was as strong as me and our other brothers, if not stronger.

If the "Leo" this lady spoke of was actually my brother and he'd managed to live these three thousand years...well, what then? Leo was as square as they came. I bet he'd kept on protecting humanity long after Belial went under. He must have gotten through countless fights.

Hyper self-development. The more he fought, the stronger he got. He had to be incredibly powerful by this point. As mighty as a Demon King. Maybe even

much, much stronger.

Man, I wanna fight him.

I felt the urge to smile. I wanted to take him on. Wanted to see how much my powers could measure up to his. The desire bubbled up inside me.

I'd always enjoyed seeing him grow. I even made him promise to fight me when he got stronger. But us brothers? Fighting? That could never happen. Especially not if Leo was still protecting humanity up there. If I was back in one piece and operating normally, I'd go up and help him to protect the peace, not fight him. *If* I was operating normally.

We humanoid bioweapons of the Demonhart Series had incredible power sources called Akashic Engines built into us. A melding of magic and science, they drew nearly unlimited power from the space described by imaginary numbers. It wasn't too hard to guess mine must have worked in synergy with my regeneration abilities to keep me alive this long.

Still, I'd just been a core with no body for three thousand years.

Perhaps my engine was broken. There was no guarantee I'd be alive tomorrow. Hell, there was no guarantee I'd be alive in the next *moment*. Maybe my Akashic Engine would collapse on itself and die, taking me with it. And that would mean I'd never be able to fight Leo.

I couldn't have that.

I want to fight him. Just once before I die, I want to fight the stronger Leo!

My life was my own. I would decide when it burned out. That was how I looked at things when I still had a body. I'd never wanted to die with regrets.

So I made my choice. Before this core died, I would fight Leo, one way or another. No matter what I had to do. No matter what it took.

Still, I've got a problem. How am I going to fight with no body?

Getting my hands on one was my first task. Luckily, even as a core, I could still use some magic. This opened up a few options.

The first and fastest option was taking over someone else's body with magic. Easier said than done. It would be near-impossible if they weren't close to me mentally and in terms of magic wavelengths. Was there anyone around who wanted to fight Leo and needed a bunch of my magic power?

"There has to be a way. There has to be some kind of way!"

The lady seemed to be lost in thought, too. She raised her wounded body out of her chair and walked over to the bookshelf by the wall. Then she began sifting through grimoires at random, looking through them in their entirety before casting them aside.

"I'll use a forbidden spell that pares down my life. I don't care. I need to come through for Master! For Her Majesty!"

Books fell to the ground, one after another. Her body was well past its limit, but an iron will apparently kept her going. This "Master" and "Her Majesty" had to be really significant to her. The energy coming from her told me she was willing to die tomorrow if only she could take Leo down with her.

So she lost to Leo, huh?

If I had a body, the look on my face would have probably earned me a solid punch.

She can't go crawling back to the Demon World, so she wants to somehow get a rematch with Leo. ...Pff! Ahahaha, gahahaha!

There we go! Suddenly I regretted having such a negative first impression of her. She was just too useful.

Hey! Lady!

I spoke to her, knowing full well she couldn't hear me.

You know what, I like you. Let me, Virgo, heal those wounds!

"Huh?"

My core emitted a dim, golden light which quickly encompassed her. It was Cure Light: a basic spell for healing wounds.

It shouldn't be looked at lightly just for being a basic spell, though. My ability was hyper-regeneration, and I could make even the most basic spell advanced.

"Wh-what's going on?!"

While she was staggering back and forth in confusion, her wounds were all abruptly closing up.

"Incredible! Is...is this a healing orb?"

Heh, healing wasn't all I did, simpleton! You also got a lot of bonuses on your plate!

I threw in a Life Booster to increase her stamina and a Mana Converter to convert stamina into mana, and that was just the beginning. She now had more than ten buff spells working to make her magic power and physical abilities at least double what they were before.

She had enough physical and mental energy now to go for three days and nights without sleeping, and magic power that made her previous capacity look like a child's.

All right, lady, you've got Virgo's backing! Use that power to take Leo down!

"This...this power! With this strength, even I can defeat Leo! No...no, I *will* defeat him. Absolutely and completely!"

Her eyes burned with determination. Determination and an overwhelming desire to annihilate Leo.

That's what I wanted to see! That determination, that murderous intent!

The more I encouraged her, the more I poured my power into hers, the more her magic wavelength attuned to mine. Right now, what I needed was a container. One with a mind like mine and a wavelength like mine. It may take a week, it may take a month, but with time, she would become my perfect vessel.

Go ahead, use that power! We share a fate now!

She chuckled to herself.

"J-just you wait, Leo! Just you wait!" She snatched me up and howled at the ceiling. "I, Curse-maker Canaan, greatest disciple of Sage Shutina, will finally take your life!"



Three thousand years had passed and I found myself in the far future, in some

tiny dungeon in a forgotten corner of the world.

That was where Curse-maker Canaan and I, DH-06 Virgo, began our strange life together.

Chapter 1: The Dungeon Visit

1 — Hero Dragged to the Dungeon

On that afternoon, I, the new executive of the Demon Queen's army and former hero Leo, was paying a visit to my coworker, Sorcerer General Shutina, in her room. She'd summoned for me.

"Hmm. What to do, what to do..."

"Hey, Shutina. I'm here. What'd you want?"

"Oh, Leo. You didn't waste any time. Thank you for that."

When I opened the door to her office my first sight was the Sorcerer General, groaning with a frown on her face.

Sorcerer General Shutina. A top-class sorcerer in the Demon World, one of the dark army's Four Great Guardians, and Demon Queen Echidna's brilliant right arm. Her talent aside, Shutina's beauty had won her much acclaim with the regular troops. At the moment, however, her attire suggested none of that power or talent.

In one hand, a pen. In the other, a document. Beside her, an immense mountain of papers. Ink splotches covered her glasses and sullied her well-kept nails. Her pale arms were hidden under brown protective sleeves for office work, suffocating their sex appeal. I won't mince words: she looked dumpy. The receptionist at an adventurers' guild in a podunk village would put together a

more fashionable ensemble than her.

Shutina heaved her dumpy self out of her own chair and forcefully sat me down with a bit too much gusto.

"Sit tight for a moment, I'll make us some tea."

"You don't need to. I know how busy you are getting ready for the Demon World trip."

"Well, that's a boat you and I are both stuck in. Anyway, go ahead and relax."

It had been two days since Demon Queen Echidna announced we'd be heading back to the Demon World. The entire reason she'd come to the human world was to obtain the Wisdom Stone. It was said to be able to grant any wish and would surely bring light to the wasteland of the Demon World. That was her intention when she opened the Great Spiritual Hole, the passage between worlds, and came to take it by force.

The Wisdom Stone happened to be the core of the DH Series, bioweapons made three thousand years ago. Its true name was the Akashic Engine. And although Echidna didn't manage to get one, she had me, the only remaining DH Series member, enlist in her army.

With that, two titans joined forces: humanity's hero and demonkind's queen. We were to work together to bring peace between worlds, to ensure our shared prosperity. As the first step down that path, we had to reorganize the Demon World. And to do *that*, we had to return to it.

Echidna, however, added a condition. She would only return to the Demon World with the Four Guardians and myself, leaving the castle and army intact.

"I wish for our worlds, human and demon, to coexist. Since I struck against

the human world to pilfer what I believe to be the sole Wisdom Stone, I will have to make amends for that aggression. When the time for that comes, this castle will be a diplomatic linchpin, so I cannot let it go to waste. Nor can I let go the army that protects it." That's what Echidna had to say about the matter. She wanted to preserve the castle for the eventual peace with the humans, incredible maintenance costs aside. Naive, yes, but it suited her.

She had a point, though. The Demon World was far more barren than the human one, and bringing in resources unique to the human world would make life over there far more abundant for its denizens. And if the humans entered an official peace with demonkind it would free them from the anxiety of a possible invasion. So Echidna was onto something.

"Still," I began, sipping the chamomile tea Shutina had made, "if all the Guardians head back to the Demon World, are things really going to be all right here? What about the off-chance that there's trouble with the humans?"

"We won't need to worry about that. Julietta will be in charge. She takes after her father and is quite handy with a sword. That, and..."

"She doesn't take after her father in that she's actually considerate, right?"

"Correct."

"Hahaha! Well, we can leave it with her, then."

Edvard of the Great Guardians was dragonfolk and had far greater magic power than your average human. He probably had more than a lower-level devil, even. And his physical abilities were world class.

Being his daughter, Julietta inherited his sword skill and charisma. Rather than depending on her natural strength as dragonfolk, she put effort into all that she did, rising through the ranks to become Edvard's second-in-command.

Considering how much she'd earned the trust of her underlings, she was an easy choice to watch the castle while we were out.

"Besides, we can simply pass through the Great Spiritual Hole if we ever need to return. And humans hardly ever approach the castle, so we needn't worry."

"Yeah, true Hell, I'd never want to attack this castle if it were up to me. Wouldn't even want to scout it out."

Shutina took a glance out the window. The scenery was equal parts beautiful and cold. Snow decorated the rocky faces of the mountains outside, which were dotted with trees. The cliffs and peaks around the castle turned the entire area into a natural fortress.

The Demon Queen's castle had been built in the Seshat Mountains, located in the middle of an exceptionally massive mountain range of the human world. Using flight magic as a mage to get there was hard enough. To march the distance would be hell.

"They say a battle is won before it is fought and all lies in the preparation. We did good to build this castle so deep in the mountains," Shutina stated, and finally came over and sat across from me.

I'd wondered what she was fiddling with by the windowsill and it turned out to be some relaxing incense. As the white smoke wafted up, the fresh scent of cedar wood tickled my nose.

"All right, let's get to it. What did you need?"

"I wanted you to join me in a dungeon crawl."

"A what now?"

"Mapping."

Shutina snapped her fingers and a transparent map appeared in midair. To use a nostalgic word from the scientific age of years past, it was a hologram. But to be more specific, it wasn't a map, but a blueprint of part of the castle.

"That's...the floor right under this room, right?"

"Correct, the living quarters of the quasi-executives, those second only to the Great Guardians."

The quasi-executives were essentially the behind-the-scenes heavy lifters of the dark army. There weren't too many left since I beat them back to their homes, but their numbers were many in the early stages of the invasion. For example, Sagaz the Unpredictable, a runic fencer able to imbue his weapons with spells. Or Octurn the Downpour, an archer able to rain down innumerable arrows from unexpected angles. Or Linus of the Abyss, a summoner able to conjure up beasts of the Demon World.

Every one of them was the toughest of the tough, hand-picked by Echidna or Shutina, one of the Guardians, themselves. I had a really hard time tussling with them when I was still at war with the army. And Shutina was showing me a blueprint of the floor these powerhouses lived on. With most of its denizens away from the castle, it *should* have been little more than a glorified storehouse.

"Do you remember a curse-maker named Canaan? She's a disciple of mine you've exchanged blows with."

"Canaan? What was she like again?"

"Well, you know...she has that long, black hair that always covers one eye, and she mumbles..."

"Oh...oh, yeah, I remember her! She was the dungeon master, right? The one

in charge of Siculus?"

"Right, that Canaan."

I remembered Shutina's disciple well. After defeating Edvard and Mernes, I stopped by the town of Siculus only to find a massive dungeon underneath it, controlled by Canaan.

She was a succubus, much like Shutina. However, as Shutina reminded me, her appearance and demeanor were not going to stir a man's passions. She was also gloomier than Mernes, and seemed worse at dealing with people than him, too.

"Right, right, her. I seem to recall her saying something about being your disciple. And yeah, she was a first-rate sorcerer."

"Indeed. Her skill as a curse-maker may be above mine, as is her dungeon-making ability."

Yeah, she really was talented when it came to creating dungeons. See, if all you wanted to do was "make" a dungeon, anyone could do it. You could borrow the power of the earthen spirit, Gnome, to make a tunnel, or you could use the power of Shade or Diabolos to create a closed-off dark space on the surface. Or, you could make a small labyrinth that dulls its victims' senses of time and direction...that would easily count as a dungeon, as well. But if you wanted to make a dungeon that would be a vault for storing valuable treasure or a fortress for effectively dispatching foes, then things were different.

You couldn't adequately defend a large dungeon alone and you couldn't keep a mercenary group on rotation. That meant you needed some form of automatic defenses. In other words, traps. The question was, how vile could you make those traps? That was where your skill came in. Your aesthetics. And

when it came to that, Canaan was absolutely awful. Which meant she was *excellent.* Her forte? Geas spells, spells of control.

"The dungeon under Siculus, now that was a rough time. I don't know how much this means coming from me, but it's really not something you want to take on alone."

"I suppose she had rooms with various magic restrictions and whatnot?"

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe! Like, a room where you can't draw your sword, or a room where you can't get out unless you meditate for fifteen minutes in poison gas, or one where the whole room explodes if you use fire spells...man. Can you imagine what that last room was like?"

"I'm afraid I cannot. Although I can imagine it was pretty bad."

"It was this huge maze. Visibility was so awful you couldn't tell where the enemies were, and there were these hidden doors everywhere that magical beasts and homunculi that were really good with fire spells popped out of regularly."

"I see."

"The moment they saw me they'd start chanting their spell. It would be like, two or three seconds before the spell went off? And if I didn't take out the enemy during that time, the gas filling the room would ignite and we'd go sky-high. There were like, two hundred of those rooms."

Shutina fell silent.

"Did she like tearing off butterfly wings as a kid or something?"

Shutina said nothing and simply clutched her head in frustration.

That was, of course, why curse-makers made excellent dungeon makers. Spell

tags, magical minerals, otter heads...the catalyst didn't matter, only that you could cast a curse on it and put it in the room. Then, the curse would ward off invaders and you didn't have to do anything. The cost-effectiveness was massive, and because of that, you could make more rooms, which made the dungeon even harder. That was the scary part.

Curses weren't omnipotent, though. Stronger foes would resist them. Hell, if I were up against a third-rate curse-maker, I could resist their geas without even thinking about it and leisurely stroll all the way to the dungeon core.

But a disciple of Shutina? It wasn't going to be so easy. Even if I resisted nine out of ten curses, there was still one that got through. And that made Siculus a rough time. That was all in the past, though. I had found Canaan at the bottom of the dungeon, beat her senseless, sent her back to the Demon World, and made sure to destroy the labyrinth while I was at it. It was off the map. What was more, Canaan and I were on the same side now. I never had to suffer another one of her dungeons again.

I gave Shutina, who was still cradling her head, a poke and urged her to continue with her story.

"So, what about Canaan?"

"I lent her a grimoire, the Book of Dimensions. I'd like to use it to stabilize the Great Spiritual Hole."

The hole she spoke of was the only gate between the demon and human worlds. It had been unstable as of late. Rather than its true blue 100%, it would be 90% one day and 75% the next. The ups and downs were violent. Which wasn't to say that it hadn't improved. Just a while ago it was mere days away from permanently closing, so it had seen dramatic improvement.

"Your efforts to stabilize the gate have not gone unnoticed. It has been in a much better place over the past few weeks, and we no longer need to worry about it suddenly closing on us."

"Well, yeah. I made a mana condenser out of orichalcum. Do you know how hard that stuff is to find? I'd riot if it *didn't* keep the gate open."

"Do you know why it became unstable in the first place?"

"Beats me. All I did was treat the symptoms. I'll check the entrance on the other side when we get to the Demon World and find the source. Until then, we've got to keep up with maintenance."

"I know that! That's why we need the Book of Dimensions. We need to get more people on the maintenance crew."

"Oh, I see. You're not going to read it, but your people are."

"Correct. I've committed the entirety of the tome to memory already."

The Great Spiritual Hole was open in both human and demon worlds and required a constant stream of magic power from both sides. Without that power it would fade, and opening it again would take an immense amount of time.

Shutina and I were leading the maintenance team on the human world and had them working in shifts to supply mana to the gate. This system would break down, however, when we went to the Demon World. Looking ahead, I figured Shutina wanted to have her subordinates read the Book of Dimensions so they could operate the gate more easily on their own.

"Coming up with manuals for jobs and setting up systems that can work without you being around...well, damn, Shutina! You sure have grown!"

"Hmph! Only because you suggested it."

A look of thinly veiled annoyance accompanied her gratitude.

"I've been putting your advice to use at work, so...I suppose I should actually thank you. So thank you."

"That's it? I don't get a thank-you kiss?"

"Ghh! Obviously not!"

"All right, all right, I was just kidding. Sorry. ...Anyway, let's get to the point."

I consoled the red-cheeked and fuming Shutina. For a succubus, she sure was green when it came to...anything dealing with seduction.

"The point is, I went to Canaan's room this morning to get back the Book of Dimensions."

"Right. You went to Canaan's room."

"I went to Canaan's room."

"And?"

"Well. It was a..."

Her voice rose to the pitch of a mosquito's whine.

"It was a...dungeon."

"Come again?"

Shutina picked up a small wand and pointed it at the Mapping image of the blueprint then gave it a flick. The image switched from a flat blueprint to a three-dimensional one, viewed from the side.

"This is Canaan's room. The door to the bedroom is now a warp gate to a dungeon."

Shutina placed the tip of her wand on the spot in question and a glowing light

appeared. Then she proceeded to draw a massive rectangle next to the room using that light, just like an old-fashioned tablet pen.

"By my estimate, her dungeon is about...this size," she continued to expand the rectangle. "Or maybe a bit more? Maybe about this much?"

According to the blueprint, the rectangle's dimensions were rapidly approaching the height of the castle itself. In fact, they might have already surpassed it.

Wait, how big is *this dungeon?!*

"Phew. About this size, I'd say. She's used a warp gate to connect her room to a dungeon somewhere in the human world that has about thirty floors."

"Come again?! Th-thirty?!" I reflexively blurted out. There was just no way! "You gotta be kidding me, that's bigger than the Labyrinth of Siculus!"

"And that is why I called you here. I wouldn't be able to get through it by myself."

The Labyrinth of Siculus, nasty dungeon that it was, had only fifteen floors. Canaan had put everything she had into making that dungeon—or should I say deathtrap. No, that was an automated slaughter machine with no chance of survival. That piece of work was definitely one of my top three worst dungeons. And Shutina was telling me this one was *thirty* floors? *Twice* the hell?

Who would dare venture into that? Seriously, who? I immediately turned around and started heading for the door.

"Wait! Where are you going?!"

"Back to bed. Sorry."

"As if I would let you!"

She began to chant.

"Listen and obey. You will lose your way to the hand luring you to indulge. ...Ville Allure Attract! Temptation!"

"Like that'd work."

Shutina unleashed a Temptation spell with a full chant behind it. It was easy to forget, since talented casters like Echidna and myself often used spells without chanting, but chants were *generally* essential. They both increased the power of the spell and decreased the chance it would be resisted.

This was a case-by-case kind of thing, though. Some spells, you could fire freely without chants. Others, when you *really* needed them to succeed, you'd want to chant. Take the Anti-Leo spell engineered specifically to seal away all of my abilities and actions, for instance. That was the classic sort of spell you wanted to chant on.

Shutina was no rookie mage. She knew exactly what she was doing when she chanted this one, and wanted it to work. Still, I scoffed at this. Like Temptation would ever work on me. And yet, my legs began to move. They staggered towards Shutina then knelt before her like a loyal knight.

"Lady Shutina, I shall gladly accompany you on your venture through the dungeon."

"My. Thank you, Leo."

With a beautiful smile, Shutina stroked my cheek.

Wait, what? It's working*?! Her Temptation spell actually worked?! Why?!*

Even if it was a fully-chanted spell from Shutina, I of all people should've been able to resist Temptation with ease! There had to be foul play at work here! I desperately glanced around the room, and two things stood out to me. The

half-finished cup of steaming chamomile tea I'd left on the table and the incense by the window.

"Wait...the tea, the incense, you..."

"Correct."

Shutina pleasantly nodded with a smile that made me want to scream.

"Both greatly reduce the target's resistance to charm effects. It's a traditional succubus recipe for taking that special somebody, so I figured even you wouldn't be able to easily resist it."

"Oh, you *asshole*!"

While I fumed with indignation, Shutina leaned over and whispered sweetly into my ear as though we were lovers.

"I simply wouldn't feel...safe, going in alone."

"Guh."

"I am just a weak little sorceress, after all. I can't fight anything up close, and there's so many scary monsters in that dungeon. It has me truly...worried."

Her sweet breath tickled my ear and caressed the nape of my neck. That billowy, warm softness that kept pressing until it enveloped my upper arm turned out to be her cleavage.

Dammit! This would be great if it wasn't the precursor to a dungeon!

"So, Leo...you'll come with me, right?"

"Urgh...guh..."

This was *absolutely terrible*. The more appealing the caster of Temptation was, the stronger the spell became. Every time Shutina pushed her soft body

against mine, the charm effect increased exponentially. In spite of that, I drew on all the strength I could muster to shake my head.

"N-no... Hell no. I'm never going into one of her dungeons again."

"My, how wonderful! I knew you would help me, Leo. Thank you."

"Were you even listening?! I said I wasn't going!"

"Now then, let's be off. Together, you and I will conquer this dungeon!"

"Quit it! Hands off!"

Shutina was too pleased with the success of her plan to hear my protests and hummed pleasantly to herself as she dragged me out of her office and down the nearby staircase. The trip was so short I had no hope of escape. Canaan's room waited just below.

"Why...why'd it turn out like this?"

Why did I have to take on a dark army dungeon...after joining the dark army?

2 — Onward, to the Temptation Trap Dungeon

"Please don't look, Leo. Not on your life."

"I know."

"Even a peep and I'll incinerate your eyeballs!"

"I said I know! Yeesh, is your clothes turning invisible really something to get so worked up about?"

"It is! It absolutely is!"

We were on the seventh floor of the...let's call it the dark castle dungeon. Shutina and I were stuck in one of the trap rooms. This particular one made your clothes invisible. And no, I wasn't kidding. This room most definitely made your clothes invisible. To be more exact, it was a room where you had to defeat a hundred of these giant caterpillars called crawlers in order to get out. The disappearing clothes stuff was more of a bonus, but with how much Shutina was acting up, you'd think that was the main course.

"E-Earth Spike!"

"Hey, we're underground, so could you take it easy with the earth spells? You don't want the passages collapsing on us."

"I told you not to look my way! I told you!"

"Crap, we've got more company! Look out!"

"Eep! Ahh! Wh-White Mist! White Miiiist!"

"Gahh! Don't use fog spells in a cramped room!"

Shutina was screaming and had completely lost her cool. Worse, the spells she fired off in a panic just got in my way. Was she really a succubus? I gave my

pitiable partner a suspicious glance while bisecting a charging crawler, then looked up.

"Gotta hand it to Canaan, she did a really good job designing this place up. Even you and I would have trouble making a dungeon like this from the ground up, huh Shutina?"

Shutina just screamed. It didn't seem like she was listening. I elected to not expect anything out of her in this room. Back to the view above. There was a massive prism crystal hanging from a rope like a fancy chandelier. It had proudly caused Shutina's panic.

The mechanism was simple. If you shot a spell at the prism crystal, the jewel would absorb the mana and break it down, then emit a light in the room that made your clothes invisible. That was it.

You might think this a ridiculous trick. Well, don't worry. So did I. And I'm sure Shutina did, too. But thanks to said stupid trick, Shutina and I were fighting in our underwear. Or at least, we appeared to be. Obviously, it was just a matter of appearance. Our clothes would return if we left the room, and we hadn't suffered any physical damage...although the occasional translucent flickering of our final fortress, our skivvies, wasn't exactly heartening.



It was a small room. Trying to keep Shutina completely out of my sight while

fighting was an impossibility. For example, I just stepped back to prepare a spell and that happened to put me behind her. A very tame set of matching light-blue and white underwear came into view. The dim rainbow light surrounding her made them waiver like a mirage and occasionally flicker into transparency. Strategically placed decorative frill with silver-threaded accents did an exquisite job of calling one's attention to the soft curves of her breasts and backside, which led me to believe the garments were custom made by a talented tailor. Whoever they were, they'd done a good job.

"Are you quite done staring?!"

"What am I supposed to do?! You're the one who won't dispel the charm spell! This would be way easier without it, so call it off already!"

"Absolutely not. The second I drop that charm, you'll be dashing out the door."

"An excellent deduction."

"An admission! No dispelling for you!"

"Then I'll be staring at your naked body as much as I want."

"A worse admission! No staring for you, either!"

"Dammit! Thunder Pillar!"

A triangle of lights appeared on the ground at my command. When a crawler stepped into their center, I unleashed my magic power.

"Release!"

With a vicious crackle, a pillar of lightning blasted up from the triangle and made instant ash of the giant bug. The lightning lost none of its force and roared up to the prism crystal. Thunder Pillar may have been a mid-level spell,

and its manual detonation made it difficult to get clean hits with, but it had enough power to rival the Plasma Storms and Obsidian Cages Shutina used to fire off. I'd tossed it out as a test, to see if I could take out the crawler and crystal in one go, but...

"Ah. Damn."

I caught a glimpse of the prism crystal as the enveloping lightning discharged its electricity, and the crystal remained mostly unharmed. Sure, it had taken damage, but nothing destruction level.

"Sorry, Shutina, I got nothin'. Can't take it down. No sir."

"What do you mean, you got nothing?!"

After absorbing the energy from my Thunder Pillar, the prism crystal fired out its stripping beam again. Shutina's robe, which had barely retained a faint outline until then, completely disappeared. Her undershirt went with it. She was in nothing but her underwear, and that was threatening to vanish too.

What a sight to see! Thank you, Canaan! I'll only thank you for this!

"Ahh, you've *got* to be kidding me!"

"Guess I'd better take out those crawlers, fast!"

You probably already knew this, but prism crystals didn't normally have such...lewd effects. As the name suggested, a prism crystal was a gem that reflected light into a beautiful, rainbow-like pattern. They were popular as magic catalysts and decorations, and were otherwise normal gems that you'd find anywhere. Which meant that Canaan must have had a hand in this. She likely tweaked the crystal so that it would absorb spells targeted at it and use the energy to unleash a field with the effects of an Invisibility spell on the room. By making the Invisibility spell only target clothes, she made it harder to resist

for higher level sorcerers like the two of us. Furthermore, by removing any possibility of physical damage, she greatly increased the duration of the effect. And judging from how the crystal survived my Thunder Pillar, it was likely spending some of its absorbed mana on a Regeneration spell. A really strong one, at that.

"Wait a second, this is a ridiculously complex contraption! Was Canaan always this good? We're talking about item creation, enchantment, spell customization, layers upon layers...where'd she pick this up?!"

"What are you grumbling about?! Just keep fighting! Please! Fight them! Oh...Disguise! Disguiiise!"

"I told you, that's not gonna work!"

At first, I figured that I could cast Disguise or Metamorphose to counteract the crystal's effect, but my attempt failed. The second I cast the spell, one of many Dispel-loaded spell tags hidden in the room activated, immediately erasing my conjured clothes. Canaan had really put some thought into this. We couldn't conjure clothes, and we couldn't destroy the crystal.

That meant we had to kill all the crawlers. But they only popped out in small numbers from tunnels in the corners of the room, so it sure took us a while.

Canaan, just how much wasted effort did you put into this one trap?! If you had time to make this stupid room, you could have done so much else instead! Like a more lethal trap, or a more fatal geas, or something!

Since I was such a stand-up guy, I sliced through the crawlers while ranting at Canaan in my thoughts, but Shutina did absolutely nothing. She remained huddled in the corner, screaming, while attempting to cover herself with her arms...with little success. It looked like this lewd trap was incredibly effective on

her.

"Shutinaaaa! I've always wanted to say this, but you're a succubus, right?! Aren't you guys used to being naked around men?!"

"Not me! I'm nothing like those bawdy ladies! I'm a succubus of decorum and discretion!"

A crawler screeched and came at me.

"Hey, can't you see we're trying to hold a conversation?!" I yelled, jumping to the side to dodge it. I placed my hand to the ground and cast a spell. "Frost Nova!"

A small storm of ice raged around me, freezing the surrounding crawlers and killing them instantly. Normally Frost Nova wasn't used as an attack spell. You might use it to slow down your foes or give them a bit of frostbite. The spell was basic, but when powered by the Wisdom Stone it obviously became lethal. Even the lowest-level spells could kill, coming from a high-level caster. Then again, the crawlers were probably too weak, but I decided not to think about that.

"Is that...all of them?"

"I truly hope it is."

As if to answer Shutina's prayers, the stone floor opened to reveal stairs leading to the next floor. Finally. We could finally get out of this ridiculous room.

"Hurry, Leo, hurry! Go down the stairs!"

"All right, already! Quit pushing!"

She eagerly shoved me from behind as I walked down the stone steps. One step, two steps, three steps...about halfway down the staircase we traveled out

of reach of that perverted light and our clothes returned. Shutina's hands were still on my shoulders as she collapsed against me with a deep sigh of exhaustion.

"What in the world *is* this dungeon? Who would make such a twisted place?"

"Your disciple, apparently."

Curse-maker Canaan.

Also known as Maze-maker Canaan.

A master of item crafting and maze construction, the Labyrinth of Siculus wasn't her only creation. Most of the fiercest, most insidious fortresses under the Demon Queen's army were made by her hand.

She would enchant a variety of items with the curses which were her specialty and activate them in cramped dungeon rooms where victims could not escape. It was a difficult setup to counter, and a solid strategy. I knew her reputation well and was ready for all sorts of horrific traps in this labyrinth, and yet...they disappointed. That last one made our clothes invisible. Earlier, we had to win a game of rock-paper-scissors, but losing meant we had to strip off an item of clothing. Other trap rooms were too painfully stupid and embarrassing to even describe out loud.

Still, the traps had immense effect on Shutina, prone to embarrassment as she was. The barrage of lewd contrivances had her on the verge of tears.

"Hey, how about we just do things my way, like I said earlier? Instead of playing her game, we break through the walls and floors and slide straight down to the core."

"I told you, we're not doing that."

I tried to give her a lifeboat, but she refused it without compromise.

Destroying the dungeon seemed to run afoul of her principles, so she kept activating the traps instead. That prism crystal earlier was a good example. I told her it looked suspicious, but before I could finish advising her not to cast any spells, she'd already launched a fireball at it.

"Canaan is my disciple, and she put her soul into this dungeon. It would be way too cruel to simply destroy her hard work. I have to see each trap, test out the mechanics, and give her a final grade."

"I...I see. Very sorry for the suggestion, then."

This was where Shutina's ability to instantly cast spells worked against us. If she'd at least take the time to chant, I could stop her, but when it happened in the blink of an eye? I had nothing.

"Still, it seems really strange to me."

"What does?"

Shutina questioned my complaint while refreshing the light spell guiding our way.

"This dungeon. It doesn't feel...unfair enough."

"Unfair?"

"Yeah. It's stupid, but it's not the kind of stupid that makes you want to quit from how unfair it is."

"Is...is that so?"

She pondered my observation a moment, then shuddered and covered her body with both arms as if remembering the prism crystal.

"Oh no, I would say this dungeon is plenty unfair! Think of that clothing-erasing light! How is that fair, in any way?! Pure malice, I tell you!"

"Yeah, but it's just a mean trick, right? Sure, there's malice there, but that's it. It wasn't going to kill us, or anything. The trap was too easy."

"Well...you do have a point there."

"That's what I'm saying. Think about it, dungeons are meant to confuse invaders, to lead them to their doom! To take them out! Siculus was out for my life, but this place? No way."

My explanation seemed to have brought Shutina out of that quagmire the lewd traps had dragged her mind into. The look on her face told me she realized how bizarre this dungeon was.

"Out for your life, you say...well, I do have to wonder what she was thinking, making a labyrinth like this."

"Beats me. At first, I figured it was for gathering materials."

Sorcerers made dungeons for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they made fortresses like the Labyrinth of Siculus, which was meant to fend off advancing enemies. Other times they made dungeons to guard grimoires, magical minerals, and other valuable treasures. Another popular purpose, however, was gathering materials.

Corpses, or more specifically, bones, skin, and blood from humans and beasts often retained strong thoughts long after death which made them ideal catalysts for black magic and curses. To gather these "materials," some curse-makers made dungeons far away from civilization then spread rumors of great treasure. This lured in greedy adventurers, allowing the curse-maker to procure fresh spell components. Keeping in mind that Canaan was a curse-maker and needed a large amount of catalysts to make her curses work, I was led to believe this would explain the purpose of her dungeon. And yet...

"Canaan's room appears to be the only entrance, so I can't imagine materials are what she's after. We haven't seen any adventurer corpses, either."

"Yeah, you're right about that."

We hadn't run into a single adventurer so far, the traps weren't very lethal, and it seemed clear she had some other objective in mind.

"Well, you're her master, right? Can't you venture a guess as to why she made it? Maybe you gave her an assignment. Like, 'Make a bunch of lewd traps,' or something like that."

"I would give no such assignment! Do you want me to slap you that badly?!"

After shouting back at me, Shutina crossed her arms and let out a thoughtful groan.

"...Canaan is as straight an arrow as they come, so I can't imagine the reason for her dungeon would be that roundabout. It has to be something simpler. Perhaps she just wanted a testing ground for her new traps?"

"Hmm."

"That would explain why the traps aren't very lethal, would it not?"

"Well, yeah. I guess it'd also explain why they're all so...unique, too."

"...Hmm."

I nodded, not fully convinced. Shutina cocked her head one way then another and didn't appear all that convinced herself. The facts: A dungeon with the entrance in the castle. Lewd, non-lethal traps that only seemed to target Shutina. The dungeon creator being Shutina's disciple, a specialist in mind-dominating geas spells. Something seemed strange, but no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't find the answer.

"Back to reality, Leo. We're here!"

"Hm?"

While I was lost in thought, I'd managed to reach the bottom of the staircase and the entrance to a large hall on the next floor. Four raptors guarding the entrance immediately took notice and came charging at us from all directions. These beasts were a bit stronger than the crawlers we fought before, but they were still small. The weakest of dragons. Shutina took a step back and prepared her staff, and I drew my sword.

"Well, regardless of why she made the dungeon, we're still going to have to get to the bottom."

"Indeed, let's polish these creatures off and keep going. If this keeps up, I can't imagine we'll have much trouble with any monsters we run into."

All right, so that wasn't really how it happened. We had our guards down. We were naive. We thought we could take anything that showed up, but neither of us had any idea of the terror that waited at the bottom of that dungeon.

3 — What Lies in the Depths

Curse-maker Canaan.

Female. Succubus. Disciple to the succubus sorceress, the Almighty Magic, Shutina.

Though prone to jumping to conclusions and getting carried away on occasion, she boasted solid skills as a curse-maker. Acknowledging her talents, Shutina lent her a number of valuable grimoires. After her defeat at Leo's hands, however, Canaan returned to the Demon World's capital, Svanetia, where she was recovering.

Favorite thing: Geas spells.

And...

To get to the point, the dungeon itself wasn't that difficult to deal with. Why would it be? With a tag team of the strongest hero in the world and one of the Four Great Guardians, most traps were as good as beat. Hell, it would be baffling if they *actually* stopped us. If I had to go out on a limb and point out an issue, it would be that the lewd traps gave us some trouble.

That prism crystal on floor B7 wasn't the only pervy trap we had to deal with. There was a room with a swarm of tickling hands, one with hypnotic gas that caused erotic hallucinations, one with acidic slimes that only melted clothing...and the list goes on. We didn't come across a single fatal trap. No, every single one felt like a teenage boy came up with it, and there were just...so many.

Then, when we got to the bottom of the dark castle dungeon, we found what we expected: a lavish living space. The corridor was wide enough for horse carriages to pass each other and was lined with a luxuriously thick red carpet. The wide hall it opened into was illuminated by magic stones enchanted with Lighting spells, and clear water gushed from a large fountain in the center. A stairway beside the fountain likely descended to Canaan's bedroom, library, and vault. One usually imagined the bottom, or core of a dungeon to be suffocatingly cramped. Yet, it looked like Canaan had her own private palace and was living quite well.

"Hey, Shutina. I know how you feel. I'm pretty surprised, too."

The Sorcerer General said nothing. She had, however, looked pale from the moment we stepped into the room. Was she sick or something? When I received no answer, I tried my best to keep up a cheerful tone.

"Trust me, I get it. Anyone would be stunned to see this, and I get why you'd be shocked, but...you know? It's like they say, that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger. You've really gotta try to think positive, and—"

"Leo."

Shutina's gaze remained fixed on the floor. Her tone was hard as rock.

"I'm begging you, give me a moment of peace and quiet. If I have to see any more of that smile of yours, I may decide your destruction is more important than finding that tome."

Needle-thin purple sparks came spewing from Shutina's staff and landed on the red carpet with a sizzle. In the blink of an eye, several maids dashed out of nowhere and began mending the burnt sections.

That's right, maids. It couldn't be easy to live in a place this large, and it

looked like Canaan had the quarters staffed by about a hundred familiars, all clad in maid costumes. They likely acted as security as well, but Shutina and I both cast Undercover spells the moment we stepped onto this floor, so they hadn't attacked. Thanks to that spell, we must have looked exactly like Canaan to them. As we passed by one maid, she reverently bowed her head.

"Welcome home, Mistress. Would you like to take a bath? Or perhaps dinner?"

"Guh..."

When Shutina struggled to respond, I gently elbowed her side and whispered into her ear, "Hey, she asked you a question. We may be Undercover, but you should probably still say something."

"I know! You keep quiet!" She cleared her throat, then answered the maid while trying her best to sound like Canaan. "I-I'm not in the mood for either. S-say, which room was mine again?"

"Third right down the hall, mistress."

"Thank you. K-keep up the good work."

"Yes, mistress."

The maid familiar deeply bowed her head and left. Our Undercover spells directly affected perception, so Shutina didn't have to mimic Canaan's voice, but she was meticulous and went above and beyond. The hall was filled with maids coming and going, and many of them spoke to Shutina. She responded with Canaan's voice each time, and me...I just couldn't take it. It was too funny.

"This is hilarious. I can barely keep myself from laughing."

"And what, might I ask, is so funny?"

"Come on, do I *really* have to say it out loud?"

I struggled desperately to hold back a guffaw while pointing at a nearby maid who was diligently sweeping the floor. She looked *exactly* like Shutina.

"Who could have imagined that all of Canaan's maids would look exactly like you? No one, that's who! God, this is funny! Ahahaha!"

"Silence, Leo. Shut your mouth."

"And they're in freaking maid outfits! Shutina of the Great Guardians, in a maid outfit! Bwahaha!"

"S-silence, you! *Silence!*"

My sides hurt from all the laughter. Shutina ground her teeth as she stomped the floor beside me. It was about time to come clean. The countless familiars on this floor? All of them looked exactly like Sorcerer General Shutina. The beautiful, wavy blonde hair. The telltale pointy ears; almond-like, melancholic eyes; and large bust of a succubus. There was no mistaking it. They were all the spitting image of Shutina. Canaan must have cast a transformation spell on magical automata to get the effect.

This army of false Shutinas in provocative maid outfits with deep-cut tops, open backs, and miniskirts reverently bowed to who they thought was their master, while speaking in ways that Shutina herself never would.

"Welcome home, mistress. Would you like to take a bath? Or perhaps dinner?"

"Welcome home, mistress. Your Shutina has eagerly awaited your return."

"Bwahahaha! Gahahaha!"

"Ahhh! Shut up, shut uuuup!"

Shutina finally lost it and screamed. Wanting to waste no time, she stomped on ahead to Canaan's room where the Book of Dimensions was likely to be.

"Hey, wait! We're still in a dungeon. It's dangerous to go off alone!"

"I don't care!"

As I followed after Shutina, something worried me, and it wasn't her yelling. It was Canaan's obsession for making automata in Shutina's image. There are plenty of transformation spells out there capable of changing your appearance or deceiving others. Like the Metamorphose spell I used when I was Onyx, there was a variety of those kinds of spells, from the most basic to the most advanced. What they all had in common, however, was dependence on imagination and the ability to fantasize. If you didn't have a strong image of what the transformation looked like, it wouldn't work too well. Onyx was easy enough. It was just a suit of armor that kept the wearer's identity hidden. But an exact replica of an existing person? That was a tall order, even for me.

You might want to try it yourself. Think of someone close to you. How do they speak? Is there something they say a lot? How about their pitch? And what about their hairstyle, can you remember that with perfect accuracy? What about their skin tone, and the color of their eyes? If one was after quality, there was no end to the finer details. Yet, if you could reproduce all of that perfectly, you could transform into a perfect replica of another person. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this.

Canaan took a high-level, difficult-to-use transformation spell and enchanted nearly a hundred automata with it to produce all those perfect replicas of Shutina, without one single flaw. The quality was, quite literally, *insane.* It meant that Canaan had observed Shutina to obsessive lengths. She thought of her 24/7. When she was eating, bathing, sleeping...she was always thinking of

her.

That could only mean one thing.

"Here's the room!"

"Hm?"

I noticed that we were in front of Canaan's archive. The door had a normal lock and three magical ones, but Shutina instantly cast a Master Key spell to unlock them in the blink of an eye. That was impressive. Master Key was one of the harder spells to cast without a chant, but Shutina pulled it off like it was nothing. Sorcerer General indeed.

But now's not the time to be admiring her technique!

If my prediction was right, I couldn't let her go into Canaan's room!

"Don't do it, Shutina! Stay out of that room!"

"What's gotten into you, Leo? Why the sudden pa...hm?"

Crap. I was so busy admiring her Master Key usage that I ended up being too late to stop her. By the time I'd told her to stay out, she'd already carelessly stepped into the archive where she immediately froze. The milk was spilled. I scrambled into the room after her.

"Leo, is this...real?"

"I told you to stay out for a reason."

Canaan's archive was a large room made of stone and housed countless bookshelves. Yet what I saw inside was just as I'd...no, far worse than I'd predicted. The walls, the ceiling, the desks, and every other available empty space in the room, all of it was decorated with nothing but photographs of Shutina.

Unlike photos from the scientific age, the technique for creating modern "photographs" used a Stock Print spell to print an image of something seen by Mirage Eyes onto an object of one's choice. All images made with this technique were commonly called photographs. They were far more realistic than any painting, and made it seem like the person was actually right there. A perfect *graphe,* or drawing of an image, made out of light: a photograph. Names always seemed to stick.

"Damn...there must be like two hundred of them, and that's only the ones I can see."

On one wall was a photo of Shutina nobly chanting a spell. On another was one her relaxing with a spot of tea. Next to it was one of her reading a book, one drifting off to sleep, one smiling, one angry...oh, crap, one where she's in the bath, too!

Shutina leaned against her staff as the energy drained from her body.

"M-my disciple has been...taking illicit photographs?"

"Let's calm down, Shutina. It's not *that* bad. Like, that's the only photo of you in the bath."

"You're. Not. *Helping!*"

"Man, look at the artistry on these. I think I'll take one ho—"

I froze. I had been looking over the photos one by one when my gaze landed on a small work desk nearby. Shutina must have sensed my alarm. She immediately hid behind me, making sure to keep the desk out of view.

"U-um. Leo?"

I said nothing.

"What is it? What happened? Please, you're scaring me, say something!"

"Just...take a look at this."

I pointed to the desk, and Shutina slowly poked her head out to look. Atop the desk was a collection of horribly familiar scenes which had been converted into a mountain of photographs.

"This...can't be!"

"It is. They're all of you...taken on the way here."

A photo of Shutina cowering in a corner in her underwear after the prism crystal's light struck. A photo of her getting caught by tickling tentacles, revealing her pale thighs. A photo of her stripping off her purple robe in tears after losing five rock-paper-scissors games in a row. All of the embarrassing and lewd situations Shutina had just been subjected to as she fell prey to the traps had been collected into the mass of photos on the work desk.

Judging from the camera angles, I figured that there must have been Mirage Eyes hidden in every corner of every room. They were likely set to automatically record the images and send them to this archive room. Shutina let out a weak moan.

"This much? So the reason she made those maid dolls in my image..."

"Because she really loves you, I'm guessing."

"And the reason she so diligently studied geas spells was..."

"Probably looking for a chance to have you under her power, I'd say."

"Th-then..."

She stumbled over her words then paused to look again at a photo of herself reduced to her undergarments.

"The reason she made this ridiculous dungeon..."

Yeah. There could only be one.

"To draw you inside under one pretense or another and take a bunch of these photos, yeah."

"Arrgghhh!"

Shutina let out an unearthly cry and collapsed onto the desk, completely deflated. It all started to make sense to me. This was a classic case of student-teacher attraction. Indeed, the earnest love and affection of a disciple toward her master...or, at least, that was the best answer I could come up with.

Still, *damn.* I wanted to get out of that room as quickly as possible, but we hadn't found the Book of Dimensions yet. Just standing there made me feel like I was losing my mind. How was I supposed to find one book among countless volumes? I genuinely worried that one of us would break down before we found the tome.

4 — Keep Out of Your Coworkers' Private Lives

Curse-maker Canaan was a succubus who specialized in geas spells, spells that allowed her to control the actions of others. She was also the disciple of Shutina, the Demon World's greatest spellcaster. Canaan had put in the appropriate effort, becoming a high-ranking sorceress herself. She wasn't one in name only, either. The dungeons she made gave even me trouble.

With the amount of magic power she possessed, she could easily make countless men into her puppets using geas magic. Her natural behavior as a succubus, slurping up magic power from men, should have been effortless for her.

But...what if the object of her affection was her *master,* Shutina? That changed things. She couldn't, of course, breach etiquette and suck out her master's mana. Even if she tried to force it, Shutina was the more powerful sorceress. For example, Canaan had heavily locked her archive door, but Shutina unlocked it without batting an eye. That clearly illustrated the differences in their power.

Casting a geas on a more powerful opponent was no easy task. Even if Canaan had decided to steal Shutina's mana by force and unleashed geas spells with all of her power, most of them would end up resisted. Our adventure in the dungeon showed this, too. It wasn't geas spells that gave us trouble, but her lewd traps. And most of those were ones Shutina activated on purpose, out of consideration for her disciple. If she had decided to simply punch through the dungeon, the trip would have been painfully easily.

Right?

I decided to believe that, in order to protect Shutina's honor.

That left Canaan with one option, which was to confess her feelings to Shutina and enjoy a consensual, legal sucking of mana. Such an act wouldn't be easy, either. Shutina was as green as they came with matters of love, and if rejection happened, their student-teacher relationship would most definitely get awkward. Worst case scenario, their relationship would completely fall apart, and Canaan would no longer be with the woman she loved so much. And since Canaan not only loved Shutina as a woman but also admired her as a sorceress, that was the last thing she'd want. So down went the confession option.

Canaan wanted to be with her master, but the road to that was rough. Ultimately, the solution she chose was to live in her underground dungeon surrounded by false replicas of Shutina. They may have only been familiars, but every day when Canaan came home her love was there to greet her. She got to live with the woman she loved. It was, probably, mostly a happy life. Mostly.

She still wanted to be with the real Shutina, however, and there was one obvious way to accomplish that. She had to pour everything she had into her geas magic.

Canaan trained and trained and trained, dreaming of the day she could control her beloved master as she pleased. While she did this, she diligently worked on her dungeon with the purpose of collecting erotic imagery of her love. She then arranged it so her room in the castle led to the dungeon, in preparation for the day she invited Shutina to visit under false pretenses and...

Damn! Yeesh!

A shiver ran through me. Succubi were *terrifying*.

While naturally born with loose views on matters of chastity, succubi and incubi were said to be fully devoted to anyone they've truly fallen for. I'd met a

couple of succubi like that, so I knew where they were coming from.

But what Canaan was doing far surpassed mere devotion. It was the kind of thing that would get the guards called on you in the human world, the kind of thing that made you pack up your bags and go on your way immediately. Yet, Shutina, the person who *should* be calling the guards on Canaan, shakily rose to her feet with the help of her staff, then shook her head a few times.

"This...must be a mistake," she said weakly. "That's right, a mistake. A fluke. The familiars look like me and my photos adorn her archive because she simply happens to be researching her master. That is all."

An unsettling look appeared in her eyes as she murmured. I started to feel bad for her and realized I had to go along with her version.

"Y-yeah, definitely. You can learn a surprising amount from observing someone's everyday stuff."

"Indeed. One's diet forms the backbone of mana cultivation, and there's hardly a sorceress who doesn't meditate daily in the bath. By observing me without my knowledge, I'm sure she simply wanted to learn more by seeing me in a natural state."

"Yeah, exactly. She really is something, your disciple."

"She really is. It's...wonderful she's so passionate about research."

It looked like Shutina had finally recovered her composure. I could see a touch of sanity back in her eyes. She took an awkward step forward.

"All right, let's find that grimoire and get out of here! Come, we're going through every bookshelf!"

"Y-yeah, sure. What was it called again? The Book of Dimensions?"

"Correct. It has a beautiful, rainbow-colored cover that stands ou— Hywahhh?!"

Books came tumbling down with a load crash. Shutina had tripped over a step without looking and collided with one of the bookshelves. Her eyes teared up as she let out a painful groan.

"Watch where you're going! It's really messy in here!"

"I'm sorry...ow!"

One of the books had taken its time falling and slammed directly on top of Shutina's head before tumbling down to land in front of us. It had an expensive-looking binding and a purple cover.

The book also opened when it fell. As if the book had a will. As if it was telling us to read it. The moment I saw the pages, a powerful chill ran down my back.

Oh no.

My intuition, my instincts, were screaming at me. I could tell with a single glance that this was not a book to be read. The photos on the desk you could just laugh off compared to this. No, this was a forbidden text, the kind of text that would make you lose your mind if you read it.

"Leo..."

"I know. Don't touch it. Whatever you do, do not touch it."

Shutina was with me on this. She remained completely frozen in front of the book.

Books were not forbidden just because what was in them was dangerous. No, it was because what they held was too appealing. They were immensely

powerful and came with the possibility for destruction. Those two traits, together, made them taboo.

And unfortunately, Shutina and I were sorcerers. Spellcasters. Curious by natural. We sought out the mysteries that explained how the mystical and the magical interwove to create our world. This was a book we should not and must not read. Yet we *had* to. We lost to our intellectual curiosity as magic users. Both of us reached for the book so we could see it more clearly...then both of us cried out.

"Whoa!"

My instincts were right. This *was* a forbidden book. In a way.

"You...cannot be serious!"

A photograph of Shutina changing adorned the left side of the page, and the right side had what one might think to be Canaan's handwriting. It recorded the following.

Shutina Observation Log, Vol. 251

7 AM. Master woke up just in time, as usual. She slept in a pink negligee today. It was very adorable and suited her well. Oh, if only I could be that negligee and absorb her sweat as she slumbered, how wonderful that would be.

1 PM. Masterer had a bit of a late lunch. I was honored to have the opportunity to join her. Her table manners were a picture of perfection, leaving me a little embarrassed with how sloppily I ate my fish. I'll have to practice my

etiquette from now on so that I don't embarrass her.

She wore a look of melancholy throughout our meal. It's been half a year since we came to the human world under Queen Echidna's banner, though it seems that lately a maggot named "Leo" has been giving the army trouble. This is the source of her worries. How dare he waste her precious thinking time.

I will take it upon myself to eliminate him. I'll find a town somewhere...in fact, the town of Siculus I happened upon the other day would be perfect. I'll make a horrific dungeon, lure him in, and kill him. There we go! Decision made!

That aside, when I gifted some new chamomile tea to Master, she gave me the most joyful look. It was like the face of an innocent girl...so precious. I just want her to be my bride. Or I could be her bride. Either is good with me. I know I would make her happy! Miss Shutina is well known for her dignified and mature beauty, but that is the evaluation of a casual observer. I believe her true nature is shown by those occasional youthful, almost childish faces that make the heart leap.

8 PM. Master went to bathe herself. After giving the goblin stonemason a generous tip, I had him exchange a stone in the ceiling with one enchanted with a Mirage Eye. The results were rather positive. From now on, I can see it! I can see her! I can see Miss Shutina bathe! As long as I want! Live! This is amazing! Every part of her, every last inch, shows up with such clarity! Her body in the nude, it's incredibly beautiful!

Day in Review

Dear Miss Shutina. Canaan loves you.

Though a succubus like me, you show no interest in men, electing instead to quietly hone your craft and spellcasting abilities. That stoicism you show stole my heart when I was but a little girl and has never given it back. I fully believe that becoming your disciple was an act of fate. Out of the...what was the population of the Demon World again? Oh, it doesn't matter. I simply know that you choosing me out of all the faceless nobodies was a sign of things to come. A sign of our future together. *Together*. Oh, and I want to be perfectly clear, I don't simply look up to you as a senior sorceress. I respect you as a woman, as a succubus. You are wonderful, Master. Your allure and sex appeal as an adult woman, combined with your occasional childish attitudes form a perfect balance. You can go top and you can go bottom. That sleek waist, that ample bustline, the well-maintained hair and nails...every part of you agrees perfectly with my ideal woman. You are my idol of the Demon World, ever out of reach. Ahh, I know this is a hopeless wish, but I hope we can be together one day. I, Canaan, love everything about you. I love you! *Love* you! Oh, Master, can I call you darling? I can, can't I? You'll let me? Wonderful! Darling, darling, darling, darling!

"Wh-whoa."

The rest of the page stopped being an observation log. It devolved into a long string of "I love you, Master" and "I love you, darling" quotes. Past that, the text got so small and so jumbled it was impossible to read. I didn't want to think about it, but the other pages had to be all like this. It sent a chill down my spine.

When I took another look around, I got goosebumps. A quick observation revealed that most of the books on the bookshelves were observation logs just like this one! *Shutina Observation Log Volume 33...101...185... Shutina Quote*

*Collection Volume 8...15...*all the way up to *27*. *Best of Shutina: The Photo Collection. Shutina in the Bath: The Photo Collection.*

This was utterly terrifying. Succubi were terrifying.

Uh. Canaan. Sorry. Yeah, it was your master's orders, but I'm sorry for intruding on your private space while you're not even in this human world. I'm just...really sorry. I'll forget everything I saw here, so just...forgive me, please.

Shutina remained frozen with her hands still on the pages of the book where she'd first touched it. I called out to her as carefully and considerately as I could.

"Shutina."

Nothing.

"Shutina...?"

Again, nothing.

"Ah. Well...it's a lot better than being *disliked*, right? I mean, being loved by your disciple that much, there's no way it's a bad thing, right?"

Shutina showed no sign of acknowledgment.

I very, *very* cautiously chose my next words.

"And hey, I don't know what it's like in your world, but in the human world women can marry each other! Did you know that? I bet you didn't, haha. Yeah, same-sex marriage. That stuff's just commonly accepted nowadays. Oh, the creepshots however, that's definitely illegal. You should be mad at her for that, haha!"

Still nothing.

"And besides, just think about it. You'd be hard pressed to find another curse-maker who could make a dungeon of this size! You really brought her up well.

That's something to be confident about! So try and cheer...uh, Shutina? ...Shutina?"

Silence.

"She's...she's out cold."

The shock must have been too great. The Sorcerer General was sitting on the ground, completely unconscious. I lightly shook her by the shoulder and the *Shutina Observation Log Volume 251* in her hand slipped out and fell onto the floor. Shutina soon followed.

We eventually managed to find the Book of Dimensions, but Shutina never brought up the subject of the archive again. I ended up having to mind my words *very* carefully to help her forget the whole incident.

Although we managed to get through the dungeon, something still weighed on my mind. Something I'd been thinking about since the first time Shutina explained how big the dungeon was. I thought I would get my answer when I got to the bottom of the dungeon, but that only left me more confused.

"Canaan lost to me at Siculus."

It was the dead of night. I was pacing back and forth in my room, thinking out loud. I wasn't pretending to be a detective or anything, either. This was a debugging technique called rubber ducking, popular among programmers from the scientific age of old. As the name suggested, you explained your problem to a rubber duck. It sounded silly, but it got results.

"I figured killing her would leave me with a grudge on my hands, so I let her go after defeating her. She escaped to Echidna's castle. So far, so good."

The bigger the problem on your hands, the less time you had to organize your thoughts. The anxiety would eat away at you, hiding the true problem from your eyes. That's where rubber ducking came in. Explaining an issue to someone allowed you to realize where you had the most trouble talking about it, which was a key discovery. That fuzzy area was the tumor to be excised. The core of the problem.

"So the issue here is how deep the dungeon is. The dungeon in Siculus had fifteen floors. This dungeon had thirty. When did she manage make something *this big*?"

I had been wondering about that for a hot minute now. A massive labyrinth thirty floors deep. It was too big; it made no sense. See, a dungeon's size was a direct reflection of the dungeon master's abilities. If the dungeon in Siculus took all of Canaan's power and only ended up at fifteen floors, then there was no way she could easily make one twice that size. That, I was stuck on.

"First hypothesis: she didn't put 100% into Siculus."

No. There was no way. When I encountered her in the last room of that dungeon, she threw *everything* she had at me. When I told her I'd let her go, did she give up? No. I had to bring her within an inch of death before I sent her on her way. She wanted nothing more than to bring me down.

Such determination was a mystery to me then, but not anymore. She loved Shutina more than anything and would honestly die for her master. Canaan didn't want to sully her master's name. I bet she hated the thought of crawling back to the Demon World after losing to me and being spared.

That being said, she *had* to have put 100% into Siculus. My first hypothesis went down.

"Okay, so if she didn't slack on the dungeon, what then?"

I turned to a simpler answer. If she gained twice the magic power, she could make a dungeon twice the size of Siculus'.

"Second hypothesis: after returning to the castle, she doubled her magic power through training."

This didn't seem terribly realistic, either. A bit of training wasn't going to give her the immense level up she'd need to get twice the magic power. Absolutely not. Magical prowess, physical strength, endurance, academic abilities—all of these grew bit by bit from daily practice. The stairway to improvement was a gradual climb. Yet, according to the castle records, she returned to the Demon World through the Great Spiritual Hole about a week after her defeat. So after suffering nearly fatal wounds in her battle with me, she would have to drag her carcass into training, level up immensely, greatly expand the dungeon in her room, and return to the Demon World all in a week. It didn't sound possible.

"Third hypothesis."

Okay, this one sounded a little bit too out there.

"After being defeated by me, Canaan managed to return to her room's dungeon with a source of magic power on par with a Wisdom Stone. No, let's go all the way. Let's say she picked up an actual Wisdom Stone."

That sounded a little *too* convenient, but this was just a hypothesis. Even if it was only a 1% chance, it was worth thinking about.

"After leveling up with the Wisdom Stone's power, she tested out her newfound abilities by greatly expanding her room's dungeon. However, because the Wisdom Stone had some unexpected geas on it, she found herself compelled to leave the castle."

An unexpected geas? What could that have been? Maybe an allergy to the Demon Queen? Regardless, she probably deceived the sentries at the Great Spiritual Hole with any number of spells. Brainwashing with a Temptation Spell would have worked, or even a clone with Mirror Image. Either way, it wouldn't have been that hard to make it look like she'd gone back to the Demon World while staying here.

"Burning with desire to take revenge on me, Canaan accepted the geas in exchange for power. Now, she's hiding out somewhere in the human world, waiting for the perfect chance to strike back. That's why she isn't in the castle, and why she doesn't know I've joined Echidna's army."

That brought up the question of where Canaan could be at the moment, but the answer didn't really matter. My reason was simple. Even if she had grown vastly in power thanks to the Wisdom Stone, if she actually wanted to kill me, she'd use her best strategy to do so. And what was Canaan best at? Making monstrous murder-dungeons. She had to be somewhere in the human world, in some mountain or cave, making a massive dungeon. When she was finished with it, I was sure she would lure me in one way or another to take me out.

"Wait. Seriously?"

If this hypothesis was right, it meant I'd have to go through another one of her dungeons. And I *hated* the thought of that.

You know what? Screw this! I'm not thinking about it anymore!

"Besides, the chances of that are way too low. A massive power-up from a Wisdom Stone? Pff. There'd be a higher chance of me waking up tomorrow to find Lili all grown up and just my type! Come on!"

I put the thought out of my mind and slid into bed. Sure, I hadn't come to any

conclusions, but I was probably overthinking it, anyway. Canaan was definitely back in the Demon World, bedridden and recovering.

Yeah.

It's not like a Wisdom Stone, the heart of one of my brothers, would just be lying around. With that in mind, I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2: Dragon Steak with Garlic Butter Sauce

1 — Good Work Starts with a Good Meal

Hunger was a phenomenon most life-forms had in common. While it functioned as one of the primal desires for preserving life, it was also a common weak point. No matter how strong the being, hunger could not be stopped.

Take the titans of the surface world, for instance: Shutina, Lili, Mernes, Edvard—all incredibly powerful in their own right, with Demon Queen Echidna towering over them. If they skipped out on too many meals, you knew they wouldn't be able to fight at full power.

Oh, me? I was a bioweapon in human form, so I could make do without. In practical terms, I didn't need to eat or drink for about three days. That was, however, in purely physical terms. With self-development and growth being the concepts I was built around, I essentially changed into a normal human. This meant that going too long without eating stressed me out, and that brought with it a host of problems. I tried to keep regular meals.

You couldn't march on an empty stomach, and no one could live without eating. So, why was I going on this monologue about mealtimes? Well...

"Ahhh! I wanna eat *meat*! I'm tired of these *beans* all the time!"

"Lili, no yelling at breakfast. That's bad table manners."

"Wahhhh!"

The army had a bit of a problem. The girl screaming and whining about food in front of me was Beast General Lili, one of the Four Great Guardians and the

current chief of military logistics. She looked human, but she had wolf ears popping out of her head—a trademark of demi-beastfolk. She waved her spoon and fork around in protest.

"Leoooo! I wanna eat some meat already!"

"Be a good girl and make do with beans for today. We'll have meat tom...ah, the day after tomorrow, okay?"

"I don't wanna! I don't wannnaaaa!"

"C'mon, Lili, these beans are great! We've got bean soup, bean salad, vegetarian bean chili! And just look, the beans are begging you to eat them! 'Nom us up, Lili dear!' See?"

She continued to wail.

"Well, damn."

We were in my combination bedroom and office in the castle. I'd elected to have a lunch meeting with Lili to discuss the supply situation, but she wasn't fond of the menu I'd presented. What started as mild dissatisfaction exploded into unconcealed frustration. That meant that instead of enjoying my bean meal, I had to spend some energy calming down a rambunctious dog girl.

"All right, all right. I'll give you my steak the day after tomorrow too, how about that?"

"Now! I want steak *now*! Leo, can't you use your powers to poof one up?"

"Sorry, but that is one of the few things I can't do. Though, give it half a year. That's when I've got our food situation slated to improve."

"I can't wait that long!"

"Yeah, I figured."

With tearful eyes, she finished off her bean soup. I had to admit I was impressed with her appetite.

It wasn't the time to be impressed, though. Lili's whining was pretty comical and took my attention, but her heart was in the right place. Food, with its effect on motivation, was a huge part of running an organization. The problem deserved a lot of focus.

To review: I, humanity's hero, made peace with Echidna. I officially joined her army and worked with a variety of departments, dramatically increasing efficiency in many of them. On the other hand, there was something I couldn't quite solve in a day. Namely, the army's main supply issue: provisions.



Echidna had established her castle at the very center of the human world, in

the steep mountains of Seshat. Though the tall peaks surrounding the castle made it fantastic for defending, there was no hope of developing agriculture or housing livestock. That meant that in terms of provisions, we had no self-sufficiency.

Of course, we wouldn't *starve*. Our contracts with the Largo dragonfolk kept us supplied with plenty of fresh vegetables and fish, and we had a supply line from the Demon World that passed through the Great Spiritual Hole. One issue, however, was that the Largo supplies were a little...health-focused. Essentially, they provided very little red or white meat. I could see how a growing girl like Lili would be disappointed.

Hell, the supplies from the demon world were even worse. The variety was far more lacking. Bitter carrot-like vegetables, berries spicy enough to make you breathe fire, acidic kraken tentacles...you could say most of the ingredients in question were acquired tastes.

Still, there were a few foods both worlds had in common. For example, the beans we were eating at the moment. Beans were resilient enough to be grown in the barren lands of the Demon World, and none too different from human world ones. They tasted just right.

Humans must not live on bread alone but *could* live on beans. They were tasty and nutritious, sure, but...eating beans alone *did* lead to monotony.

"So, we'll have lots of normal meat in half a year?" Lili asked while munching on beans into which I was sure Demon World farmers put their hearts and souls.

"Yeah, pretty much. I'm setting things up."

"Setting things up?"

"Yeah, doing the groundwork for us to get a lot of meat, so to speak."

"We can't get a lot of meat now?"

"Nope. And I mean, come on, have you forgotten that we're the Demon Queen's army?"

"Hm?"

"We came here to invade the human world, remember? Even if Echidna tried to kill as few people as possible, there's still a huge diplomatic gap between us and them."

"Y-yeah?"

Lili gave me an ambiguous nod, leaving me none-too-confident that she knew what I was talking about. No, actually, there was no way, but I didn't mind.

Making a supply route from human villages to the castle was no simple task. That seemed obvious enough, right? Even if we tried to enter into an equal trade agreement, why would they sell food to a force that was trying to kill them just a few days ago? The human leaders would have none of it.

With the war over, the leaders of the human countries certainly hoped to fix their broken lands. The dark army rising again and invading was the last thing any of them wanted. That meant that the only places willing to do business with us were exceptions like the dragonfolk of the Largo Islands, or the neutral commerce city of Jaiya.

In an effort to make things better, I'd disguised goblins skillful in business and sent them to all corners of the human world as traveling merchants. It would take three months for them to lose the traveling merchant guise and start acting as local merchants in the towns where they settled, and another three months to get a solid supply line going to the castle. A total of six months for my

current project to set the stage for a steady supply of meat.

One could, of course, think that this would take far too long. Was there no shortcut? Well, no. It was the kind of thing you needed to take your time with and be certain about. I might have been able to use my connections to change things, but I was a wanted man in the human world as of present. Putting my network to use would be a trying task.

"Half a year, huh?"

"Yeah, half a year."

Only half a year, but still...*half a year.* It felt so far off. I heaped some bean and mandrake salad onto my plate and found myself making the same complaint as Lili.

"I really wish there was a big job that would leave us in a business relationship with some large kingdom. One able to give us all the meat we could eat."

"There's no jobs like that?"

"I wouldn't be this frustrated if there were, and you wouldn't be crying, either."

"Ohhh. Pretty tough stuff."

A full stomach seemed to have brought Lili back to her normal attitude. After finishing up her salad, she tossed her fork into her empty bowl and leapt onto my bed.

"That was really good! Thanks for lunch!"

"Hey, hold on a second! What am I always telling you? Clean up after you eat!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll do it later."

"Do it *now*! And don't go to sleep right after you eat. You'll turn into a cow!"

"I'll be fine! Besides, I'm not a cow, I'm...I'm a wolf, you...know..."

She had wrapped herself in a blanket and started snoring.

"There's not a single thing in this picture that's fine. Jeez."

Lili had been putting up such a fuss not a few minutes ago, but there she was, sleeping like a baby. Did it not matter if it was meat or beans? Did she just want to fill her belly? I cleaned up both of our dishes, and right when I was about to get back to work, there was a vigorous knock at the door.

"Say, Lord Leo, are you in?"

"Yeah, come on in."

A massive man with a greatsword on his back bent over to lumber through the doorway into my office. A familiar face, much like Lili. The Dragon General Edvard, one of the Four Great Guardians.

"Ah, sorry to bother you during a meal. I simply had something to discuss."

"What's up, Edvard, need something? And I'm telling you up front, I'm not going to a seedy bookstore with you again, no matter how much gold you grease my palms with."

The Dragon General had been a *bit* too strict and harsh on his men before, but after one of my plans, he'd gotten a lot softer around the edges. Perhaps too soft. In fact, yesterday, he said he wanted to pass out books to entertain his troops, and he wanted me to help him pick out said books. So of course, I casually went shopping with him. But that idiot, that absolute buffoon, of all the things he could get, he picked out racy photo collections with models who looked exactly like Shutina and Echidna and had the gall to pass them out to his unit.

In all honesty, sure, Echidna and Shutina were beautiful. On the outside, at least. And I could see how seeing them in states of undress might excite and motivate the troops. Still, a Guardian *himself* going to buy said books was going overboard! And why did he have to drag *me* along?!

Oh, it got worse. On our way back, we ran into Echidna and Shutina themselves. They went into a frenzy upon seeing the books and nearly murdered both of us. That was an experience I could really do without having again.

"Sorry, sorry. Really, I do feel bad about our last outing. Don't worry, though. Today's is completely different."

"Well, glad to hear it. So what's the deal, then?"

"Mmm. You had beans today, right? With fish yesterday and more beans before that?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Now, let's be honest. You want to eat your fill of meat, don't you?"

Him too?! Lili, Edvard, all it was with them was meat, meat, meat! Was this a Meataholics Anonymous meeting?!

Still, I could see where they were coming from. Truly, I could. I nodded deeply, showing how enthusiastic my agreement with Edvard was.

"Yeah, I do. I want me a big steak, a big ole' plate of meat and potatoes, of ginger-fried beef, of pork belly with daikon, of every meaty dish we've got."

"Ah, great hunger, is that so? I knew I could count on you!"

"That's great and all, but where are we going to get meat? It's going to be a pretty rough road without being able to secure a steady business partner."

"Hm?"

Edvard gave me a curious look. Seeing that, I mirrored his expression.

"Trade? Lord Leo, what are you talking about?"

"Well, that's how we're going to get the meat, right? If we want the stuff in any significant quantity, we're going to have to take the time to earn the humans' trust and set up a trade route."

"Mm, you have a point there."

"See, I knew you knew."

"Then let me venture to ask you a question, Lord Leo. Were you to obtain meat with*out* taking months to do so, how might you go about it?"

"Hm? Ah. Hm, good question."

My thoughts vaguely wandered about the topic as I wiped down the table. And damn it, as you can probably guess, my growing desire for a steak really didn't make thinking easier.

"Get into a tight relationship with a huge kingdom right now, start trading with them, and get cartloads of their excess meat. If there was some sort of miraculous job like that around, that would solve this whole thing, but that's way too convenient."

"My, Lord Leo! As sharp as they come!"

Edvard clapped his hands without a hint of irony.

"You see, I happened upon a job of those exact specifications. It is rather difficult for me to take on myself, so I came to request your aid."

"See? Reality is *brutal*. Brutal and emotionless. Something that convenient would never—"

I spun vigorously to face Edvard at the same moment Lili snapped out of her slumber and burst from my bed.

"Huh?"

"How about it? Want to take this job with me?"

"Wait, are you...serious? There's a job that appetizing? And you got it?"

"Meat!"

"You gotta be kidding me!"

"Meeaaaaat!"

Lili wagged her tail with such ferocity I thought it would go flying off as she barged in between us with sparkling eyes.

His log-sized arms crossed, the Dragon General looked at us with a warm smile.

"A wing of blackened dragons has assailed the kingdom of Eris, down south. Our job is to disguise ourselves as traveling adventurers and slay the horde!"

2 — The Ultimate Passing Adventurer

The town of Finoy, in the kingdom of Eris—since long before I was born, my hometown had been attacked by all sorts of powers and groups with hopes of claiming our copious magic stones. Sometimes they were sorcerers, needing large amounts of the stones as catalysts for their spells. Other times they were bandits trying to sell those magic stones to those sorcerers. Occasionally they were wild chimeras, drawn in by the stones' scent. Whenever attackers came knocking, however, they had to contend with the fortress on the hill overlooking Finoy: Fort Wieten.

When I, Johan Arment, turned sixteen, I became a kingdom archer and was assigned to that very fort. It had been half a year since I'd joined the force. With the guidance of my strict-but-fair captain and fellow soldiers, I'd gotten used to my duties in the fort and started to know the people of Finoy by face and name. Yet, right when things started to get easy, my home, Fort Wieten, was surrounded by countless wyverns. They wanted our fort destroyed.

"Captain, our arrows aren't doing a thing to them! We're just wasting ammo!"

"Keep up the barrage, Johan! If we don't keep their eyes on this fort, they're going right to the town!"

Captain Gustave and I were stuck in a lookout station on the fortress walls. It was made of tough stone and protected us from the wyverns' sharp claws. However, that was all it did. If I took one step out of the station with the wyverns flying above, I would be dead. It was like a mouse wandering around with birds of prey circling overhead. In fact, a fellow soldier who had gone to call for help from the center of the fort was torn to shreds the moment he

stepped outside.

Though we kept on fighting, the blackened wyverns seemed to mock us, landing freely on the ramparts and in the courtyard. They wandered about as if they were browsing their new home. Wyverns were too large to fit inside the fort's buildings, which saved *us*, but if they lost interest and left, that meant they would destroy Finoy.

We were left with only one choice: continue pelting them with useless arrows to keep their attention. Luckily for us, the lookout had a hefty stock of bows and arrows. I held back my complaints and posed a question to Captain Gustave.

"Will the townspeople be all right?"

"With a big ball of wyverns over the fort like this, I'm sure they've smelled danger and run. That's all we can hope for besides the chance that a really tough adventurer happens to pass by town to save it. We're clinging to a miracle over here."

"What about the unit the crown sent?"

"They're probably all in pieces! Dammit, it was a full troop led by a royal knight! I can't believe they all got taken out!"

Dragons were smart beings. They knew all too well that while humans were weak, poking at them could easily lead to their downfall. This was even true of wyverns, lower forms of dragons. They generally avoided harming humans unless necessary.

Sometimes, though, there were exceptions. And these blackened dragons were one of them.

Whether it be the work of some curse, a strange mutation, or a regular occurring happening like mating season, dragons occasionally turned fully black

and went berserk. It was then that they'd start attacking human settlements. The blackened wyvern sightings had started about a month before. It wasn't just a single blackened wyvern, but many. They had taken up residence in the mountains beyond the fortress.

The crown had sent in knights to slay the wyverns going after traffic on the roads, and just a few days ago, a large troop had been sent into the mountains to quash the wyverns' nest. An esteemed royal knight had led them. The unit was made up of elite soldiers and sorcerers, eighteen in number, that boasted skills I could not dream of. And so, we breathed a collective sigh of relief and prepared a banquet for their victorious return.

Two days passed and the unit had not returned. Instead, on the third day came a swarm of blackened wyverns.

"You've gotta be kidding me. Johan, hide! Get under those barrels or that shelf!"

The sharp scream of the captain brought me back to reality. I had no idea what was going on, but I knew I didn't have a second to waste. As ordered, I hid in the opening of a pile of barrels. Then, there came an incredibly loud crash. I let out a scream.

Something had punched through the ceiling, and as the dust cleared, I realized it had been a massive boulder. As I looked through the hole in the ceiling, I saw wyverns flapping across the blue sky above. I finally understood what the captain saw.

They must have hauled them in from somewhere nearby. Blackened wyverns seemed rich in knowledge of how to kill their prey. These wyverns were all grasping boulders in their claws and dropping them from above!

Two, three, four. Smaller boulders came hurdling down, smashing into the tough stone ceiling, gradually crushing it. I could hear the captain's voice from across the ruined room. He must have gotten as lucky as I had.

"Staying in here is just going to get us killed. Johan, run to the main keep! I'll draw their attention!"

"But Captain!"

I was on the fence for a moment on whether or not to obey that order. The lookout's ceiling was over three-quarters gone. If I continued to hesitate, the next boulder was sure to fall through and we would definitely be dead. Running to the main keep as Captain Gustave ordered was, indeed, correct.

But is abandoning my superior officer really the right thing to do, as a soldier?

I took a moment to question myself. As a warrior, would it not be better to stand and fight until I die? Or perhaps to draw the wyverns' attention while the more experienced Captain Gustave survived?

Before I could arrive at an answer, a key was thrown at me. The captain had slipped it through an opening in the ruins.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to die out here. That's the key to the third armory under the keep you're holding."

"The third? You mean the one only you have the key to?"

"That's where we keep the best spell tags. If you use 'em all, you should be able to send these wyverns packing. Normally you'd need paperwork on paperwork to get permission to use them, but desperate times call for desperate measures! Let 'em have it!"

"But sir..."

"Just go! If that next boulder comes down, we're dead!"

"Got it, sir!"

I decided to follow orders. I wasn't just running while the captain drew their attention. No, I was going to make it to the armory and save him! That's why I had to move, fast!

"I'll be back, I swear it! Stay alive, sir!"

"You too, kid!"

The armory wasn't all the main keep held. The older soldiers had to be holed up in there, much like I was holed up in the lookout station. If I met up with them, perhaps we could work out a battle plan.

I couldn't compete with the captain in swordsmanship or archery, but I had a lot of confidence in my speed. That's right! I was the best choice for a messenger to the keep! With that in mind, I carefully confirmed our situation during the few seconds before the captain bellowed out his final orders. There were twelve, thirteen...fourteen wyverns. The cannon at the gate was still workable. The other lookout stations hadn't been destroyed, either, so the soldiers in them should be fine.

All right!

"Listen up, Johan. You dash out on the count of three. When I say three, I'm using a Fireball spell tag. The explosion in the air should buy you some time, so hit the ground running when you hear it, got me? Don't go over the walls, go down the stairs to get through the courtyard!"

"Got it!"

"Here goes. One. Two. Three! Release!"

Calling out "Release" unleashed the spell tag's power, launching a fireball into the air. The burning sphere exploded with a terrible din, and I could see the wyverns roused from their smug roosts on the walls. They took to the air, investigating the sound.

"Go! Now!"

"Yessir!"

I steeled myself and darted out of the lookout station. All I needed to do was dash. But what if the stairway to the courtyard was broken? Then I'd have to go over the perilous walls...yet, luckily, my fears were unfounded, and the stone steps were intact.

The courtyard was a flat rectangle, lacking any hiding places besides a few trees, but that made it easy to dash through. I ran down into it as fast as I could. When my feet hit the last step, I heard the second Fireball go off. I remembered the captain telling me he had three spell tags, so I figured I had some more time.

I slipped through the openings between the trees to lower my chance of being caught by the wyverns and kept going. It was twenty yards to the keep door.

Damn, that's a ways away!

I'd always felt like the courtyard was small, but suddenly, it seemed like a wide expanse. That mere twenty yards felt like it would take days to cover. I panted as I kept running, emerging from the trees into a clearing. A straight shot to the door. Ten yards. Five yards.

"Uh-oh."

I stopped. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. A great black

shadow, a howling wyvern, had landed in front of me. It growled at me, letting me know my fate. I yelped before the large creature, bigger than the others with wider wings. I guessed it was the leader.

Its yellow, reptilian eyes glared at me. The door to the keep was right behind it. Then, the alpha wyvern made a great flap of its wings and soared into the air, climbing higher than the fortress walls in an instant.

No, it hadn't let me go. In the next moment, it lunged down towards me, its deadly claws a reaper's scythe coming for my neck.

He'd probably been waiting. Waiting for his pack to break the lookout station with boulders, waiting for his prey to crawl out into the courtyard. Time slowed down as I processed the five-yard dash to the door.

Do I shoot him with my bow?

No, I didn't even have time to nock my arrow, much less loose it. I'd be dead by the time I reached for my quiver.

Then I run.

I could run and try to open the heavy iron door the others constantly complained about and escape inside...but, no, I didn't have enough time for that, either.

All that awaited me was one dreadful, brutal reality. No matter what happened, those descending claws were going to destroy me.

After two or three seconds, I would be skewered and dead.

The third Fireball exploded, using up the last of the captain's spell tags. He would soon follow in my fate. After I'd calmly assessed the situation, for some reason, I felt no fear.

I am pissed, though. Pissed that this *is the way I die.*

I cursed my powerlessness. I hated the position I was in. I could do nothing but die, knowing that the town I had to protect was going to be destroyed. And really, if I had to die, I wish I could have died with the captain, at least. It would have been better than this worthless death. If I fell here, what was the point of the captain's sacrifice? My parents would be distraught to learn their son had passed before them.

Sorry, captain. Sorry, mom. Sorry, dad...

I apologized to everyone as I awaited my fate. When the glint of the wyvern's claws drew near, I closed my eyes.

Yet, their painful stab never came.

"Yeah, I figured."

Instead, I heard a voice nearby. A young man's voice. Not the captain, no, and not any of the other soldiers in the fort. I'd never heard this voice before.

"Blackened dragons form packs and push their strongest to the top. If a blackened wyrm is leading the pack, then he's definitely going to have wyverns under him. Hey, kid, you okay?"

"Whuh?"

I timidly opened my eyes to see a young man holding a longsword. He had black hair and, rare for an average human, red demon-like eyes. He was an adventurer, I imagined. Surely a swordsman of some sort, but he wasn't even wearing the most basic of leather armor.

"U-um...did...did you...?"

"Yeah."

What truly surprised me was the wyvern corpse at his feet. It was, most definitely, the wyvern that nearly killed me. Both of its wings had been cut off at their sockets and its decapitated head lay nestled by the base of a tree a few yards away.

This guy pulled that off? With a sword and nothing more? I couldn't believe it. I fell on my butt, embarrassingly, and looked up at him.

"Who are you?"

"Onyx. Just an adventurer passing by."

Not even chastising me for asking him a question before saying thanks, Onyx gave me a toothy, reassuring smile.

"I'm here to eat me some tasty dragon steak."



3 — Onyx's Wyvern Slaying Course for Beginners

"So, you know that town at the base of the mountain? Finoy, right? Two or three wyverns were flittering around there, so I cleaned them up before coming. That's why I'm late. Sorry."

The black-haired man, Onyx, apologized to me as he looked up above.

"Damn, though, there's so many of them. I'll wipe them up real quick, but don't drop your guard, all right? A dragon's still a dragon."

"Wipe them...up? Alone?"

"No, I've got people with me. Two, in fa—get down!"

I let out a cry as Onyx pushed me, slamming me down onto the cold, stone path. Something had sliced through the air where I'd just been standing. It looked like a new wyvern had swooped at us.

And of course one would! The leader might have gone down, but there were still a dozen wyverns overhead. They were probably angry to lose the leader of their pack, no less.

"Ed, we got one here!"

"Got it!"

However, the wyvern did not make it back to the air. In the center of the walls, in the most conspicuous place, stood a massive, red-haired man. With a light swing of his massive sword that looked more like bound slabs of iron than a blade, he sliced into the ascending wyvern. It was hard to see from the courtyard, but there were already three wyvern bodies at his feet. My eyes went wide.

It took multiple veteran soldiers to barely defeat one wyvern, but he had

taken out so many with such speed!

"Hahaha! Is that all you got, lizards?!"

The man bellowed out a taunt, and the wyverns dove into him in rage.

"Too easy! You'll need sharper claws than that to make me flinch!"

Even after concentrated attacks from above, the man did not budge. If anything, the punishment only seemed to make him stronger; more vigorous.

"Lili! Uh, I mean, Alyosha!"

The man shouted again and stabbed his sword into the belly of a descending wyvern. Paying no mind to its cries of pain, he swung his blade and launched the beast away.

"I'm running out of space here! You finish him off!"

"Got it!"

The near-dead wyvern sailed towards the castle gate. Had Onyx opened it? The heavy gate was, for some reason, wide open, and a small shadow stood before it, awaiting prey.

Ah, so that's Onyx's other ally. W-wait, what?!

"W-wait, hold on a second, Onyx!"

"Hm? Hey, watch your head. They're gonna take it off."

"Priorities! That girl, she's...she's still just a child!"

"Ah, don't worry. She's really, really strong."

Standing in front of the fortress gate was a girl much younger than I! She was holding one of the practice weapons that just happened to be lying around, an iron mace. It was bent and battered, and I hardly imagined it could do its job as

a weapon.

This "Alyosha" seemed to have noticed the weapon was no good and tossed it aside. Instead, she took up a boxing pose, warming up her footwork. Really? Bare-handed?

"Look out!"

"Yeah, the wyvern really should."

Onyx muttered beside me as Alyosha leapt. She brought down her right hand and *struck* the wyvern, bare-handed. That was all it took. As if struck by a warhammer, the wyvern slammed to the ground and twitched briefly before ceasing to move entirely.

Wait, what? That can't...she was bare-handed! Bare-handed! What human could defeat a wyvern bare-handed?!

"There's no way!"

"I told you she'd be fine."

As I looked on in disbelief, Onyx was unmoved. I thought over what I had just witnessed. Of course, the head is said to be one of a wyvern's few weak points, so being struck there with immense force was likely to be unbearable for the creature. I understood the principle. Yet, *bare-handed*? That made no sense!

"Well, we've taken out a lot of wyverns. I was a little worried at first, but glad things turned out okay."

Onyx chatted nonchalantly as he leisurely swung his sword, somehow slicing off the wing of a low-flying wyvern and sending it crashing to the ground. He didn't appear to have cast a spell, so did the force of his blade somehow...generate a shockwave? Was that humanly possible?

Right before my eyes, the dragons above fell one after another, and the ones that managed to survive flew away. After safety had clearly been attained, the other soldiers stepped out from the keep and the other lookout stations.

"Johan, what in the..."

"Captain!"

"I see we're going to live for another day, but...what's going on here?"

As the captain staggered his way down the stairs, Onyx gave him a look.

"You're in charge here, huh? Well, it's too early to celebrate. The main dish's about to arrive."

"You can't mean there's more than wyverns?!"

Onyx shrugged off the captain's alarm.

"You were dealing with the grunts. Their actual leader's a blackened wyrm. The battle's probably going to happen in this fort, so gather up the survivors quick and evacuate them to town. I'll protect them on the way."

"Don't forget meee! I'll protect them, too!"

"We'll cover your escape."

"Wait, beat a wyrm? With only three people? Are you *joking*?!"

I was so stunned I forgot that they'd saved my life. Certainly, I could tell that they were powerful fighters, but a wyrm was on a completely different plane than a wyvern!

Wyverns were relatively small dragons and mainly stuck to the skies. If you managed to smack one down to the ground and robbed them of their mobility, they were not that powerful a foe...or, so they said.

Wyrms, however, were the strongest class of dragon, and they were mighty on all fronts. They had four powerful limbs to tower over prey on land with, and two mighty wings. Their tails could easily shatter a castle wall, and their breath rivaled the highest-level attack magic.

If it was hard to imagine them, picture the first thing that comes into your head when you think of a "dragon." Just a giant, monstrous lizard. That was a wyrm.

"D-do you understand what you're getting yourselves into? A wyrm normally takes an entire kingdom's concerted efforts to bring down!"

"Yeah. Hell, taking out the wyverns was like a bonus. A warm-up. What I'm saying is, when the three of us bring down that wyrm, the kingdom of Eris is going to owe us big-time. And see? There he is!"

Right as Onyx finished speaking, I heard an immense crash at my back. As I scrambled to turn around, I saw part of the wall crumble. Something had come down from above. At first, I thought it might be more boulders, like the wyverns dropped, but I quickly realized that wasn't the case. A massive beast was before me.

"Oh. Oh no."

Its body was black as night. I could see its sharp fangs, and its tremendous growl rocked my innards. The wyrm was about as large as the keep itself, with its wings alone being as large as multiple wyverns. The stone path underfoot audibly cracked with each heavy step it took.

Then, with a loud bang, the wall was turned to dust. This was no attack. It was simply the beast swatting away an obstacle with a light flick of its tail. I quivered

in my boots.

"Gods be good, a wyrm!"

A wyrm, the most powerful of all dragonkind, had crushed its way into the fort.

The beast let out a low, blood-chilling growl.

"Fallen speechless, comrade? Judging from the looks of it, it must have been quite the storied dragon indeed. How cruel a curse it is to be blackened!"

The large, red-haired man had come up beside me at some point, to my surprise. He gave the blade at his back a quick spin to ready it and looked to the wyrm.

"Can't bear the sight. It's time to hunt."

The wyrm roared in response, and I crumbled to the ground, hands over my ears. It felt as if my eardrums were going to burst.

The captain and the other soldiers fared no better. If we didn't summon our courage, this roar alone would be enough to render the whole unit useless. Yet, Onyx and the others seemed unmoved.

"Ed, can you handle this guy?"

"Leave the dragon to me. I'll leave the soldiers to you."

"Good luck!"

"You can't mean to face the dragon alone?!"

I couldn't believe it. This swordsman, this Ed, was planning to bring down a wyrm alone. And Onyx and Alyosha didn't seem the least bit surprised, either. It

was like this was normal, or they'd planned it.

"All right, with Ed handling the big guy...hey, captain, is this all the survivors?"

"Y-yes, everyone's here."

"Then let's hurry out of this place! He's taking that dragon down here, and if you don't want to die in the crossfire, get moving."

"W-wait...hold on, you can't be serious!" One of the older soldiers, wounded and leaning on the captain's shoulder, spoke up in protest.

"You, face a wyrm?! Sure, you may be strong, but a single swordsman can't hope to challenge the strongest of dragons! Do you honestly think you can win with no support?!"

What he said made perfect sense. The wyrm was large enough to make the wyverns look like humble pet lizards. It was less a dragon and more a force of nature, like a storm or a tsunami. It wasn't something a human could deal with, much less one with only a sword. Yet, Onyx provided a surprising response.

"About twenty-one."

"What?"

"That's about how many blackened wyrms Ed here has taken out," Onyx stated softly, not stopping as he walked ahead of us. "He's a dragonfolk, see. Maybe it's the human blood in them, but dragonfolk become blackened the least among dragons. As one of their strongest, it's Ed's duty to execute other dragons that have fallen so far there's no turning back."

"E-execute? Dragons?"

"Hm, maybe that isn't the best way to put it. Think of it like this: he's a dragon slayer. So how about you leave the dragon slaying to him and worry about

yourselves?"

"Bows up! Four wyverns, incoming!" A senior soldier shouted right as Onyx pointed to the sky.

Four wyverns came at us. They slowly descended as they closed in.

Our group was walking down a slope that stretched from the fort to the town below. It was paved and decently wide, but that robbed it of hiding spots. We had to fight.

Tension ran through us as we drew our weapons. I pulled an arrow from my quiver and started to nock it.

"Man, they're dumb. I would've let them live if they just flew away. Hey, sorry, I'm borrowing this."

Before I knew it, Onyx had slipped the bow from my hands with all the deftness of a pickpocket.

"All right, we've got a nice variety of weapons here. I'll teach you how to beat wyverns easy, as a bonus!"

"You'll what?"

"Time for Onyx's Wyvern Slaying Course for Beginners. Let's start with the bow."

Onyx sloppily nocked an arrow and fired at the lowest-flying wyvern.

"Take a look at where I'm aiming."

The whizzing arrow didn't land in its weak patagium, nor the easy target of its belly. Instead, the arrow closed in on the wyvern's neck and zipped right past it.

A missed shot. Or so I thought. Then it plinked against the tip of the wing. The wyvern let out a shriek after, and to my surprise, it stopped flapping its wings

and fell from the air, belly-up.

Onyx must have calculated the landing point because the beast fell right in front of Alyosha, completely defenseless.

"Take him out, Alyosha!"

"Aye!"

Alyosha somehow had a blunt weapon...no, it was a log in her hands. She swung the log up and crushed the wyvern, killing it instantly. It's true, there *were* a lot of trees near the fortress and there *was* a lumberjack's cottage a little down the path, but...who in the world would use a *log* as a weapon?

"It really hurts when you knock your pinky finger on the corner of a cabinet or something, right?" Onyx remarked nonchalantly as he handed me my bow back. "It's the same thing with wyverns. If you apply a strong shock to the edge of their wing, that force'll go through their whole body, stunning them for a bit. The target's pretty small, though, so you'll need to know the trick to hitting it."

"U-um. Back at military academy, we were taught to aim for a wyvern's patagium while using a bow."

"Probably because it's pretty big and easiest to aim for, but it's surprisingly resilient. You won't be able to ground the lizard if you don't open a big hole in the patagium, and it's kind of springy, so sometimes your arrow will just bounce off. Hey, you over there...mind lending me your spear?"

"S-sure."

Onyx began spinning the borrowed spear around. He spun it twice overhead and one more time at his side. He then brandished the weapon, looking like an experienced lancer. Disbelief overcame me as I realized what he was attempting. Was he really going to knock out another wyvern as part of his

educational demonstration?

Wyverns aren't practice monsters!

"Lesson two, fighting with a spear. This one's the easiest, so teach your pals later." Onyx looked up at the sky to see two wyverns descending simultaneously. They were most definitely coming after Onyx and Alyosha. It made sense, too. Dragons were smart, and they must have realized that killing those two meant that we would be easy pickings. They zipped at them, paying us no mind.

"Once locked onto their prey, a wyvern will zip down with absolute focus, ready to tear its victim down with those sharp claws. That means..."

Onyx knelt down on one knee, his eyes focused squarely on the advancing claws.

"You do this!"

He vigorously thrust the spear forth. With perfect accuracy, it pierced through the wyvern's chest, with the tip poking out its back. Though not an instant kill, it dealt immense damage. As the wyvern tried to stagger back, Onyx hurled the spear at its head, finishing it off.

As for the other wyvern, well, it was a goner too. Alyosha threw a rock at its head to ground it, then smashed it with her log.

"That's how you do it. Better to do it with a tower shield or something, really. That way you can hide behind it and lunge with your spear up diagonally. If you time it right, the accelerating wyvern will just skewer itself on your spear for you."

"Time it right? Is...is there some way to tell?"

Onyx thought about my question as he handed the soldier back his spear.

"For this, you'll want to rely on your ears. Right before they attack, you'll hear these three high-pitched scraping sounds. That's them trying not to bump into their friends in the sky. You probably won't be able to hear it during a brawl, but they won't be able to do diving attacks easily in that case, either."

I'd never been taught any of this back in the academy, and it wasn't in any of the military texts, either. One never really pays attention to any sounds a wyvern makes in battle. Normally, anyway. I'd been attacked by wyverns countless times but could only focus on defending myself. I didn't have the confidence to look out for signs of their attack. Just how much experience did one need to reach that level?

"All right, last lesson. After bows and spears comes spells!"

There was one wyvern remaining. It seemed to be burning with rage at the death of its comrades, because it was zigzagging back and forth as it dove towards us. Onyx held out his right hand and began to perform some motions with it.

"Spells are the only method where it's good to aim for the patagium. The patagium's really strong against physical attacks, sure, but it's pretty weak to magic. Fireball!"

Onyx launched a spell—without chanting, no less! I'd heard that the mage's guild set the ability to cast at least one spell within an hour without chanting as a condition for promotion to a mid-level spellcaster. At that level, you'd be able to have disciples and your own workshop, meaning that most sorcerers take the exam, but very few pass. Casting spells without chanting was that difficult.

And Onyx just...did it. Which meant he was a talented user of swords, spears, and bows, and was enough of a sorcerer to have disciples.

What is with *this guy? What's he doing being an adventurer?*

If he was this strong, he could've been in a better position in society! Like the leader of a knight unit, or a guild master! Something, anything!

The Fireball he launched hit the wyvern directly, causing an explosion far greater than the ones from the captain's spell tags. The whole sky was dyed red. Though the wyvern was far away, the hot wind still scorched my cheeks. Any closer and I would probably have burns.

The wyvern couldn't have gotten off easily. And it didn't. The ashes of what had been the flying lizard crumbled into the shade of the nearby trees.

"And that's basically how you do it. I used a Fireball spell because I felt like it, but fire spells are pretty bad against dragons. I'd recommend lightning or ice."

"Um. Say."

"Yeah?"

"Ah...nothing. Never mind."

Aim for the patagium, he said, then incinerated the whole beast.

And that was with a fire spell, that dragons resist. It looked to me like Onyx's magic power was so immense that *anywhere* he aimed would have had the same effect. I wanted to bring this up as I stared at the ashes of the wyvern, but thought better of it.

Aim for the patagium if you're fighting with spells. Got it. If Onyx said it, it must be true.

"All right, that's it! Let's run to town before the fight in the fort gets serious!"

"U-um, sir, a question first!"

"Yeah?" Onyx stopped and turned to me. I was sure everyone was thinking

the same thing about Onyx's group, but no one could say it. Their power was so inhuman that they felt like they'd be more at home in the fairy tales.

Still, *someone* had to ask. And that someone happened to be me.

"Who..." I finally asked the question that had been on my mind this whole time. "Who *are* you people?"

Onyx and Alyosha exchanged blank looks, then turned back to us and faintly smiled.

"Just some adventurers here to eat dragon steak."

4 — Truth

"Leaving already?"

"Yeah. Sorry about doing such a number on the fort, Johan. Apologize to the captain for me, okay?"

"Oh, it's totally fine. If it weren't for you three, much more than the fort would have been destroyed."

It had been half a day since the attack of the wyverns. I was standing at the remains of the fort with Onyx and the others. We had come to do an inspection of the site with the royal knight and his troops from the capital.

The reinforcements from the throne had not arrived until the sun started to set. By that time, though, the battle had already been settled. Every last wyvern had been defeated, and Ed had defeated the wyrm in his duel at the fort.

We had escaped down the road descending the hill, and when we'd gotten to town, a massive explosion rocked the fort. I imagined it was the wyrm's fire-breath. Still, Ed only came away with minor burns, speaking volumes as to his toughness. And apparently, the burns would heal in a few days at most. How could anyone be that resilient?

"You're good! You're good! All right, Alyosha, toss that one into the gate, too!"

"Here goes!"

They hadn't just defeated the wyrm, either, but offered to take all of the dragon corpses off of our hands. Dragon meat and bones did sell for high prices, but transporting the corpses was another thing entirely. Though we were

skeptical at first, Onyx opened up a Warp Gate with a spell and started tossing the dragons through it like he was collecting scraps of paper.

"Urahhh!"

Alyosha easily held up a wyvern body and tossed it into the gate. This had occurred repeatedly over the past few hours, so almost no one was surprised by her immense strength anymore. It was truly fearsome what one could get accustomed to.

The royal knight in charge of checking out the site was one of those unsurprised. He simply spoke with Onyx while calmly watching Alyosha in action.

"My inspection is complete. Now, Adventurer Onyx, your group defeated the wyrm, then?"

The knight had his left gauntlet off as he flipped through the papers the inspection was recorded on.

"The countless blade wounds on the wyrm match with the greatsword swordsman Ed uses. There are also multiple eyewitness testimonies from Johan and the surviving soldiers confirming that you aided in driving off the wyverns, as well as accounts of aid from the townspeople. And I must say, I'm quite impressed that you protected both town and fort."

"Yeah, I'd say it's pretty impressive. Impressive enough to warrant a bag of gold coins as a reward, maybe?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Gold? For such a feat?"

The knight turned to cast his gaze on the black mountain behind him. No, it wasn't actually a mountain, although it was similar in size. It was the blackened wyrm's corpse.

"A wyrm is a beast that requires an entire country's worth of concerted effort to defeat. With such an achievement under your belt, you could easily be knighted by His Majesty himself!"

"My, knighthood, huh? That's quite something!" Onyx made a show of being impressed. "But we're adventurers, you know? We're not going to lay our roots here in Eris."

"You needn't worry about that. There have been knighted adventurers in the past, few though their number may be. The title brings with it support for food and board, preferential access to supply trade, and countless other benefits to make your journeys as smooth as possible."

"Now that does sound pretty nice. We've been having a bit of a recession lately that's made it really hard to find a decent meal. In that case, you can bet we'll show up at the capital in a while. Count on it."

"I recommend you do. After all, tales of your exploits have made it to neighboring villages already. They speak of three dragon slayers, as mighty as the heroes of legend."

"Hero, you say?" Onyx's cheeks twitched, and his smile grew strained.

"Does that sound strange? You risked life and limb to save the many. If that is not the work of a hero, what is? Should you simply disappear without a trace, why, that may cause a panic."

"Ahaha...heroes, huh? Well, that's...that's good to hear. An honor, really."

Onyx seemed to harbor mixed feelings as he laughed. The knight gave him a perplexed look.

"Your group truly is a mystery. When I heard that a group of three had defeated a pack of dragons, I expected warriors of legend, yet...here you are,

the leader, laughing it up. And Alyosha is still a child, even. Swordsman Ed is the only one who fits the bill."

"Well, you can't judge a book by its cover, you know? We've got a lot going on." Onyx snapped his fingers. The Warp Gate began to glow even brighter, then slowly sucked the wyrm's massive body into it.

"When it's all cleaned up like this, there's no telling who beat the dragons." A hint of sadness showed on Onyx's face as he spoke. "There's plenty of great works and huge talents out there, all buried under obscurity. Appearances tell you next to nothing. That's all just surface level."

"Right you are," the knight replied, nodding. "In fact, the infamous hero Leo performed countless great works, yet they say he looked like an unassuming youth, much like yourself. Today's incident reminded me to not judge on appearances, indeed it did. I'll keep myself in check."

"O-oh, y-yeah? G-great."

"Is something the matter? Did I say something strange?"

"Uh, nope, not at all!"

Onyx stretched and looked the other way. Alyosha and Ed were behaving similarly. They'd defeated a wyrm and a horde of dragons, but they acted as though they had just finished up an errand at the store. It boggled my mind.

Perhaps that was simply what adventurers were like. Though they boasted great strength, they elected to not stay anchored to a single place and instead venture out into the world, living freely as they took on danger. Perhaps they had no interest in loyalty to a single country, or gaining status and power. As a man who could not imagine leaving Eris, this was a completely different world to me.

Ed and Alyosha had started getting ready to leave and were in high spirits. They didn't even seem to be listening to the knight's conversation.

"Have to say, coming out to Eris was worth the trip! Now we can eat meat until we're sick of the stuff! Isn't that right, Alyosha?"

"Yeah! Glad we came!"

"There's plenty of ways to prepare dragon meat, but the most scrumptious has to be steaks! Even if all you do is cook it, good meat is always tasty. Salt? Pepper? We need none of it! Look forward to some great steak from yours truly!"

"Yayyy! Steak, steaaaak!"

They truly were free spirits.

Wait, isn't Ed a dragonfolk? Isn't that cannibalism?

I let out a deep sigh. This entire day had been one big ordeal. The fort was attacked, I nearly died countless times, and wandering adventurers saved my life. They were amazing, really. Alyosha, tiny, yet fierce as a wild animal in unarmed combat. Ed, strong as a dragon and masterful with a blade. Onyx, built up with countless experience and boasting incredible strategy and tactics. It wasn't just their abilities, either. It was the sheer courage they displayed in facing powerful foes. It felt like I had witnessed true strength this day.

I needed to rethink my ideas of strength, in fact. It felt like even my outlook on life had changed.

"Well, I shall take my leave. I can arrange lodging for you in the town of Finoy if you'd like. The innkeeper was rather eager to have you stay."

"Ahh, I don't think we could pull that off. Gotta prepare the dragon steak...er, ah, there's a lot of stuff we have to take care of. Apologize to the innkeeper for

me."

"Very well, I won't push it. Do take care on the road."

"We will, thanks."

The sun had set, and darkness was falling. The royal knight and his unit left the fort.

"U-um! Onyx, Ed, Alyosha!"

"Hm?"

When Onyx and his group were about to leave, I quickly stopped them. There was something I had to ask them. Something I had to learn from those who were stronger than anyone I'd ever met. It was probably something incredibly mundane to them. But this wasn't the kind of chance one had every day, and I knew I wouldn't get another for my entire life. I didn't want to let the opportunity slip.

"What's up, Johan? Need something?"

"Well, there's just something I've been curious about since you first showed up."

I reflexively drew back as they all three turned to look at me. Even under the cover of darkness I thought I saw suspicion on their faces. Nervous suspicion. Had I mistakenly given them the wrong impression, somehow? Even during the battle against the wyverns, they hadn't seemed this on edge. I scrambled to ask my question.

"H-how can I get as strong as you?! Please, tell me!"

"...Oh, that's it?"

They all let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Kid, did you really stick around this long just to ask that?"

"I-I did. I mean, I nearly died here today."

"You want to get strong, do you. Why? Are you afraid of death?"

I thought Onyx would respond to my question, but surprisingly, Ed gave me his attention. I shook my head slightly at his question.

"No. W-well, yes, I am afraid of dying, but...I wasn't exactly afraid when the wyvern was about to kill me. I was frustrated."

"Frustrated?"

"Well, it suddenly seemed obvious to me. If I were stronger, I could have protected the fort, my brothers in arms...myself. When I stared at those claws coming down, I wanted more strength."

"Heh. I see, I see."

"And that was when you all appeared. Onyx, Alyosha, Ed...you're all so much stronger than any soldier or knight I've met in my life. That's why I wanted to ask, how did you get so strong?"

Ed grunted in response, then walked up to me and put a rough hand twice the size of mine on my shoulder.

"Whoa?!"

"Skinny. Very skinny."

He patted my shoulders and waist.

"Guh!"

"Mmm, skinny all over."

I was wearing scale mail over my leather armor, but the impact went through

all of those layers straight to my bones. I nearly had the wind knocked out of me.

"You've got a delicate build to you, not one suited for the front lines. Better suited, I'd say, for an archer, scout, or messenger. Whichever you choose, it better be something that requires agility."

"Does that...mean I can't get stronger?"

"Not at all. Realizing your inborn mediocrity is the first step to gaining strength." Ed's tone grew stronger. "The average man who trains himself to the bone becomes a true terror. He understands his weaknesses and trains rigorously to cover them. A humble, mediocre man with good technique and a well-trained mind and body is far greater than a lazy genius."

"H-he is?"

"He is. And this doesn't only apply to the martial arts, either. Deskwork, art, it's all the same. In any field, those who put in the effort are the strongest. That is how you gain strength."

"Hey, Ed. You're basically saying, 'put in a ton of effort,' then?"

"Because I don't know any other way! Hahaha."

"Musclehead over here, trying to solve everything with brute force."

Ed just laughed as Onyx gave him a baffled look. It felt strange to see. After all, Ed seemed like the most naturally talented and powerful of the group. He was physically immense with rippling muscles, and his greatsword was an intimidating sight. Hell, the look in his eyes could scare a mountain lion or bear away.

This man was certainly blessed with strength and a genius at combat. Yet, there he was, telling me about "effort"? It seemed so strange.

"Oh, but!" Alyosha interrupted. At some point, she'd poked her head between Ed and myself, like a cat joining in. "If a regular person and a genius *both* work real hard, then won't the genius still win? Like, are you okay with that, Johan?"

"Whoa, you actually understood what Ed was talking about? Good on you, Alyosha."

"H-hey! Quit making fun of me!"

Alyosha bit into Onyx. She was absolutely right, though. If the amount of effort spent was the same, the genius would always win.

"I am. I don't need to be the strongest in the world."

"You don't?"

"It's all about finding your place in life, right? I'll have my work, and the geniuses will have theirs. If there's a genius out there that worked really hard like you said, then I want to support them as a regular person who's also worked really hard. That's the kind of strength I'm after."

"Whoa."

Alyosha gave me an impressed look and clapped. Her tail also swished back and forth in approval.

Ah. She looks so human I forgot, but she's beastfolk. Maybe that's why she's so strong.

"You're right! It's best for everyone to do the job they're good at!"

"Yeah."

"Good on you, noticing that! Headpats for you!"

"H-hey, could...could you please not?"

"Good boy, good boy!"

"Wahaha. How about you leave the poor man be for now, Alyosha?"

Alyosha patted my head. Ed watched for a while before peeling her off. Meanwhile, Onyx just laughed.

"Whaddaya mean, good boy? You're the one who only just figured out what division of labor is!"

"W-well, I'm doing it now! I'm doing good management!"

"Say, Onyx."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe you could give me some advice...that is, if you're able to."

"Huh? Me?" Onyx bashfully scratched his cheek. "Well, I did show you how to beat a wyvern a bit ago. I'm guessing you don't want tactics, but something more related to mindset?"

"Yes, that's right. Even if it's just relating your own experience, I'd love to hear what you have to say."

"Experience, huh. ...Heh, you want to hear one of my experiences?" Onyx laughed at the thought, like this was funny.

"Is that asking too much?"

"No, it's just...my experiences are a little peculiar, you see. Hm. Lemme think."

This man was an enigma to me. He didn't look as strong as Ed, and he wasn't a beastfolk like Alyosha. He seemed...plain. Almost like an average person. Yet, there was no mistaking he was strong. He boasted skill in a variety of weapons, and he was a master of magic on top of that. It had to be the result of unyielding effort and must have taken years.

He was able to make swift, concise judgments in combat situations and take command of others. This, I imagined, came from vast experience. He must have traveled the world, solving all sorts of trouble.

Vast experience. Unyielding effort. When I put it like that, Onyx seemed like the ultimate example of an average man who just kept on working hard. Though I entertained that admittedly rude thought, I waited patiently for his advice.

"Well...becoming too strong isn't really a good thing," he relayed after a long thoughtful pause. "You get too well known and people start coming after your life. They start coming after where you live. The stronger you get, the more responsibilities and obligations get thrust on you. Sometimes, your strength locks you down."

"Really?"

"It's weird. You really want strength when you don't have it, and when you do, you get bogged down with all of these annoying obligations. Sometimes, you wish you didn't have all the strength you'd gained."

"Then...would I be happier if I didn't become strong?"

"Nah. Honestly, you should do what you want." Onyx shook his head. "There's plenty of problems to be had from being weak. No matter how strong or weak you are, you're always going to have problems in life, so just do as your heart demands. You can worry about all the problems that come with being strong after you have that strength."

"Do as I please, huh."

"Oh! One thing, though!" Onyx pointed his finger at me. "Don't try to take on responsibility for everything by yourself! If you want to get strong, you should

get friends who'll walk the path with you. People you can share your troubles with."

"Like Alyosha and Ed?"

"Yeah, exactly. They're always helping me out. When you don't know what you want to do, or how to move forward, talk with your friends first. That, I want you to never forget. Got it?"

"G-got it!"

"Good. Well, that's all the advice I've got for you." He nodded with a satisfied smile.

His words...especially the advice at the end, had a strange persuasiveness to them. He always seemed so calm and laid-back, but I knew there had to be a lot of difficult trials and suffering behind his advice.

"Well, it's about time for us to actually go. Take care, Johan."

"I will! You too, everyone!"

"Be good. Looking forward to seeing how much stronger you are next time we meet, kid!"

"See you! Bye bye!"

Onyx threw a runestone before him, creating a Warp Gate about the size of a door in midair. It sparkled with a blueish-white light, and I couldn't tell where it led.

Right before Alyosha stepped through the gate, "Oh!" she remembered something and turned around. She hopped up and down and waived several times to get my attention. "Oh yeah! Johan! Johhhaaan!"

"Yes?"

"We're always in the big castle in the Seshat Mountains, so stop by and play sometime! We'll be waiting!"

"Huh?"

"Shut—"

"The castle's been all about peace since Leo came, so a human visiting should be—"

"Idiot! Can it!"

Onyx booted Alyosha in the butt, sending her disappearing into the blue portal. Did...did I hear that right? It came so suddenly I didn't quite understand what she said. I mean, I heard all the words, but my brain was refusing comprehension. The Seshat Mountains? Where Queen Echidna's castle was? That was the dreaded land where Demon King Belial had descended into the human world eons ago. The mountainous region had almost no trade routes and made for a poor place to live. Who would *ever* build a castle in such a place?

The Demon Queen, I supposed.

"That moron."

"Haha, a handful to the end, 'ey?"

Ed laughed with detached amusement and stepped through the portal while Onyx cradled his head in frustration. As I watched him go, I remembered.

Ed was a dragonfolk. Come to think of it, one of the Demon Queen's Four Great Guardians was a dragonfolk. He loved combat on the front line, wielded a greatsword, and lived to fight against powerful foes. And his name was...if I remembered right, Dragon General Edvard.

That wasn't all. One of the Guardians was a beastfolk, too. Her name wasn't Aylosha, but she was a little girl far stronger than she looked.

"U-um. Onyx."

"Ahh..."

Onyx awkwardly scratched his head and looked away. Onyx. He had to be...

"Alyosha just referred to you as Leo."

I heard rumors that a man had ventured to the Demon Queen's castle, alone. He was said to be the strongest man in the world, and hell, he *saved* the world. The man had brilliant skills with every weapon, could be a guild master of any guild, and he defeated the Demon Queen himself. He was the hero of legend, Leo.

They said he turned on humanity, throwing in his lot with the demons instead, carving his place as history's most powerful traitor.

"Onyx, if...if you're the hero of legend, Leo—"

"Hold up."

Suddenly, Onyx bowed his head.

"Trust me, Johan, we're not enemies. There's a lot going on and I can't tell you exactly who I am, but when the time comes...I promise I'll tell you the truth. Until then, I'm just Onyx, an adventurer. Can we just leave it at that?"

"W-wait! Please, it's all right, you don't have to bow like that!"

"I'm begging you."

I tried to show him I meant no harm, but he kept his head lowered. The man didn't need to request anything of me. I'd already made up my mind. No matter *who* they were, Onyx and the others risked their lives to save us. They seriously

helped me grapple with my conflict and desire over becoming stronger. That wasn't going to change. My parents wouldn't be proud of me if I looked at these three with suspicion.

"You're a good person, that's what I believe. How could we be enemies?"

"...Yeah?"

"Absolutely. So please, you don't need to bow. I...I can't have the man I owe my life to bowing to me like this."

"Ahaha...yeah, you have a point there." Onyx finally raised his head. Then, after a brief moment of hesitation, he held out his right hand. "Thanks, Johan."

We shared a handshake of trust.

I took his hand in both of mine and held it tight.

"I thank you, Onyx."

"Glad it was you that I got to meet you. Well, see you. Don't know when we'll meet again, but take care."

"And you, too."

This time, the conversation truly ended. With a light wave, Onyx vanished into the portal. The Warp Gate's light grew weaker then vanished, leaving a blue outline behind. After blinking several times, the outline also dissipated into the air.

"Well, it's over."

The darkness of night fell, lit up by the stars and the moon in the sky. I could see lights from Finoy, past the wreckage of the fort and down the hill road. The chatter at the bar, the merchants coming and going, the knights' horses, the loud children...they were all a part of the peace the adventurers protected. And

I, too, wanted to become strong like them. I ran home.

5 — Dragon Steak with Garlic Butter Sauce

Back at the courtyard of the dark castle, a specially-made stage loomed. A goblin in a loud outfit stepped out onto it holding a spherophone to magically project his voice with. Countless soldiers focused their attention on him.

"Hey, hey, hey! People of the dark castle, I know you've all been waiting! And I know you've all been *hungry*! Well, we've got a surprise for you in our monthly talk show. Today, the Hero and the Dragon General are going to put on a cooking show! Let's give it up for them!"

Thunderous applause filled the courtyard.

"I'm Doug Garrix. Back in the day, I was one of the best con men out of all the goblinoids, but now I'm the army's head treasurer! Today I'll be your host, wielding my silver tongue as my weapon! Now, let's have a look at our guests... Lighting on!"

With a snap of his fingers, the magic stone enchanted with the Lightning spell flashed on, illuminating the sofa at the back of the stage. There were two women seated comfortably on it. One of them, a beautiful girl in a red dress, stood up and spoke in a quiet, yet commanding voice.

"It's me, Echidna. I want all of you to listen."

The crowd immediately grew quiet. It was obvious their queen was trying hard to maintain her dignity, but the weeks of eating nothing but beans had gotten to her. Unable to hold back any longer, she broke into a smile and started yelling without the aid of the spherophone. This was her natural state. She abandoned dignity and excitedly addressed her soldiers.

"*Finally*! We're going to finally get to eat meat again!"

She thrust her hand into the air in a triumphant pose.

"What's more, we're having dragon steak! Wyrm meat, do you hear me?! You'd have a hard time getting steak that high class even back in demon world! And it's all thanks to Leo, Edvard, and Lili. So thank them! Give them a great round of applause!"

Another thundering round of applause.

"I can't hear you! More! Thank them more!"

Yet another thundering round of applause.

"Er...Doug? How long are we keeping this up?"

"That's just the kind of event it is, General Shutina. I'm afraid you'll have to bear with it. Still, look at how pleased the soldiers are!"

"I can hardly see the advantage in this. We need the queen to stay dignified, yet she slips back into her commoner habits at the drop of a hat."

"Well, those commoner habits you're complaining about are Queen Echidna's best feature! Speaking of which, where is General Mernes? I invited him as a special guest, as well."

"He stepped out. He's busy with work."

"Whoops. Well, I guess there's no helping that. Let's pass the baton over to the kitchen, then. Hey, Leo!"

"Yeah, I'm here."

I responded unenthusiastically from the cooking area set up in the center of the courtyard where I was chopping onions. It looked like the ball was finally in my court. Really, you let Doug talk and he just went on and on like this. Sure, it was fun to hear, but sometimes he got too carried away. Sometimes it was just

impossible to keep up with. Mernes probably made the right choice in staying home.

Don't get the wrong idea, though. We weren't doing this funny little show for no reason. The issue simply was that the castle barely had any entertainment. It was stuck in some obscure mountains with nothing but rocks around it. The only fun to be had was food and chatting.

"We've got all this dragon meat, so how about we raise morale by building a stage and putting on a cooking show?"

Echidna immediately agreed to my suggestion, and we put on the event under short notice. The troops were pretty into it, so let's call it a win.



"Phew! Here we are!"

"Thanks, Lili."

Lili carried over a basket filled to the brim with meat and set it down beside me with a thump. It looked like there was enough meat in there for forty people.

"Is this enough? Do we still need more?"

"Mmm, we do have a lot of people here. Sorry, can you do two or three more trips?"

"What about the vegetables?"

"Edvard's taking care of those, so bring them to him."

"Got it!"

Edvard and I were the cooks in the kitchen. Lili was transporting the food from the storehouse. It was a pretty tough job, bringing in enough meat to feed the whole castle, but this was punishment for letting her mouth slip at the end.

That really had me worried. Luckily enough Johan was a nice guy, because if he hadn't been, my plan to get in thick with the upper crust of a kingdom after slaying some dragons would have fallen to pieces. Next time I went on a stealth mission, I was definitely leaving Lili at home.

"Honestly, Edvard, I'm pretty surprised."

"Surprised? About what?"

"I had no idea you could cook. I thought you just ate."

"Hahaha, well, I'm quite the drinker. I got into making sides to enjoy my liquor with, and before I knew it, I'd picked up quite a few cooking techniques. That's all."

"Huh. You know, that makes a lot of sense."

Edvard wasn't wearing armor this time, but a leather apron with a cute dragon design. It was a funny sight to see, and I was sure his daughter, Julietta made it for him. He cricked his neck back and forth and put aside the vegetables he had just finished chopping.

"All right, now what? There's countless recipes for meat, but only a few of them really bring out the unique taste of dragon meat. And we have a lot of mouths to feed, so we'll need something we can serve a crowd. Let's start with something by the numbers. First up—Ultimate Dragon Steak!"

———————

Ultimate Dragon Steak

・Dragon Meat

・Cooking Oil (small amount)

1. Score the meat along the fat.

2. Cook medium rare.

3. Enjoy!

———————

I invoked Salamander to light the oven fire, and I already had my meat oiled, so all that remained was to throw it on the iron grill and lightly sear it. Normally, you'd salt and pepper both sides of the cut beforehand, but I didn't. As the wyvern meat began sizzling on the massive iron grill, as I suspected, the soldiers started to boo from the audience.

"What the hell, hero!"

"You're just cooking it like normal!"

"You haven't even put any damn seasoning on it! Are you even *trying*?!"

"Get outta there! Let General Edvard take over!"

Honestly, I expected this reaction. Fools, every last one of them. I could tell they hadn't eaten dragon meat before, and it was time to rock their worlds. Edvard calmed the soldiers down as he put the finished steaks onto a large plate.

"Simmer down, men! Just give it a try. Trust me, you'll really like it."

"Well, if the general says so..."

They looked as reluctant as could be, but they gathered around the massive plate in front of the stage. It was piled with freshly grilled steaks, and more were being added at a rapid pace. Some soldiers used knives and forks, others used chopsticks. Some just picked it up with their bare hands and chomped.

Then, shock. A wave of emotion as they cried out in unison.

"Whoa!"

"What the hell, this is so good! There's no seasoning, but it's got this sweetness to it!"

"This meat's so juicy! There's so much umami with every bite!"

The waves of emotion rippled outward, and a stampede of soldiers rushed to the plate as they began fighting over who got to feast first. Before I knew it, the plain dragon steaks were gone. Only Shutina and Echidna kept their cool.

"Mmm! That must be the heavily marbled fat I'm tasting. I hear good meat is tasty just grilled, but I didn't know it could be *this* good. Is it a matter of freshness?" Shutina mused as she cut a big bite out of her steak and ate it. The

sight of that medium-rare center must have tickled her appetite, because she immediately had another bite. Next to her, Echidna chomped at hers with reckless abandon.

"Leo! Is this meat really half a day old? It tastes like you just killed it! The juiciness, the firmness...this is amazing!"

"Yeah, dragons have life force like you wouldn't believe, so it takes forever for their meat to go bad. It'll be fresh even if you keep it at room temperature for seven days. Hell, you could eat the stuff raw."

This I knew. Lili was munching on the raw meat as she carried it. Well...she's an actual wild child, so it wouldn't destroy her stomach, but the fact remained that dragon meat stayed fresh for a long time. I was sure a human could eat it raw, too.

It didn't go bad, was full of nutrition, and tasted incredibly good. There was just no beating dragon meat when you wanted to cook!

"Fantastic steak! That can't be all there is, though. Come on, give me the rest!"

"As you wish, my queen. Hey! Lili! Bring in the next round of meat!"

"Mrrph!"

Lili ran off to the storehouse, steak still stuffed in her mouth, and pulled out a massive cart full of meat. Looked like my efforts weren't in vain. We had a ton of meat remaining. The plain steak had shown everyone the *potential* of dragon meat, so it was time for my next move. Edvard must have been thinking the same thing, because he had already begun cutting before I could say anything.

"There's only one way to follow up that first preparation, right? Freshly grilled raw steak is to die for, but we need to knock them over with a powerful sauce."

"Are you a mind reader, Dragon General? Absolutely!"

———

Garlic Butter Soy Sauce Dragon Steak

・Dragon Meat

・Cooking Oil (small amount)・Salt, Pepper (to taste)

・Butter

・Soy Sauce

・Garlic

・Rosemary

・Asparagus, Red Bell Peppers, Mushrooms (for sides)

1. After scoring the meat along the fat, season meat with pepper and let it sit for at least fifteen minutes. Season with salt right before grilling.

2. Grill the meat on medium heat. Add butter when both sides have lightly browned.

3. Add rosemary and garlic to the pool of melted butter and allow the flavors to infuse the rosemary. The soy sauce should be added at this time. It burns easily, so make sure to mix it thoroughly with the butter.

4. Place the rosemary on top of the steak and spoon melted garlic butter over the top as it continues to cook. Liberally coat side vegetables with the remaining sauce and sauté.

5. Remove from heat when cooked to individual preference.

———

"This is so good!"

Lili's tail stood on end as she chomped away at her steak, entranced. Of course, she wasn't using a knife or fork like Shutina and Echidna did. She grabbed the steak with her bare hands and bit into it, licking at the garlic butter sauce that dripped down her fingers. It...might have been time to teach her some table manners.

"I like this one better! The first one was great, but this one's amazing!"

"Because we added flavors that work with dragon meat's potential. Back when I was a cook, everyone from kids to heavy drinkers loved this stuff. Pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah, it's great!"

"Hey, General Lili, that's my st—"

Lili started chomping away at the steak a nearby soldier was about to pick up. She just kept going, looking like she was ready to eat all ten pounds of steak left on the plate. I really needed to teach her some table manners.

"Lord Leo, we're going to have to make more before Lili eats them all."

"Man, that glutton...all right, Edvard, pass me that salt, would you."

"Here you go."

"Ah, thank...hmm?"

It wasn't Edvard who handed me the saltshaker. Not with an arm that lean and a white glove extending all the way up to the elbow. A girl in a black and white maid costume was standing before me. Er, or rather, a boy.

"Mernes. What are you doing here?"

"Can't you tell? You don't have enough hands, so I'm here to help in the kitchen. As usual."

"As usual? You gotta be kidding me."

Shadowless General Mernes was the master of the assassins' guild, the fastest member of the dark army, and one of the Four Great Guardians. He'd started a part-time job in the castle's mess hall as a waitress for...reasons. I knew he'd been keeping up with it, but I didn't know they kept operating during events like this.

He was a general, so I figured he should be seated with Echidna and Shutina, but being in the spotlight probably didn't sit right with him. I decided not to bring it up.

"What's the matter, Mernes? Not enough for you?"

"The opposite." Mernes shook his head. "All I see are these big, meaty steaks. Don't you have any lighter dishes?"

"Lighter dishes, huh? Hm."

"I checked the reactions of the others while I was serving, and it looks like the succubi, and imps, and the like want something lighter."

What he said made perfect sense. I'd been so focused on churning out enough meat to feed the entire army, but it's not like everyone enjoyed steak, or could wolf down a whole cut. In that case, I had just the recipe for something the light eaters could enjoy, and that Mernes could munch on while he worked.

———————

Dragon Meat and Veggie Skewer

・Dragon Meat

・Leek

・Garlic

・Onion

・Red Bell Peppers

・Soy Sauce

・Sugar

・Cooking Wine

・Mirin

・Grated Garlic, Grated Ginger

1. Mix soy sauce, sugar, wine, mirin, garlic, and ginger into a sauce.

2. Place thickly cut dragon meat in sauce to marinate.

3. Skewer marinated meat along with bite-sized pieces of onion, leek, red bell pepper, and garlic, then grill while rotating.

4. Once meat begins to brown, brush entire skewer with sauce and continue grilling.

5. Meat and vegetables are ready to eat when the sauce has heated up and become fragrant.

―――――

"Skewers?"

"Yeah, what do you think? They're simple to snack on, and you can easily take them back to your room. Hell, I could wrap up a few for you to have as late-night snacks."

"Thanks, I'd like that."

Surprisingly, Mernes readily accepted my offer. I couldn't tell from his expression, but based on his response, I guessed he must have really liked the sound of it. He wasn't the only one enjoying the food, either. Echidna and Shutina were happily sipping wine and chatting in the guest seats, the soldiers were entranced by their first meat in ages, and Lili had consumed enough meat to feed thirty.

Damn. Sneaking out into the human world incognito and doing some adventuring was really worth the trouble. I placed some skewers into a box labeled, "For Mernes (Lili, do *not* touch!)," and decided to ask Edvard something that was on my mind.

"Hey, Edvard. There's something Johan mentioned that's been on my mind, too. Mind if I talk to you about it over our meal?"

"Hm? What's that?"

Edvard had his apron off and was dishing up his steak.

"You're dragonfolk, right? That means you're a dragon?"

"Yeah."

"Isn't this, like, cannibalism?"

He paused.

"Hahaha! Ahh, I see, I see. Yeah, I could imagine being worried about that."

Edvard let out a booming laugh, then his tone grew a little more serious.

"You have to understand, me slaying dragons and eating the ones I've defeated is all a part of dragonfolk tradition."

"Tradition?"

"Let me give you the basics. All dragons believe in the God Dragons, beings spoken of since ancient times. You've been to Largo, so I'd imagine you know about them, right?"

"Yeah. The land dragon Midgardsormr, the black dragon Nidhogg, and the golden dragon Fafnir. Right?"

"Indeed."

The sound of those names really brought back memories. Nidhogg, Fafnir, Midgardsormr...or Jormungandr, as he was also known. These were all dragons from the Norse myths I'd heard, back during the science age three thousand years ago. As civilization changed, so did myths and religions, but it looked like some things didn't. I felt a small joy as I listened to Edvard refer to those faint remnants of the old world.

"The dragons that listen to Nidhogg's dark whisperings find their flesh and scales turning black, and they simply...go berserk. Like the dragons we faced."

"All right, but what's that got to do with the cannibalism?"

"Dragonfolk believe that all the souls of the dead are sent to the World Tree Yggdrasil, whether dragon or man. They pass through the spring of Hvergelmir and receive their new lives. However, those corrupted by Nidhogg are excised from that cycle. Their souls do not go to Yggdrasil. They stay within this world, even after death, wandering until the world ends."

"Ahh, I see where this is going."

I picked up one of the dragon skewers and took a real close look at the meat

of the wyrm Edvard slew. That wyrm had become completely blackened and gone berserk. If the dragonfolk religion was true, then his soul wouldn't go to Yggdrasil. It would just stay as is.

"So this is a purification ritual, then? A way of bringing corrupted souls back to the cycle of reincarnation?"

"Correct. One eats the meat of a blackened dragon, bringing its body into yours. When we die, the blackened dragons we've eaten will go to Yggdrasil with us."

"Really, though? Sounds kind of fishy."

"Haha, you said it. This is what all the priests tell us, but whether it's true or not, I couldn't say. Still...believing that I was saving them made executing my own blood easier."

"Yeah, I can see that. Here's hoping they get some kind of salvation."

"Indeed. This is why I always eat the meat of the dragons I kill. I believe it's my responsibility."

I heard that when he was younger, Edvard was the strongest dragonfolk around. That was likely why he had the duty of dragon slayer. Personally, I didn't have any interest in religion, but if it made it a little easier for him to carry out that duty of putting down his kin, I couldn't complain.

Edvard pulled out a bottle of ale and poured it into both of our glasses. Then, before taking up his knife and fork, he put his hands together in front of his chest.

"That is why I always give thanks to the life I have taken for the sustenance it provides." His tone was quiet.

"You know, that's not half bad. Let me try too. Uh, thanks for the food."

"Thank you for the food."

Night fell and the feast continued. There were some wonderful developments, both in the provision shortage department, and otherwise.

———————

"Truth be told."

It was the dead of night, and the castle had fallen silent. Much like the night I'd returned from the dungeon, I was pacing my room, deep in thought. This time, however, Shutina was with me.

"I didn't bring it up because I didn't want to complicate things, but there's a clear reason those dragons became blackened."

"Oh? There is?"

"So, there's two types of dragons in the human world. The original ones, which came in from the Demon World and set up shop here, and their copies, which were created in labs as bioweapons three thousand years ago. Dragoneers, we called them."

"...Good grief. The sorcerers of the human world truly make the most terrible things."

"Our backs were really against the wall."

Dragoneers weren't as powerful as the DH Series. However, they'd been infused with powerful mana from the embryonic stage, giving them just as much power and vitality as an actual dragon. That vitality, however, is what caused them to become blackened and go berserk.

"After the war three thousand years ago, a few of the dragoneers mated with

the originals, leaving behind descendants. Essentially, half of the dragons in the human world now are mixed."

"Well, that's good. The Demon World greatly promotes intermixing. The combination of blood from multiple species sometimes leads to very powerful mutations."

"That's the problem, though. The originals' immense magic power combined with the bioweapons' huge vitality sometimes creates powerful mutations that run wild."

"I see. Well, as a sorceress and an academic, I find this very fascinating," Shutina said, then adjusted her glasses and let out a faint sigh. "Although hearing about the mechanism that makes them become blackened doesn't change much. After all, you defeated the blackened wyverns, did you not?"

"Yeah. That's why I wasn't going to bring it up."

"Then, why are you telling me now? And all secretly at this late hour, no less?"

"Well."

I began my hypothesis.

"If my prediction is correct...then Curse-maker Canaan might have something to do with the blackened dragons. So, I figured I should speak with her teacher."

Shutina shot up from her seat. She must have thought we'd put the situation with her disciple behind us after clearing her dungeon. Canaan's name was the last name she expected to hear me say.

"Canaan's involved with the blackened dragons?! What do you mean?!"

"Yeah. It's still just a theory though."

"But how? She's back in the Demon World, healing from the wounds you left her with."

"Oh, I guess I've got to explain that first. Okay, let me do it in order. This is what I think is going on." It was going to be a long story. I sat down in the comfortable chair by the window and beckoned her to sit across from me.

"Remember going into Canaan's dungeon a few days ago? Did anything stand out to you about it, as her teacher?"

"What do you mean?"

"The dungeon at Siculus was fifteen floors. She put everything she had into it trying to kill me, and fifteen floors was all she could manage. You see where I'm going?"

"Ah, I see. What you are trying to say is," Shutina leaned over and looked me in the eye, "there's no way Canaan could make a dungeon thirty floors deep."

"Exactly. I've been stuck on that for a while."

"Indeed, I also think that dungeon was far greater than what she could manage. And I'm not simply talking about the depth, either."

"Like that prism crystal?"

A pause.

"R-right. That was an obvious one, I imagine."

She began to blush, probably from the memory of being stripped almost naked.

"When I truly think about it, she shouldn't be able to make a prism crystal that could survive a direct blow from your Thunder Pillar spell. Such immense resilience is unimaginable, unless one could enchant it with a highly advanced

Regeneration spell."

"Yeah, exactly. And there's no way Canaan could cast a Regeneration spell of that level on her own."

"Indeed. ...That is quite true."

"Which means that Canaan got her hands on something big after I beat her. She found some sort of item that could fully heal her up and make her magic power far greater than it is. That's the only way I can imagine that she made that dungeon."

"An item like...a Wisdom Stone, perhaps?"

"Yeah."

"Hold on a moment. Like I said before, Canaan should be in recovery in the Demon World. If she healed herself without returning home, where would she be now?"

"If my read on this situation is right, she's somewhere along Eris's border."

"What?!"

"One or two dragons becoming blackened and going berserk on their own, that's one thing. But more than twenty, all at the same time? That doesn't make any sense, unless there's a source of corruption right beside their lair."

"...So you're saying Canaan somehow got her hands on an item that emits life-waves strong enough to make dragons become blackened, simply by being placed nearby?"

"Exactly."

I nodded as Shutina looked at me in disbelief.

"Unfortunately, there's one Wisdom Stone I can think of that fits the bill."

I looked out the window at the night sky. The stars up there were in the same place they had been three thousand years ago, when the DH Series was created as heroes to save humanity. I used to think I was the last survivor.

"Demonhart Series number six. The immortal berserker, with an infinite store of vitality. DH-06, Virgo. If he's still alive...hell, even if he's just his core and Canaan picked him up, that would explain the dungeon and the blackened dragons in one convenient package."

Chapter 3: What Are You Doing Here?

The day after the wyvern attack, I was walking down a paved road that cut through the plains on the outskirts of Eris. Lili always wanted to join me on my adventures, but she wasn't with me that time. I hadn't been exiled from the castle, of course. I was out looking for Canaan.

After hearing my explanation, Shutina wasted no time in sending a servant to the Demon World to find out if Canaan was really recovering there. And, just as we expected, she was nowhere to be found. Multiple soldiers had reported witnessing seeing her return home through the Great Spiritual Hole following her retreat to the castle after I defeated her at Siculus. There were also reports that she never left her room until she made the trip back to the Demon World.

Putting that together, I could tell she'd been doing something in her room's dungeon. The Canaan that went through the Great Spiritual Hole had to have been a dummy she'd conjured up with a spell. The real her was still somewhere on the surface, hiding away. Somewhere close to the nest of the blackened wyverns that attacked the fort in Eris territory the other day.

"Hey, friend. I hear there's a wyvern nest nearby. You know anything about that?"

"Oh, a wyvern nest? Well..."

I called out to a young merchant I'd passed on the road, and he pointed to the top of a nearby mountain.

"It's around the peak of that mountain. It'll take you about half a day, but..."

"But?"

"You shouldn't bother. The wyverns have been going berserk lately and attacking anyone who goes near. Do you know about dragon blackening? It's when their scales turn black as night, and they become overcome with bloodlust."

"Oh, yeah, I do. I beat a bunch of them just a few days ago."

"Huh?"

"Thanks for the info! Here, take this."

I dropped a few copper coins into the stunned merchant's chest pocket and embarked for the mountain. If Canaan was using Virgo's power to make a dungeon, it was probably under there. The powerful life energy it unleashed would travel up through the leylines to affect the wyverns, overloading them with vitality and causing them to blacken. It *could* happen. When I got close to the mountain, I planned to use the Gnome's Ring spell to dig far and wide.

"You know..." I began as I took a look at the long, straight road ahead while stuffing my robe into my bag, "this is a pretty nice, laid-back place. I wish I were here to sightsee."

As if responding to my monologue, a gust of wind blew over me from across the plains. There were barely any people on this road, so far off from the city. All I'd run into were traveling merchants coming from the capital, like the one I passed by a while ago. There was no one in sight but me at the moment. Me and the traveler resting under a tree a little further ahead. We were about halfway through spring, and the hot noon sun was burning my back.

Well, panicking wouldn't do me any good. I decided to slip under the shade and eat the rice balls I'd made. However, as if freeing the space for me, the

traveler immediately stood up.

"Hm?"

Right then, the black leather pouch she had at her waist fell onto the ground with a little plop. The traveler didn't seem to notice and headed for the road in the opposite direction I'd been walking. I took a moment to consider stopping her or not. There *was* the possibility she'd see that I was Leo, former hero, and panic—startle at the sight of the man who betrayed humanity to join the Demon Queen's army. While that was how I was known the world over, not many knew what my face actually looked like. Johan was the only soldier who recognized me during the wyvern attack, after all.

Besides, I was looking for Canaan. I didn't want to cause any commotion while I was incognito, no sir. After a few moments of thought, I pulled my coat's hood low over my eyes and cast Ghost Face. As the name suggested, the spell placed an invisible veil over the body, making it so the viewer was unable to perceive your face. There was no way she would recognize me like that.

I could have put in more effort with Metamorphose, physically changing my entire appearance, but I didn't see the need to go that far. This was just a regular person, after all. I picked up the leather pouch and called out to the departing traveler.

"Ah, pardon. You dropped this."

"Huh?"

She turned around and I got a better look at her. She had short, clean-cut hair, wide, almond-shaped eyes, and light pink lips. She wore pants with a focus on mobility, and had on an expensive-looking, gold-colored coat. Men and women alike would likely be taken in by her beauty. The banged-up, grubby

black bag in her luggage stood out, but everyone had a favorite bag or two. It wasn't a point worth paying much attention to.

"O-oh! Th-that's...!" The traveler finally realized that she'd dropped something and let out a howl of alarm the moment she saw the bag I was holding out.

"Here you go. You'll want to carry bags with light or valuable stuff close to your chest or belly, rather than tying them to your waist. That'll make it a lot easier to know when you've dropped them."

"Oh, is...is that so? Th-thank you." The bag must have been valuable, because she couldn't stop herself from stammering with relief. She reached out with a thin, pale hand and all but snatched it away from me. Then she dropped her travel bag and jammed the pouch into her pocket.

"Hm?"

I noticed the contents of her bag poking out when it hit the ground. Was...was she a curse-maker? There were a couple of curse books inside the bag, along with bloody animal flesh, crow feathers, magic-packed rubies, and all sorts of other reagents jammed alongside.

Wait a second. *Wait a second.* Seeing how hurried she was to get away, I decided to probe her a little.

"W-well I'll be going now. I'm in a hurry."

"Yeah, take care! Oh, but you really shouldn't stop at the next town."

"Hm? Why not?"

"Ah, well, I just happened to pick this up on the road..."

I crept up to her to whisper into her ear. While distracting her with

conversation, I cast Hollow Chain. An invisible binding wrapped around her legs, preventing her escape.

"They say Sorcerer General Shutina of the Demon Queen's army herself is present in town."

"Whaaat?! Mast...Sh-Shutina, General Shutina?!"

"Yeah. Apparently, she's in desperate pursuit of someone, and she's been torturing, eating, and murdering everyone she can find in the towns she takes over. Terrible. Truly, just terrible."

The traveler's expression grew troubled.

"O-oh...s-so she is. That's really scary, and I think it's awful. Thank you for the advice."

"You're very welcome. Oh, but..."

Her disguise was of no use against me anymore. This was clearly the woman I was after, but I wanted to be as meticulous as possible. One had to be sure, so I decided to push for checkmate.

"Though, if I think about it, it might not be much to worry about. Remember how the hero Leo took out the Demon Queen's army single-handedly? They must be a bunch of *losers*."

"...*Excuse me?*"

Her eyes twitched.

"They're just a bunch of spineless weaklings and she's the top wimp. This 'Shutina' is probably just another loser, but I figure being careful couldn't—"

"What did you just say?!" She roared before grabbing my collar with both hands and shaking me. "A-all right, *buddy*, you t-try saying o-one more bad

thing about Master, I *dare* you! I'll murder you a hundred times over before shoving your soul into a worm and making you my slave familiar for all eternity!"

"Master, you say?"

"Yeah, that's right! I-I'm Sorcerer General Shutina's greatest disciple! A high-sorceress and curse-maker of the Demon Queen's army! They call me the Maze-making Curse-maker Canaan!"

The moment I saw Canaan smugly introduce herself, something in me snapped.

"Listen up, *pal*, Master is a great sorceress! A great woman! She's on a completely different level from that maggot, Leo! And a filthy traveler like yourself isn't fit to even speak her name! Got that?! If so—"

"I freaking *knew* it was you, Canaan!"

"Eep?!"

I dispelled my disguise, and the traveler—well, Canaan—leapt up in shock. With Ghost Face gone and my coat cast aside, she stared in alarm. Then panic sank in. She tried to step back, but her legs caught on the Hollow Chain, making her fall on her butt. Even so, she used her hands to crawl backwards.

"L-L-L-L-L...L-L-Le..."

"Yeah, that's right, it's me, Leo! What the hell were you thinking, Canaan?! You don't even have the decency to show yourself at the castle! Instead you're just wandering around here in the countryside doing gods-know-what! You have *any* idea how hard it was to find you?!"

"Why were *you* looking for me?!"

Canaan angrily snapped back at me while dispelling the chain and rising to her feet. She didn't seem interested in hiding any longer, so with a burst of purple light, she then dispelled all of her own disguise spells. And boy, she had a lot on. First, Disguise, to change her clothes. Then Dress-Up to apply illusory accessories and make-up. Following that, Ghost Face just like mine, Metamorphose to change her face and hair, and finally, Mana Seal to make her look like a normal person who couldn't use magic. Without any of them, she looked like an entirely different person. Or rather, she looked like herself.

"I never should have bothered with a disguise! It just got seen through, anyway!"

"It was a pretty good getup. I wouldn't have seen through it if you weren't so careless."

Canaan's disguise was, indeed, an impressive piece of work. Reflecting on it afterward, the banged-up bag *was* suspicious, but I didn't feel anything strange about it until it opened up. Or rather, I *couldn't* have felt anything strange about it. In other words, it was likely she had an Undercover spell working to change my perception. Guess she wasn't Shutina's top disciple for nothing.

Standing before me was no longer a traveler, but a spellcaster. One with a black robe covering her entirely and long, wavy black hair which fell over one eye. Her gaze nervously jittered back and forth constantly, and her slim, dare I say starved, frame held no appeal. This was the Curse-maker Canaan I knew. My suspicions were immediately confirmed.

"I knew it. You got your hands something big, didn't you? Some sort of overpowered item that boosts your magic power sky-high?"

"O-overpowered? Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I'm a far stronger sorcerer than you are; there's no way you could put together a disguise with Ghost Face and Metamorphose that I wouldn't be able to see through in an instant. Not with your abilities." When Canaan didn't respond, I stomped up to her and continued my barrage. "Not to mention the dungeon in your room in the castle. That was thirty floors. Way more than should be possible for you."

"W-wait, you went into it?!"

"Yeah. Pretty *interesting* traps."

"Ahhh! This sucks! This really sucks!"

"Your dungeon was way bigger than the one back at Siculus, and your disguise was good enough to fool me. None of this is stuff you could pull off! There's clearly something going on here!"

"Guh..."

I took another step towards her. She backed up again, bumping against a tree trunk.

"After I beat you, you got *something*, didn't you? A magic power source as strong as a Wisdom Stone. And you planned to use it to beat me on your own and win the approval of your precious Master. That's why you've been acting alone, right?"

Her beady eyes went wide. It looked like I was right. It made sense, too. If she beat me on her own, she would be on even footing with Shutina. She'd even be able to confess her love. And they seemed like actions that Canaan, consumed by her hatred of me, would take.

"Quit while you're ahead. If you've picked up what I think you have, it's way too much for you. I'm not going to mince words: it's going to destroy you."

"It'll destroy me?" Her tone suddenly dropped, and I could feel her gathering mana.

She's getting ready to fight? Damn, what a waste.

I silently scoffed. There weren't even three yards between us, and I was far more powerful in both martial and mystical arts. Even if she had used a Wisdom Stone to fiercely power herself up, this distance gave me an overwhelming advantage. No matter what she did, I could get her in a hold in a flash.

"You're right. This treasure of mine has a lot of power. I-if I used it wrong...it could destroy me."

I noticed a golden light spilling from Canaan's pocket. It was, I felt sure, coming from the black pouch I'd handed back to her. I hadn't felt a thing from it, but now it emitted enough power to warp and bend the world around us.

Dammit, that *was what I was after?! She really* was *using Undercover!*

A look of elation came over Canaan as she put her hand over the pouch next to her chest.

"All right, I admit it. I don't have proof yet, but this is likely a Wisdom Stone. The very object our army spent all this time searching for. If I gave it to Her Majesty, she would reward me with anything I wanted."

"She sure would. Position, honor, it'd all be yours. Your master would be pretty happy, too."

Canaan nodded, silently agreeing with me.

"Then why, I've got to ask, did you leave the castle to mill about on your own? Why pull one over on your master and make it look like you went back to the Demon World? What are you doing in *this* world? What are you after?"

"Wh-what am I after? I-isn't it obvious?!" Canaan left her guilty head-hanging behind and glared at me, her eyes burning with hatred. "I want to fight you! Fight you and defeat you!"

Her mana ballooned up and exploded.

"What the—?!"

The sheer pressure of her magic power whipped up a gust of wind strong enough to send rocks and smaller boulders flying. The trees bent and screeched, nearly snapping. It was like she'd summoned up a small storm.

"You've got to be kidding me! Are you really Canaan?!"

It didn't make sense! This was Great Guardian-class power! And it confirmed for me that Canaan was much stronger than before. Hell, she might be a hundred times stronger than before.

Unfortunately, I saw a group of traveling merchants approaching. There was still a great distance between us, but if I threw down with Canaan, they would definitely end up in the crossfire. What was worse, I couldn't hold back on her like before.

I was still deciding what to do when Canaan leapt away from me.

"I'll let you go for now, since I promised the Wisdom Stone I'd beat you at your best. I don't want to beat you while you're holding back because you're worried about some peasants, either."

"Wait, what? Promise? What did the Wisdom Stone tell you?!"

"See you later. I don't know how you scammed your way into Her Majesty's court, but she should wake up after I kill you. Enjoy what little life you have left!"

"Hey, Canaan! Answer my question!"

"Over Accel!"

The spell Canaan used let you move at blindingly fast speeds with a harsh cost. Casting it made you move faster than Mernes. Just running let you traverse hundreds of yards with each step, almost as if you were teleporting. The cost, however, was the recoil your body was subjected to. I'd tried the spell myself, and a few seconds was all it took for the recoil to wreck my organs and bones. It wasn't something to use lightly.

Canaan then neutralized the recoil by casting a healing spell. Wrapped in its golden light, she disappeared over the horizon in the blink of an eye.

"Dammit!"

Keeping Over Accel active for a long period of time was a fool's errand. If I went after her, I could likely catch up. Still, there was a reason I chose not to: the healing spell she used. The mana I felt from it was just too...nostalgic.

"Negating the massive recoil from Over Accel with some hyper-regeneration...yeah, you could do that. Easily."

The tiny particles of mana in the air were like remnants of perfume. As I felt them wash over me, I realized who was backing Canaan up: one of the twelve Zodiac star signs, the sixth of the DH Series, and the master of life force manipulation, starting with hyper-regeneration.

"Virgo. It has to be you."

There was no mistaking it.

Canaan's source of power was unmistakably my brother. The Wisdom Stone of DH-06 Virgo.

"What are you doing here?"

No one was around to respond, not on this empty road.

"Why are you trying to kill me, Virgo?"

There was no answer. Only the wind, carrying the last of the particles far away.

Chapter 3.5: Canaan's Side (1)

"Ow, ow, ow! Gods, it feels like I'm about to snap in half!" Soon after my unexpected encounter with Leo I was rolling on the floor of my lair in excruciating pain. "Virgo! What the hell were you thinking?! 'Just let me handle it.' Handle my ass! That Over Accel nearly murdered me with the recoil!"

"Quit your whining. All your sliced tendons, broken bones, and crushed organs are right as rain now, aren't they? Thanks to me, no less. I see no problem here."

"You moron! That doesn't mean it didn't hurt like hell! And it still does!"

The orb paused, then sighed as if mocking me.

"You really think you can take Leo like this?"

My lair was near the town of Finoy, in the kingdom of Eris. To be more exact, it was under the mithril mine near Finoy, and we were on the bottom floor of my dungeon. It was a labyrinth fifty floors deep, filled with all of the curse-infused traps I could manage to make. Our goal was simple: lure Leo inside and defeat him. That was all I and this "Virgo" orb wanted.

"I needed to restock my catalysts, but going outside was a bad idea. I can't believe I ran into Leo, of all people... Looks like we can't use that portal to the peak anymore. I'll shut it down right away."

"Good thing there's multiple exits. How many do we have left?"

"About two, I think? The one that leads to Finoy and the one that opens out onto the plains near the kingdom's capital. I do want to create one or two more

going forward, though."

"Going forward?"

"Wh-what? Is there something wrong with that?"

The screeching pain I felt all over had finally calmed down. I got up and sat on my bed, putting Virgo on my lap.

"If we want to beat Leo, we're going to have to build up the dungeon a little more. I-I want some more exits to make it easier to get catalysts and have emergency escape routes. D-do you...have a problem with that?"

"Ah...no, you're right. You got a point there."

"I-I'm right? Yeesh. Y-you made me think I messed up or something."

"Sorry about that."

Virgo did something rare for him: apologize. Apologize, and fall silent. He really was a strange orb, with a strong will and even stronger power. I found him about three months ago, when I'd slinked back into the castle after losing to Leo. I'd happened to dig him out of the bottom of the dungeon I was quietly working on underground. I still knew nothing about him other than my assumption that he was a Wisdom Stone, as Leo suspected.

Or rather, it wouldn't make sense if he *wasn't.* He fully healed me from the brink of death and imbued me with many times the magic power I'd had previously, and I *still* felt great power pulsing from him. It was as though he had unlimited energy. If this was not a Wisdom Stone, what was?

And for some reason, Virgo wanted to fight with Leo. Simply being granted power by him was good, but having an ally who shared my objective was the *true* prize.

"Still, I'm worried about Leo. He wasn't just looking for me. He'd also figured out that I'd gotten my hands on you as a magic source."

"Sounds like the rumors we heard at the capital about him joining the Demon Queen's army were true, then."

"He's just deceiving them, I'm sure of it! Leo's brainwashed them, or cast a really powerful Temptation spell on them, or something like that! I know he's going to come out and betray them, I just do!"

"Yeah, you're right. We'd better take him out before he hurts your dear Master, then."

"Hey. Virgo."

"Absolutely not."

"But I haven't said anything yet!"

"You want to tell your Master that you found me, right? Well, give it up. It's been what, two months? Three months since you left the castle? Why return now?"

There was a reason I was holed up in the outskirts of Eris instead of in the castle. Virgo told me not to let anyone know of his existence. Back when I'd first found him, I had been ecstatic. The overwhelming power brought me no end of excitement and I lost myself testing how far I could go, building up my home dungeon. I had a nasty realization about a week later.

Master had always told me to immediately report to her if I came across any magic items I didn't recognize. The blood all but drained from my face when I realized just how much time had passed. Steeling myself for the inevitable harsh lecture, I was all prepared to make my tardy report when Virgo's voice stopped me.

"Don't even think about it. Don't tell *anyone* about me."

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Until then, I'd only thought of Virgo as this strange orb with immense power. I'd been keeping him by my pillow and on top of my desk all the time. Hell, I'd even changed clothes around him. If I knew he had a will and a personality, I would have treated him a little differently.

"Hey, why can't I tell Master about you? There's a reason, right? I think enough time has passed for you to be able to tell me."

"I've said this a bunch of times before, but I've got a goal of my own. I can't let anyone take me away from you, so this is simply risk reduction. Got it?"

"Well...what if...on the off chance I did happen to tell Master, then what would you do?"

"Then I'll never work with you again. *Ever.* I'll take back all of the magic power I gave you and tell her all about that creepy harem you've got in your castle dungeon, too."

"Guh!"

"And if I do that, well, you won't get the praise and headpats for a job well done from your precious Master, will you? No. You'll get a look of disgust and a one-way trip to getting your ass disowned, that's what, hah! And if you're fine with that, go ahead. Be my guest. Tell her *all* about me, o Great Sorceress Canaan."

"Why, you smug little pebble...!"

That was the issue. Virgo absolutely would not budge on compelling me not to tell anyone I'd found him. It led to problems of its own. For one thing, my personal dungeon under the castle was far too close to Master and Her Majesty. Virgo constantly emitted powerful life-waves, meaning that no matter

how quiet I was, they would find out. So I reluctantly left the castle and made a dungeon in this backwater kingdom of Eris and started my life with Virgo.

Being cooped up in that dungeon meant I had no idea what was going on outside. I asserted that Leo was deceiving the army, but I still didn't know what under-handed deception he had used to get into the Queen's service.

"Well, either way, it doesn't change what we have to do. We're going to defeat Leo and save Master and Her Majesty. We're bringing peace back to the dark army!"

"There we go. Now you're talking my language."

Virgo was clearly plotting something, that much was clear. Still, he had given me generous amounts of magic power and was completely in sync with me in our goal to bring Leo down. There was no turning back. Virgo and I shared a fate.

"That Leo...running into him again out there was really enlightening."

"Oh yeah? How so?"

"Yeah. I saw just how strong he was. Last time we fought he wasn't even using half of his power. Th-there's no way I could beat him in a head-to-head fight. The only choice we have is to finish him off with my most lethal traps."

"He was wimpy like you wouldn't believe back in the day. That hyper self-development really did some heavy lifting, yeah? Guy's strong as hell now. I don't know if I could take him with my actual body, either," Virgo quietly murmured.

I wondered what expression he'd be wearing if he were flesh and blood. His voice held nostalgia and regret, yet he also sounded almost *proud* of Leo's strength, as though he were praising the success of a close relative... A parent

or child. Possibly even a brother.

"Hey. There's something I've always wanted to ask but never got the chance to."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Why do you want to beat Leo so badly? What kind of relationship do you two have?"

A long, long silence followed. Virgo had started speaking to me in earnest about a week after I'd picked him up, and it had been three months since we'd left the castle after that. Yet, in all of our time together, this had to be the longest silence I'd experienced.

The orb had a very straightforward personality. He wouldn't do anything against his principles, and he always spoke up if he didn't like something. Honestly, the way he quickly reacted to anything and everything felt like operant conditioning. Yet, there he was, deep in thought. About *what?*

When he finally did respond, he almost sounded impressed.

"I'm surprised. I thought you just saw me as a mana battery. A power-up item. I thought that was the kind of person you were, but you're interested in my past?"

"W-well, yeah. There's just so much I don't know about you. L-like, are you a magic item? An artifact? Something else entirely?"

Virgo was shrouded in mystery to me. While he was an orb that gave me immense magic power, he also had a name, a personality, and seemed to know Leo. Quite well, in fact. Part of me thought I could piece together his plot if I knew about his past, but if I was being honest, it was my curiosity as a practitioner of the arcane that provided the real incentive.

"Heh. Well, damn, if you want to know that badly, I'll tell you," Virgo replied after a moment of thought. His tone remained unemotional, yet his tale was unbelievable. "It happened three thousand years ago, back when this world was ruled by science. It was around when Demon King Belial invaded the human world. During King Belial's Expedition, as your history books call it."

I couldn't believe my ears. The subject of his casual recollection was simply that baffling. He ignored my shock, however, and continued. It was honestly like listening to a bard at a pub regaling his audience with tales of heroes.

"Twelve devils were created to defeat the demons at the gates. The Demonhart Series, we were called. Leo, myself, and all the others—we were humanity's last line of defense. Humanity's final hope."

Chapter 4: 2060 AD—Ashinoko, Hakone

1 — Humans? An Unworthy Foe

It was, I must say, a simple task. Go through the Great Spiritual Hole, arrive at the human world, and conquer their land. That was it. So His Majesty Belial ordered me, and thus, we came to the humans' realm.

I pitied the humans. Truly, I did. Mere days earlier, they had been the undisputed rulers of their land. After our conquest, however, they answered to us. To demons. One universal constant of society, nay, of nature, is that the strong rule. The humans, unfortunately, lacked strength.

Ah, forgive my lateness in introducing myself. My name is Baron Agares. As the title suggests, I was of the upper crust in demon society and a proud devil. I was the eleventh strongest man in General Vasago's army, with the general himself under the direct command of His Majesty King Belial.

I was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield alone, not to mention my devilish good looks, and the unit of battle-mages I painstakingly raised boasts strength worthy of my leadership. Of course, as their name suggests, battle-mages are professionals at using spells in combat. I'd gathered up imps, succubi, incubi, the types of demons most naturally adept at magic, and trained them into an elite corps. They had a greater nobility to them than the mindless orc units who could only charge into battle, or the shifty goblin units who could do little more than sabotage and sneak. Greater nobility and greater beauty.

Have you ever seen, I must ask, the simply divine explosion of a Spark Flare? Can you imagine the sheer pleasure of obliterating an entire unit to ash with the

endless bolts of a Thundercloud spell? Let me tell you that some things never change. The cutting edge of combat was and always had been attack spells. Swords? Spears? Such ancient implements, such utter nonsense! "The master of offensive magic has always ruled the Demon World!" Such was the motto of House Agares.

And with that, I had to say that the most pitiable characteristic of these humans was that they hadn't the slightest inkling of the arcane arts. Instead of magic, they had what they called "science," and while one could not dismiss it out of hand, magic proved far more convenient. Even if a unit of humans came at me, why, blasting them with a simple spell would quiet them down the moment the battle had begun.

That was, in fact, how I had continued my conquest since making landfall in their world. I had already placed three towns under my control and was just about to finish up with the fourth. It was one of the towns they called "Hakone" or "Ashinoko" in that language of theirs.

I had claimed the finest building in Ashinoko and deemed it Chateau Agares (natural water of perfect warmth sprung forth in its baths at all hours and was simply wonderful to soak in) and indulged in their "natural" and "soft" drinking waters. The pleasures I had found were, indeed, enough to scare me.

"How wonderful the human world is, Sebastian! Wouldn't you agree?"

"It is as you say, my lord."

My butler by my side nodded. Sebastian was an incubus who had served my house since the days of my grandfather. He was a trustworthy man and had joined my incursion into the human world.

"The water is wonderful to the taste, the soil has no mana pollution, there are

no disgusting undead wandering about at night, no wild dragons to disturb one's afternoon jaunts...and have I mentioned the water?"

"Right on all points, my lord."

"Yet I have laid my roots in this town for half a moon and cannot escape the thought that we should assail the next town. What do you think?"

"Right you are."

Sebastian took a look at the map of the human world on the wall. It had been redrawn merely two days ago, and I could see the humans had pushed back all the way to areas named "Ashigara" and "Odawara." If memory served, the commanding officer there was Morek...no, Batin. It was Baron Batin. What stayed his hand? He needed only to incinerate the humans' laughable armies, yet he had allowed them this much ground. As a fellow devil and baron, I was ashamed. Still, I awaited my loyal butler's answer. After a few moments of deliberate thought, he quietly delivered his council.

"It would appear that Baron Batin is on the verge of losing Odawara. Could we not send him a message, offering to deploy our battle-mages as support, to gauge him?"

"Hm. Simply gauge him, you say?"

"Simply gauge him, yes." Sebastian nodded in satisfaction. "Baron Batin is, of course, a man of deep suspicion and envy. Should we venture to aid him ourselves, surely he will protest, attesting to how he did not ask and accusing us of merely seeking glory. Yet, if we gauge him and see that he is having great difficulty on the battlefield and let *him* beg *us* for aid, it will put him in our debt."

"Oh! My oh my!"

How brilliant my butler was! What a perfect plan! What an excellent chance to put that fool in his place. Yet, to be sure, I decided to check the other possibility.

"And if the battle goes in his favor, what then? What if he turns down our offer of aid?"

"Then we shall go to Odawara ourselves, taking all of the territory we can and depriving Baron Batin of his conquest."

"Truly? That will anger Batin, I imagine, but will it not also irk the general?"

"You needn't worry about that. Have you forgotten the ruling ethos of our world, that the strong must always be on top? Does General Vasago not always speak of how the spoils of war go to the fastest? It is Baron Batin at fault here for floundering."

"Ah...right you are, right you are, my good man! Ahaha!"

"Indeed, my lord. Fuhahaha!"

Sebastian and I exchanged looks and laughed. I had gotten too used to the human world and thus completely forgotten the rules of my own. Indeed, to a denizen of the Demon World, strength was everything! Survival of the fittest was its sole rule! If one had a chance to outwit a rival, one took it without hesitation!

My mind was made up. I spread the map over my battle table and gave my butler the order.

"We will convene a war council! Summon our tactician, Rizet, Sebastian. We shall decide our incursion route tonight and send our message to Batin. No matter his answer, we leave this land tomorrow morning!"

"Understood, my lord. I shall summon Rizet immediately."

With a reverent bow, Sebastian left the room. I found myself alone, able to contemplate the silence and size of my chambers, but more than that, the magnificence of my subordinates. Magnificent subordinates, magnificent exploits in battle...indeed, I was not a man who would end life as a mere baron. If I continued my advances, why, I could find myself with a general's seat, nay, I could be the next Demon King! Such were my fortunes!

Indeed, back home, House Agares faced the peril of decline. When my grandfather was defeated by the current Demon King Belial, His Majesty, the wind at our sails faltered. House Agares had been one of the most esteemed estates in all the land, yet we found ourselves fallen from grace. During the formation of the army and the selection of the seven generals that would be under His Majesty's direct command, we were not even summoned.

Though my father cursed his lot and cursed my grandfather, I was different. The fool complains, the sage acts. I had always put my effort into improvement and had always made my actions speak.

"This invasion of the human world is House Agares' perfect chance for glory. Should I find the success I am due in this alien land and word of my exploits reaches back to the Demon World...ah, I can just imagine it. What a grand opportunity Batin's struggles in Odawara are!"

Oh, how I wished to march out immediately and conquer those human lands! To deprive Batin of his honors in battle! I squirmed in my seat, opening my third bottle of human-world water, and awaited my loyal butler's return.

And waited. And waited.

"Sebastian is certainly taking his time."

He did not return. I was a patient man, but this tried even me. Our tactician

was stationed on the first floor of the mansion, near the entrance. It should not take this long to call her. By the time the long hand of the clock had undergone a full rotation, I had lost all patience. I got up to begin my search of the mansion, yet in that instant, I heard loud footsteps stomping towards my room.

"Who could that be?" I furrowed my brow. The footsteps lacked the class and elegance of a man like Sebastian. Nor were they befitting of Rizet. Perhaps one of my battle-mages? Nay, succubi and incubi prized beauty far too much for such rough footfalls, and imps flew. Which led me back to wondering, who could it be?

The steps stopped in front of my door. There was neither knock nor call. I did my best to act calm and called out to whoever was standing there.

"Sebastian?"

No answer. After a few moments of silence, I called my butler's name again, an unfortunate premonition pulsing through me.

"Seb?"

This time, there was a reaction. Not a good one, either. A brash, throaty roar rang out as my wooden door was smashed open. I cried out in surprise as a sharp splinter flew over my head and stuck in the wall behind me. It was neither my butler nor another demon who entered my room. And yet, the interlopers hardly looked like the humans I was familiar with.

They were two youths. Siblings, perhaps. They had a similar air about them. The slender one stayed behind the bulkier one and appeared like a girl at first glance. The one in front, however, boasted a trained, muscular body. I imagined he was the one who broke down the door. He appeared to be dragging something in his left hand.

"Oh my!" I shouted when I finally recognized that "something." It was none other than the beloved butler that had served my family since the age of my grandfather, Sebastian!

"Seeeb!"

"So, you're the bastard in charge here, huh? Baron Agares, or whatever? You are, right? Hey, did you hear me?"

Seb did not move. He didn't seem to be dead, but he *was* in a dire state. And it looked like the man before me was a dire character.

"What did you do to Seb, you fiend?!"

"Listen, buddy, I'm asking the questions around here. You the one in charge?"

"Who in the world *are* you people? Did you come here knowing this was the territory of Baron Agares. *My* territory?"

"I *said* I was the one asking questions here!"

I drew back with a yelp as he hurled Sebastian at me, then quickly threw up a Force Field to divert his course. My profuse apologies to poor Seb, he flew through the window beside me and sailed out of the mansion. A splash followed as I watched my beloved butler land in the lake outside. He may have died. The man before me heaved like a hellhound and glared.

"Make your choice, Agares."

"O-of what?"

"Choice one. You tell me *everything* you know about the Demon World, then you die. Choice two. You get the crap beat out of you while regretting *very* deeply that you had the gall to invade our world, then you tell me *everything* you know about the Demon World, *then* you die."

"You can't be—"

"I'll give you ten seconds. Make your choice. Now."

"I recommend the former. If you actually come clean and talk, we will give you preferential treatment as a war captive."

The slender boy unemotionally amended his partner's threat from over his shoulder. Personally, I wanted to choose neither. Why was I being given such an utterly hellish choice? Who *were* these people? It had taken a few moments, but I had finally realized just how dangerous a position I was in. This was *bad*. The boy in the back aside, the man in front of me was like a mad dog. An aura of terror greater than any demon I knew accompanied him like a dreadful miasma. Did the human world have fanatics of violence, mad dogs of war, much like we did back home? As I stared in awe, he cracked his neck and gave me a toothy grin.

"Virgo's come all the way to Japan to play. And listen to me, you piece of filth. You might've had a fun time playing king of the castle, but I'm sorry to say, playtime's over for you."

2 — When the War Ends

"You should watch your tone, Virgo."

"Come again?"

"As the DH Series, we are both humanity's representatives and a model for the troops on the ground to follow. 'Piece of filth?' We may be in battle, but I do not recommend using such foul language."

"Ah, shut up, Leo! What are ya, a school marm?"

Ignoring me as I slowly backed up, "Virgo" began to argue with the slender one.

"We're weapons, you hear me? We fight the tough guys! That's all we need to do, nothing else matters!"

"I disagree. You should think again as to why we were created in human forms and given human hearts. We were never meant to be mere implements of violence. Just consider—"

"Ahhh, enough already! Details nobody cares about!"

It looked like these two did not get along terribly well. They had completely opposite personalities, and their argument showed no sign of winding down any time soon.

Perhaps this...is a chance?

I began to quietly chant a spell, quiet enough for them not to notice, and subtly made the proper signs with my right hand. I may not have known who they were, but one thing was clear: they were my foes, and this was the perfect chance to venture an ambush! I would blow them away in the middle of their

argument!

"Lightni—"

"Hold on."

Right when I held out my hand to cast my spell, Virgo, whose back had been turned, suddenly disappeared. I grunted in disbelief as I realized he had not disappeared, but had maneuvered to my flank with impossible speed. By the time I noticed, his powerful punch was already coming at me.

"Not gonna happen, pal! Eat this!"

With a stunned cry, I threw up my right arm and blocked his fist. My earlier caution had paid dividends. When I first heard their footsteps, I had wisely cast Physical Boost and Keen Sense, just in case. Both spells greatly increased the physical abilities of the caster, and with their enhancements, I had the strength and speed of a first-rate fighter. Though Virgo's attack was fierce, I still had the ability to dodge and deflect!

"Hoh-hoh." Virgo let out an impressed whistle and started up some light footwork. "Not bad. Thought I'd sink my fist in your face and that would be that."

"He's using enhancement spells. Though they're the most basic, he is an executive-class devil. Do be careful."

"How about you just shut up and watch?!"

I learned something from their brief exchanges. While Virgo was aggressive, the "Leo" lad behind him was not nearly so. It was rather unsettling, but he seemed content to watch my battle with Virgo. As I was outnumbered, this worked to my advantage. Another detail stood out to me, as well.

This Virgo is clearly of a more...physical persuasion. I imagine he can't use

magic!

His body was his weapon. He had his fists up in a fighting pose as he continued his footwork, showing no signs of preparing any spells. Virgo was nothing but an agile brawler! Realizing that brought my confidence back.

Sorcerers, requiring time to prepare their spells, are notoriously weak to ambushes. Even I, Baron Agares, was no exception. That was the only chance a meathead like this Virgo character had of defeating a powerful spellcaster such as myself. He needed the first strike. Turned on its head, this meant that should the ambush fail, his fate would be sealed. I needed only to do as sorcerers did.

Since his ambush *had* actually failed, I stood almost no chance of losing! The advantage was all mine, and I would slaughter him!

"Hah! Hahahaha! Ah, what a fascinating pair of humans you are!" With my composure restored, I decided to grant these bold humans honor before they died. "You displayed true courage, attacking Chateau Agares with just the two of you. I salute that courage and that courage alone, Virgo-boy!"

"Gee, thanks."

"But I must say, you could have thought this through more. Did you actually believe you, humans, could defeat me? If you truly wished to win, you wouldn't squabble among yourselves. No, you would attempt a fatal blow, an ambush that— Grahhh?!"

My right arm took on a fierce, white glow with immense heat that followed. Such heat! Such pain! The white light ballooned around my elbow, and in the next moment, my right arm explosively separated from my body.

I screamed.

Unspeakable pain overwhelmed me, but that wasn't the biggest shock. It was

the white light. I *knew* what it was. And it made *no* sense.

"Cure...Cure Light?!"

A healing spell, of all things! How could a mere human use a healing spell? And even more unfathomable, how did a spell meant to heal wounds cause such violent amputation?

"That's right, buddy, it's Cure Light!"

I grunted as Virgo kicked my side. He continued to lay into me, stomping on my wound as I crawled across the floor. I could hear him taunting me from above.

"Lemme give you a little lesson in metaphysics, pal. There's the Material Realm and the Spiritual Realm. You pour life energy into both of them, make the body remember its true form, and that seals up wounds. That's how healing spells work, you follow me?"

I groaned in pain as he stomped again.

"So, time to apply that knowledge! What happens when you pour in far more life energy than the target can bear in one fell swoop?"

"W-well..."

"*This*!"

Virgo cried out triumphantly as his fist plunged into my left arm, and I howled in pain. He must have purposefully drawn out that first attack, because this time my arm immediately began to glow as a sign it was about to explode. I had to resist his Cure Light spell, and any other healing spell he might cast, but I had never attempted such a feat. Not once in my life had I needed to ward off a healing spell!

As I desperately attempted to reverse the impending explosion, his blows continued to rain down on me. My arm, my legs, my stomach, my head—oh, no, not the head! Even a devil dies when he loses his head!

I resisted spell after spell, but could not keep pace with his attacks. What was worse, his blows hurt. A lot! I was not long for this world!

"Y-you're killing me!"

"Exactly!"

I let out a howl of terror. This one man had the power necessary to kill a higher-level demon such as myself. To *murder* me. His barrage continued, unrelenting. Right hook. Left hook. Uppercut. Straight punch. A leg-sweep into a chop. As I blocked his rain of blows, I desperately tried to piece together a way out of this situation.

How do I escape?! Do I pile on enhancement spells to strengthen my guard?

No, that wouldn't work. I immediately dismissed the idea. It may have been effective against his punches and kicks, but it would be all but useless against that Vitality Infusion Fist (tentative) of his. All he needed was to make contact with my body to overload wherever he touched with life energy. Even the strongest physical defenses couldn't prevent him from eventually making my innards explode. Then I'd be dead! In any case, I wanted to get away!

Right as I attempted to escape through the window, however, my legs grew surprisingly heavy. This was no explosive attack from Virgo, but a sticky, white web wrapped around my legs. It came from Leo, who had been watching on the sidelines.

"Spider Web. I figured I had to do *something*. Don't think too bad of me, Baron Agares."

"Why, you little...!"

"Hey, eyes over here!"

I screamed in pain as Virgo roundhouse kicked me twice, then moved into a heel drop that led into a straight punch. His barrage continued, and I was most definitely going to die if this kept up. I couldn't escape, and I had no hope of counterattacking. As for guarding, I kept on resisting Virgo's healing spells, and while that barely kept me alive, it was only a matter of time.

"T-to think that I, Baron Agares, would meet such an untimely end...!"

"If you ask me, it took too long!"

"This cannot beeee!"

I let out a resentful howl as the sole of Virgo's shoe descended on my face for the final blow. This, I thought to myself, was how it ended.

Yet, it did not end. A Fireball suddenly flew into the room through the window, engulfing it in an explosion. Then my body floated up, and I was pulled outside through a gaping hole that had opened up in the wall. And there, awaiting me, was a feast for the eyes!

"You're here! You're all here!"

"Baron Agares, you are alive!"

The battle-mages I had stationed around Ashinoko had come to my aid! In war, overconcentration of one's forces is a fool's errand. Having all of your men in one place was asking for them to be destroyed in one single blow, and the humans' scientific weaponry was rather good at doing just that. With that in mind, I had my troops stationed at key strategic points around Ashinoko, arranged so that the unit would survive, even on the minuscule chance that the command center at Chateau Agares fell.

And my troops, my loyal troops, had sensed that their leader was in danger and come running. There were a hundred and fifty in all. With me that made a hundred and fifty-one. My advantage had returned. Virgo-boy jumped down from the window to confront us, but as I healed myself with my own Cure Light, I pointed to him and declared my victory.

"Hahaha! A shame, Virgo-boy, but this is where the true battle begins! My mighty battle-mage corps is here in full force!"

"Oh yeah? Full force, huh?" Virgo's confident smile never faltered as he came striding towards us. "Just what I wanted. This is all going according to plan."

"You needn't put on the act, young one. You made a mistake and you should own up to it, like that friend of yours did."

"Hm?"

"I'm speaking of Leo-boy. It seems he's left you to your fate and run off somewhere."

Indeed, Virgo had come down alone. Leo had simply vanished. It seemed obvious he must have noticed my troops gathering outside while he watched us fighting from the sidelines. Yet he didn't speak a word of warning to Virgo, which was evidence that he had planned to abandon him from the start. If Virgo defeated me, good for him. If not, he could use Virgo to buy time while he escaped. Predictable.

A truly underhanded scheme, but it made logical sense. He would bring back information about the size of my unit and my abilities and temperament as a commander, all well worth Virgo's sacrifice.

That Leo sure is a cunning one, the last sort of foe I'd want to meet on the battlefield. I'll have to remember to destroy him first when I run into him again.

I shook the thought of him from my head. I had Virgo to focus on. And unfortunately for him, he did not seem to understand the predicament he was in. No, he simply grinned as though he were on top of the world as he cracked his knuckles.

"Who cares if Leo isn't around? That doesn't change my plan in the slightest."

He was either filled with confidence, or an absolute fool. Energy radiating from his entire body added to the impression that he wasn't simply putting on an act.

"Bring it on, Baron Dumbass. The name's Virgo. Virgo the Immortal!"

"Very well! I shall divest you of your name!"

I honestly admired his courage. But that was all the more reason to kill him without delay. Leaving him alive would only threaten the invasion, nay, His Majesty himself. Before he could prove more of a danger, I had to bring him down!

"Everyone, prepare to cast! Murder him!"

The flash of spells taking effect lit up the night. The countless lightning bolts, fireballs and light beams raining down on him turned the moonlit lakeside bright as day. Fireball, Stone Blast, Wind Blade, Lightning. Most were basic offensive spells, yes, but these were cast by a hundred and fifty hardened battle-mages, all at once. The focus fire easily equaled an advanced attack spell. *This* was the strength of my unit: incredible ranged firepower, greater than any barrage of arrows.

With this firepower, I had destroyed countless "tanks" and "fighter jets" that the humans were so proud of. Even if Virgo-boy was skilled in the use of healing magic, there was simply no way he could endure this onslaught.

"And now for the final act, Virgo-boy! Do be honored that you will die by my mightiest spell!"

The finishing blow fell to me. After all, it was the duty of a leader to wrap matters up with style and elegance. I had to set a good example for those I led. And as they heard my chant, they all cheered.

"There it is!"

"Here it comes! Baron Agares' mightiest spell!"

"Meet your fiery end, foolish hero! Explode!"

There was, indeed, an explosion. One that engulfed Virgo, Chateau Agares behind him, and even the trees around us. I controlled its extent, of course, so that my unit and I remained unharmed.

Virgo had taken the simultaneous barrage of a hundred and fifty battle-mages, topped off by my most powerful spell. I had hit him with the greatest firepower the entirety of my unit could muster. Honestly, I had been worried when he caught me off-guard, but things turned out all right, as they always did. Indeed, I was a man who could do anything he put his mind to. One of my men drew my attention back to the business at hand.

"Baron Agares."

"Mm, I know."

The smoke from my Explode spell was gradually clearing. Anticipation bubbled up as I waited to see my handiwork.

"Hah...haha! My, what a surprise."

I was neither complimenting nor mocking him. No, I truly was surprised. Virgo-boy, battered and beaten, stood in the center of the crater left by my

spell.

"How surprised I am, Virgo-boy! Not only are you in one piece, you've managed to stay standing with both legs! I must say, killing you will truly be a shame."

He was, indeed, in a miserable state. His battle uniform had been singed, his right arm torn off (much like mine a minute ago), and his left leg was bent in the wrong direction. The battle was won. There was simply no way he could continue to deliver his precious punches and kicks.

Though when I thought about it, this *was* surprising. How was he still alive, after all of that?

"That look suits you, Virgo-boy, but alas! Such is mere humanity! That Vitality Infusion Fist of yours was a nice little idea, but nothing can overtake an orthodox barrage of attack magic!"

My troops nodded vigorously, agreeing with my statement.

"I trust you've learned your lesson? Then, do study up on your attack magic in the next life, taking after my example!"

"You know, you got a point. Attack spells are worth learning." Virgo-boy piously nodded. "They've got the same range as a gun, but way more power. You don't need to reload ammo, and even a kid or an old geezer could be a force to be reckoned with after learning a spell or two. Yeah, they're pretty great."

"O-oh, so...so you understand my point."

Perhaps this man had more of a mind for the arcane arts than I thought. He did show all that creativity in using healing spells offensively, after all. Perhaps it truly *would* be a waste to end his life. I felt myself wanting to scout him, rather

than kill him.

The risk of taming him, of course, was great. With that temperament, there was no telling when he might turn on me. If I cast Temptation or some other form of enchantment on him, however, I could guarantee my safety while greatly strengthening my forces with his addition. This would lead to greater glory in battle, and more chances for promotion. Here, too, Leo abandoning him worked in my favor. He *should* be vulnerable. Perhaps this was the ideal time to make my move on him?

I ordered my troops around me to wait, having them stand at the ready just on the edge of releasing attack spells. Next, I thought carefully on what to say to sway such a mad dog.

However, before I could begin my persuasion, Virgo spoke up.

"But I'm not having it. No attack magic for me."

"What?"

"You've gotta get in there, close enough to feel your opponent's breath. You've gotta beat the crap out of each other until one of you folds. That's what a *fight* is. Projectiles just aren't my style!" Virgo reached up with his ruined left hand and flipped a small switch at his ear. A fuzzy, irritating sound rang out. Then...

"Hey, Leo! You learned all that, right? I can do my thing now?"

"I picked it all up perfectly. I should be able to recreate that last explosion spell perfectly, too."

"So we're done here, right? You don't mind if I finally stop holding back on Agares?"

"Not at all. I'll begin my attack, as well. Do stay safe."

Suddenly, the ground began to shake. Then, with a booming roar, countless red lights flashed from a faraway mountaintop.

What?!

A dreadful sound then reached my ears. It was the familiar sound of something descending through the air.

"Everyone, quick! Defense spells, immediately!"

"Too late!"

The next moment, the ground around us exploded, sending rock and debris high into the sky to rain back down. There was no mistaking it: this was a bombardment from the enemy! After their artillery had broken the ground at our feet, the humans fired their "missiles" at us. The explosions consumed my troops, one after the other.

I thought they wouldn't resort to this with Virgo around! Those conniving humans, they intend to kill us all!

What treachery! I was surrounded by a sea of flames, and my surviving troops were on their last legs. Even the most brilliant of generals would have trouble recovering from this. Worst of all, a grim reaper closed in on me, blocking any escape.

"Howitzers, rocket artillery, surface-to-surface missiles, and a barrage from a tank unit. All of the land-based firepower we could muster. See, you devils are obnoxiously smart, so the plan was to draw you all together in one place with me and Leo, then take you down with the heavy artillery. Sounds fun, huh?"

Hell surrounded us on all sides, but this man was not bothered in the least. This mad dog, this...Virgo, ambled towards me as if on a morning stroll.

"All right. Let me give you a proper introduction before I ice you."

Breathing like a hellhound, Virgo grinned. Then, unbelievably, he immediately sprouted a new right arm. His left leg soon followed, and the rest of his body fully regenerated.

"The name's Virgo, sixth of the Demonhart Series, built for hyper-regeneration. You could say I'm immortal. Even in a hail of missiles like this...," A missile hit him directly, blowing off half of his face and his left arm. Yet, as if the clock was turning back, his missing parts immediately regrew. "I won't die."

I recoiled in horror as the realization hit me: he had been going easy on me from the very beginning! It was all a ploy to gather my troops in one spot and destroy my unit in one fell swoop. And with that objective achieved, he would surely...

"All right, Baron Agares, time for a test of guts! Let's have us a deathmatch and see who drops to the bombardment first!"

"Y-you cannot be serious!"

Explosions behind me, explosions beside me, and the mad dog of hell, Virgo, in front of me. There was *no* escape.

"*Die*!"

"Aaggggghh!"

"*Diiiie!*"

As my vision went red and my consciousness faded, that strange phrase Virgo spoke echoed in my mind, over and over. The Demonhart Series. The Demonhart *Series*! That meant there were others, with Leo likely among them. Demons, they were, devils. More horrific, more terrifying than actual demons like myself and mine! What fearsome creatures humanity had wrought!

Fifteen minutes later, at the lakeside of Ashinoko.

Aside from myself, there was only one left standing in the ruins of the hot spring hotel Baron Agares had taken control of. My partner, DH-06 Virgo. A single number after my DH-05 Leo.

Virgo was the sole survivor of the concentrated barrage. He'd already returned to his normal form. The black battlesuit that covered his body had been attuned specifically to him, regenerating when he activated his healing magic. I handed him a bottle of the mineral water I'd picked up at Yumoto, on the far side of the mountain, and congratulated him.

"A job well done, Virgo. Did you finish off Agares?"

"Nah. The bastard had this on him."

Virgo tossed a palm-sized white doll at me. It was a magic item used by a small number of the higher-level demons. When the person bonded to it faced life-threatening danger, it took the fatal damage for them. A scape-doll, it was called. Virgo must have felt sure he had the kill. He sheepishly looked away and crossed his arms.

"Agares is the only one who escaped. Guess their top brass is good at running away."

"Is there any possibility he will immediately counterattack?"

"He's not going to be showing up anytime soon, not after I beat him within an inch of death. It'll take a while for him to get back to fighting strength, not to mention get his pride back."

"I see. It certainly would be easier if he simply returned to the Demon World and never came back."

"Oh, don't give me that. If they all did that I'd die of boredom over here!"

I could hear a heavy rumbling approaching. It sounded like the tank-heavy brigade had come down from the mountain to take control of the town.

"Ah, there they are. Hey, Leo, once the army gets here, you and me are hunting the stragglers. Get ready."

"Are there any stragglers, though?"

"Hell if I know."

Virgo and I took a look around us. It was only natural after being showered by a battalion's worth of heavy firepower, but the area had been reduced to a wasteland. Nothing in this world could survive such a barrage, except Virgo.

"Pretty good plan though, right? We managed to take out Agares' wimpy troops in one blow, and you got to learn their spells. Two birds with one stone."

"It was, although I cannot imagine wanting to do the same plan twice."

"Huh?"

"It did not feel good at all to fire on friendlies. The soldiers thought as much, too. They were worried that something might happen to you, unlikely as that may be."

"Pfff, don't make me laugh." Virgo spat and kicked a nearby stone. "We're weapons, you hear me? Tools made only to fight. You're basically saying that you don't want Mr. Frypan to get burned or anything, so you'll keep him away from fire. You know? It's dumb as hell. Make sure the soldiers know how stupid that worry is."

I couldn't quite agree.

"What's with that look?"

"Oh. Nothing."

Virgo put up a tough front, but that was simply him having trouble expressing his feelings. Keeping friendly casualties to a minimum was always his top priority, and something he was willing to sacrifice himself for. And whenever anyone got hurt, he leapt forth to heal them.

In fact, this plan was originally meant to have Virgo and myself attack the command center while an armored unit attacked from multiple directions with infantry support. Virgo, however, insisted they change it.

"You're just in my way," he had said. "Don't slow me down."

Though his words were harsh, the soldiers saw him off with looks of respect and admiration. They knew how much he cared about them. He had the kind of personality that Japanese comics and stories called "tsundere": prickly and mean on the outside, but soft and caring on the inside. He'd won the love of many of the soldiers, and he probably would have won a lot more were he built as a female model.

DH-06 Virgo. Concept: hyper-regeneration. An immortal healer and berserker able to instantly cast any healing spell without a chant...

"I said, what's with that look?"

"Nothing. I was just appreciating the fact that you're on my side."

Virgo and I slowly walked alongside the lake, under the stars.

"Think so? Well, I don't."

"Why is that?"

"You're the hyper self-development model, right? You level up and get stronger than anyone? Well, that's the kind of guy I wanna fight. It would be fun as hell, but since you're on my side it's never going to happen. That sucks!"

"Do you really want to fight strong opponents that much?"

"Yeah, you bet I do! When you're duking it out with someone who can punch on your level or heavier, you really feel like you're alive. Hey, you know what? When the war is over, fight me. You and I are definitely going to fight."

"If we're both still alive when it's over, that is."

"It's a promise! Don't forget this, Leo!"

2060 AD, the Blitz of Ashinoko, Hakone. We had secured another victory for humanity.

Chapter 4.5: Canaan's Side (2)

"We had countless fights like that. We fought Belial's forces again and again, and in the end...Leo defeated the Demon King himself."

Without even realizing it, I was sucked into Virgo's tale. Sometimes, he spoke plainly. Other times, nostalgia colored his words. And every so often he beamed with pride as he talked about his brother Leo's strength. Yet, though his tone varied repeatedly, the tale about his life never paused.

"Or, I guess I should say I heard he defeated Belial. I died in the final battle taking down one of theirs, so I don't know what happened after. I only found out Leo was still alive three thousand years later, when you told me."

I responded with stunned silence.

"See? Not such a big deal, was it?"

"I-it was a huge deal, I'd say."

I couldn't keep my mouth from hanging open. If his tale sounded like an exaggeration or fabrication in the slightest, I was ready to dig into him, but I couldn't. The experiences he recounted from the war matched the records from the Demon World perfectly. The Demon King Belial invading the human world, the seven generals directly under him, the devil barons who served under them...

In fact, House Agares still existed and even had some fame in the Demon World. Well, they were famous for being rather strange, and developing...interesting spells. The most confusing spell their family had

developed was one that made the target temporarily immune to all healing spells. I was told it had a very complex formula behind it and took immense mana to cast.

That spell was the laughingstock of the Demon World. Resistance was for attack spells, not healing magic, people insisted. However, if the Baron Agares who Virgo spoke of was the head of the family at some point, it made more sense. Agares must have been terrified of Virgo. He was probably preparing a spell that would nullify Virgo's signature attack on the off chance that a descendant battled him again.

I ended up surprisingly well-informed on the once noble House Agares, but that didn't matter. What mattered was Virgo himself.

"You said you died fighting, right? Why are you still alive, then?"

"Do I look alive to you? I don't even have a body."

"I...suppose not. Still, you *exist* as Virgo, and you're talking. You may need me for all the body stuff, but you still have a will, and you're still pursuing whatever path you choose. I'd say that's being alive."

"Heh. For a wallflower who can barely string a full sentence together, you've got good insights in the weirdest places."

Virgo scoffed, but he sounded faintly happy.

"I don't like this dependency stuff, though. Not being able to walk with your own two legs is basically the same as being dead. But...if you've got another question, I might be willing to answer it."

"Then I'll ask my last question again. Why do you want to defeat Leo?"

This whole conversation started with that question. Sure, they didn't seem to get along too well in the past, but I felt no hatred from Virgo towards him. So

why was he working with me to defeat him? I thought he would dodge the question again, but Virgo was surprisingly forthcoming.

"I don't want to have regrets."

"Regrets?"

"I'm just a core now. I can't regenerate my body, and I might end up stuck like this for the rest of my life. Hell, worst comes to worst, I'll be dead in the next second."

"Y-you have a point there."

"I'm a bioweapon. I was made for one reason, and that's fighting. If I can hold a candle to Leo, who's spent the last three thousand years growing and getting stronger...it'll mean that DH-06 Virgo still has a place in the world."

"Wait a second. What if you can't do a thing to him?"

"You use a weapon to fight powerful enemies. If a weapon can't do that, no one needs it. I'll enjoy a pleasant death if it comes to that."

Virgo did not hesitate. He seemed to truly believe that he had no reason to exist if he could not fight.

"But the worst thing is dying without knowing how I'd do against him. You think I'd let myself have such a half-assed death?!"

Three thousand years had passed, and the world had completely changed. Virgo was fighting to find out if he still had a place in it. Much like General Shutina and Her Majesty, he was thinking seriously about how to use his life.

After hearing Virgo's tale, I thought back to when I was a girl. I overheard two adult incubi swapping rumors about Master and Her Majesty, which prompted me to walk the path of a curse-maker.

"You remember that prodigy, Shutina? She's all grown up and working as the Demon Queen's right hand now."

"Echidna, huh? When she entered Shutina's tutelage, I thought she was such a fool, yet...I suppose anyone can change."

When I was younger, I didn't have a clear vision of the future. I just lived my life aimlessly. There was nothing I wanted to do, and I didn't have any particular hobbies. Those empty days came and went, and I thought I would simply wander into the grave. Then I learned about General Shutina. After hearing the adults speak about her, I looked into her life. And what I found shocked me.

The succubus Shutina was blessed with great magic power from birth. Having mastered many advanced spells at the mere age of twelve, she was hailed as a prodigy. Yet rather than use her powers for herself, she wished to put them to use for the peace and unification of the Demon World. She aimed to become Demon Queen and put an end to the constant war and strife our world found itself in. Though she was my age, she already had such great ambition, such lofty ideals.

Around then, a certain tomboyish devil girl demanded to be allowed to become Shutina's disciple, forcing herself into the succubus village. That girl was Echidna. Her father, Cychreus, was the Demon King at the time, and she was a princess.

Princess Echidna had focused entirely on training in swordsmanship and hand-to-hand combat, leaving her magic utterly amateurish. This led her to the idea of receiving magical instruction from Shutina, the genius, who was also far younger than her. It is said that Shutina was suspicious and questioned the princess.

"Are you not embarrassed to bow your head to someone so much younger

than you and to beg her for her teachings? And you wish to become the next Demon Queen, no less, making you my rival. Do I look foolish enough to aid my rival so?"

They said Princess Echidna answered without hesitation.

"I'm not embarrassed at all! You're a lot more experienced with magic than I am, so the age thing doesn't bother me one bit. I don't think of you as a rival, either."

"You don't?"

"I don't care about all that 'position' and 'power' stuff. The Demon World is always on the brink of one war or another, and I just want to make it peaceful!"

"Th-then...we share the same ideals."

"I know, right? So, you teach me magic, and I'll teach you how to fight with that staff and your fists in exchange. Heck, I'll even be your lab rat for testing new spells if you need. That way, we'll both get really strong, and if one of us becomes the next Demon Queen, we'll both win!"

Or at least, that is the story I have heard. The two of them were close from then on, sometimes as teacher and pupil, sometimes as sisters, and occasionally even as rivals. Ultimately, Shutina decided to become Princess Echidna's right hand, and that was that.

It truly had an impact on me. The amount of sheer passion in our lives was *that* different. Both Master and Her Majesty gave infinitely more thought as to how to make use of their lives than I ever had. From that day forward, I started seriously considering my life and my future. I wanted to be useful to the both of them as a sorceress.

Unfortunately, I was no good at attack spells, so I picked curse-making. When

I did, though, I met fierce resistance. Even from my mother. A succubus must use her beauty as her weapon, they said. Why become a miserable curse-maker, of all things?

I stroked Virgo on my lap and nodded.

"I know how you feel, Virgo. You really have to choose your own path in life, right?"

"Yeah. I'm not gonna let anyone else decide the path I choose. Because..." Virgo paused, so I finished his sentence.

"Because your life is your own."

"Yeah, that's right. So, I'm going to decide where my life burns out. Heh, sounds like you know what's up."

I giggled.

"Hm? What's so funny?"

"I'm just glad to have someone of like mind so close by. It's like I've made a new friend or something."

It was just too funny to think about, and it put a real smile on my face. I didn't imagine we would get along very well, but...it turned out that our ideas, our views on life, were very similar. I felt like I had gained a true friend, and someone who understood me. I was glad that I got to fight by his side. Perhaps that was why I found his next remark so difficult to accept.

"That said, Canaan."

"Yes?"

"All of my preparations are complete. *I'm taking your body.*"

My heart began pounding in my ears and everything went black for a moment. When I returned to my senses, I was lying on my bed. Virgo, previously on my lap, was glowing fiercely in front of me. A searing pain assailed my head, and I could hardly breathe.

"V-Virgo...? Wh-what are you doing?!"

"I want to fight Leo."

His voice was flat and cold, as if he'd killed all of his emotions.

"I want to run across the land with my own legs, to knock Leo out with my own fists. That's what a *fight* means to me. And to do that, I need a body. A vessel synchronized with me both magically and mentally."

"A ve...ssel?"

It felt like my head was about to burst. As I fought my fading consciousness, I remembered the first time I met Virgo.

I couldn't hear his voice at first. It took about a week before I could, and that was after he'd granted me the power that I used to expand my dungeon. I'd always wondered why I started hearing him all of a sudden. I figured maybe it had taken him time to adjust the wavelength of his voice, but perhaps...

"The more magic power I poured into you, the more our magic wavelengths matched. You gradually became an ideal vessel, and hearing my voice was part of that."

"I-I...I see, so that's..."

It finally made sense. It wasn't complicated at all. I simply started hearing Virgo's voice because I got closer to him. You can't hear someone far away, but you can hear someone right next to you. It was precisely because I'd become a suitable vessel for him that I could hear his voice.

My mana was already nearly identical to Virgo's. We both burned with the desire to fight Leo. The conditions were absolutely perfect for him to possess me.

"Canaan. You called me a true friend, right?"

My vision had gone completely black. I could hear Virgo's apologetic voice from far, far away.

"I really appreciated that. See you."

Then, like a magical lantern dying out...

"Farewell, Canaan."

My consciousness as Curse-maker Canaan ended.

Chapter 5: Fulfilling the Promise

A commotion outside my door woke me up. The sound of chattering, intense chattering, lifted my eyelids.

"The hell...? Do they have any idea how early it is?"

It was the morning after I'd run into Canaan. I dragged myself out of bed while rubbing my tired eyes. After Canaan had escaped, I'd kept on looking for her and Virgo, but my initial hesitation had cost me. They'd been long gone. I ended up back at the castle in the dead of night and passed out on my bed.

The commotion outside continued. Hell, it had gotten even worse. I had figured I could just ignore it and go back to bed, but they were *too* loud. Sleep wasn't happening this morning. I stepped out of my room, bedhead and all, and saw some dark elf sorceresses running to and fro down the hall.

There were four of them in all, and one of them looked familiar. Dianette, the dark elf sorceress I'd taught how to resupply the magic power reactors efficiently, back when I was a trial hire as Black Knight Onyx.

"Why're you being this loud this early? What's going on?"

"Oh! Lord Leo! Everyone, Lord Leo's here! I found him!"

The elves immediately gathered around me. Judging from the looks on their faces, they seemed to be in the midst of a pressing situation.

"Were you looking for me, or something?"

"We were! You didn't answer when we knocked, so we were looking all over

for you!"

"What have *you* been up to?!"

"We called you and knocked so many times!"

"All right, all right, sorry, sorry!"

The elves surrounding me showered me with complaints, so I held up both hands and surrendered.

"I've been through a lot and I'm tired. So, what do you need me for?"

"Oh, that's right, we don't have time to be hounding Lord Leo about sleeping blissfully through an emergency."

"I said I was sorry!"

"Please head to the throne room immediately. Her Majesty summons you!"

"Echidna?"

I found myself double-checking. Why would she be calling for me? Shutina was the only person I mentioned looking for Canaan to. I couldn't think of any reason for Echidna to ask for me.

"Is there trouble again, or something? Did the Great Spiritual Hole close up again?"

"No, it's something in the kingdom of Eris...ah, ask Her Majesty or General Mernes for the details. Please, just hurry to the throne room!"

They wouldn't take no for an answer, so I hurried towards the throne room. When I descended from the executive floor, I noticed how battle ready the castle seemed. The sorcerers were gathering up catalysts for combat spells, and the soldiers were donning their armor. A large number had already formed ranks in the courtyard.

Dianette mentioned something about the kingdom of Eris, the country that had been attacked by wyverns the other day. Had another swarm of wyverns appeared? No, it couldn't be. That wasn't reason enough for the castle to be this on edge. A strange worry gripped my heart, and I sprinted into the throne room.

"They what?! And you're absolutely sure of this?!"

Inside, the leaders of the army were conversing, their faces grave. Echidna, Shutina, Lili, and Edvard surrounded Mernes, looking at photographs he held in his hand.

"Mm. Accounts have come in from multiple units, with Stock-Printed photographs, too. Look."

Echidna snatched a photograph out of Mernes' hand and grimaced with a groan when she looked at it.

"Urgh...now this is something we cannot let slide. Not with the army's reputation on the line!"

"Sorry, I'm late! What's going on?"

"Oh, hey Leo!"

"Leo!"

I waved at Lili and Shutina as I joined the ring. Mernes silently handed me a few photos. They appeared to be taken from atop stone walls near some human town. The photos showed a horde of blackened dragons, organized into ranks on the plains close to the settlement. The dragons themselves boasted a surprising amount of variety. Despite the distance, I could make out wyverns, raptors, drakes, and even a wyrm or two. It was a full course of dragons, really.

"These photos were taken atop the walls of Eris's capital." Mernes explained

as he looked at one of them. As leader of the intelligence unit, Mernes had spies in key cities all over the human world. I figured one of them had taken these photos.

"The capital's under attack. We're looking at...ten times the size of the horde you three took out after leaving me behind."

"*Ten* times?!" I couldn't believe my ears. "You're kidding, right? There were over twenty wyverns last time!"

"So I've been told. There's about three hundred surrounding the capital now, with more on the way."

"And that's not all, Leo. Look at this."

Echidna handed me another photo. It rendered me speechless.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Someone was standing on the plains, surrounded by the blackened dragons. They weren't attacking her, though. No, from how proudly she stood, it was clear that she *led* them. She looked familiar, too. The curse-maker's black robe, the wavy black hair covering one eye, the scrawny frame. It was her I'd been chasing deep into the night the day before.

"Canaan!"

Curse-maker Canaan, the woman with Virgo's Wisdom Stone.

"I'm absolutely certain this is my missing disciple, Canaan. And look at this—the largest, strongest dragons are closest to her."

Shutina was right. There were dragons big and small all over the photos, but the ones closest to Canaan were all larger ones. With the formation they were in, it was safe to say they were defending her. There could be no doubt she was

in charge.

"Canaan is leading this horde of dragons. And that's not all. The magic power she's emitting blackens the dragons around her and drives them berserk, adding them to her army."

"She first appeared near the town of Finoy and slowly moved south towards the capital, adding more dragons to her army as she went. Yet, for some reason, she didn't attack a single town on the way there."

"Not a single town?"

"Yeah."

Mernes put other photographs on top of the map, likely taken from each town. The march started at Finoy, then went to a small farming village to the south, then to a larger village further past that. The photos showed the dragon army traveling along the roads and over the plains near said settlements. If the dragons were attacking people in a frenzy, the spies wouldn't have time to take these photos, so their report was most likely correct.

"Strange, isn't it? Three hundred dragons are more than enough of a force to wreak havoc, but for some reason, the dragons are staying put. The capital is unharmed, too."

"Uh, maybe they're not listenin' to orders?"

"No, that isn't possible." Edvard immediately shot down Lili's question. "You saw how the blackened dragons acted at the fortress. They're as fierce as they come. The very fact that they passed by so many towns without so much as a swipe is proof that Canaan has complete control over them."

"Yeah? Then why aren't they attacking?"

Lili tilted her head and swished her tail from left to right, like a metronome.

"It's still morning, so maybe they're waiting for the king to wake up?"

"Obviously not. I can't imagine they'd set up an arrangement with the throne," Shutina dismissed.

"...!"

"Leo? What's the matter?"

So that's what's going on!

I grit my teeth. I couldn't believe what Virgo was up to.

"Leo, Shutina's told me your hypothesis about how Canaan likely had a hand in the previous wyvern attack. If you have an idea of what's going on, tell me."

"All right, I'll talk."

All eyes were on me. I pointed to the photo of Canaan and quietly began explaining.

"That's not Canaan. That's Virgo."

"What...?"

"Like I told you before, I'm not the only one of the DH Series. In the war three thousand years ago, they made twelve of us."

"Ah, I remember that. And that all of them were already dead, except for you."

"Virgo's one of them. My brother, DH-06. He was reduced to his core, his Akashic Engine...well, let's just call it the Wisdom Stone. Anyway, my read is that he's taken over Canaan's body. Most likely to lure me out."

"Whuh?!"

Lili looked at me in wide-eyed surprise.

"But why?! Isn't he your brother? Why's he after you?"

"It's *because* he's my brother. He's always wanted to fight me. Taking me on after I'd grown was something he'd been looking forward to from the bottom of his heart. That's just the kind of guy he is."

"Ahh, I see, I see." Edvard nodded. "He's the type who can only feel alive when fighting a worthy foe. I can understand that."

Edvard's read was correct. Virgo was a man truly stuck on fighting worthy adversaries. He always said that was his duty as a weapon. I flipped through my earliest memories, recalling my time with Virgo during the war.

"When the war is over, you and I are definitely going to fight. Got it?"

"If we're both still alive when it's over, that is."

I did remember making that promise after we'd taken over Ashinoko. And now, three thousand years later, Virgo had come to fulfill that promise, in the loudest way he could!

"I was a model soldier back in the day. No back talk, always loyal to the mission, and I would protect people no matter what. If he knows that I'm still alive and much stronger, there's no way he's not going to want to fight me."

"So, the reason he's leading this army of dragons, then..."

"Traitor or not, I'm still a hero. If humanity's in danger, I'm sure he thinks I'll come running. It's basically bait for a big fish."

This *was* a good plan. The man I used to be would have gone running to the humans' aid. But in the present? It was even more effective. If rumors spread that a curse-maker from the Demon Queen's army destroyed the capital of Eris, our reputation would collapse. Echidna's plan to make peace with the human world would be rendered impossible. Attacking the city in Canaan's body was

the fastest way to draw me out. A simple, but brilliant plan.

"The dragons' blackening is being triggered by an overflow of life force. I'm guessing Virgo's life force manipulation put them all in that state, with a Beast Master geas thrown in for good measure."

"Hm. So in a way, that means we simply have to defeat Virgo, then?"

"Yeah. That should stop the dragons' rampage and fix everything."

"...Well, I'm glad it's so simple. That means there's but one thing for us to do."

Echidna looked at us with resolute eyes.

"The six of us alone will head to defend the capital of Eris! Edvard and Shutina, tell the troops to stay on guard in the castle!"

"Hm? Lady Echidna, we are not taking the troops?!"

"Too many legs will slow us down." Echidna allowed no objection. "We must be as swift as possible. What we need is not a grand army to defend the capital for a week, but a light unit to join the battle as soon as possible. As long as we bring Virgo down with a focused attack, nothing else matters!"

Echidna's judgment was sound. Though our troops were well-trained, moving a large unit took time. Communicating orders, provisions, logistics...it took far too much time, and there was no telling when the dragons would attack. We had no time to burn.

Worse, our destination was a human city. If worst came to worst, the humans might assume the dark army had come to invade once more, leading to a three-way battle. It was hard to defend people who were trying to kill you, so I nodded in agreement with Echidna's proposal.

"Agreed. Lili, Edvard, and I are heroes to the people of Eris after that last

quest, so that should make things go a lot smoother when we get in there."

"The people of the city know you?"

"Most definitely. I told Mernes' spies in the capital to spread word of Onyx's group to every last corner. If the troops hear the names Ed and Alyosha, their morale'll jump up."

"I didn't think it would become useful like this. That's a laugh and a half."

"Mernes! It's not funny!"

Ignoring Lili's complaints, Mernes stood up as he munched an apple. Shutina and Edvard used spherophones to order the troops in the courtyard to stay on standby. I figured Echidna wanted them waiting on the off chance that we didn't manage to bring Virgo down. If the capital actually seemed in danger of falling, Echidna would march the whole army into the human world, fearing no misunderstanding. At that point, it would be a huge melee against Virgo's dragon army.

The people who didn't live in the capital would have no idea what was going on, but at the very least, the dark army's reputation would fall. This would lead to all sorts of problems. All of the diplomacy, all of the seeds I'd planted around the world since joining the army, would be ruined. And I *couldn't have that*.

"All right, we're moving out! We have two goals: defend Eris's capital, and defeat Virgo!"

We all nodded at Echidna's order. Shutina immediately summoned a warp gate, opening a portal to a hill near the capital.

There were many problems to consider. If the dragons attacked, how much of a fight could the human soldiers and knights put up against them? Was there any way to tear Virgo away from Canaan? Would killing Canaan stop Virgo?

Could Virgo, with his hyper-regeneration, even be killed?

There were too many problems, but this was our only opportunity.

Just you wait, Virgo. I'll give you the fight you've always wanted!

I stepped through the blue, glowing gate with the unfortunate resolution to defeat my brother after a three-thousand-year reunion.

Final Chapter: Virgo the Immortal

"This is *it*, man. This is *it."*

"We're all going to die here, every last one of us!"

Horror and despair overtook the north gate of the capital. Beyond the gate lay a rolling plain, currently occupied by over four hundred dragons. The great beasts showed no sign of attacking. Not yet, anyway. This grace period had given the throne time to arrange its forces.

Archers and sorcerers lined the walls, while swordsmen and pikemen formed up on the fields. Every last soldier in Eris was present, but they faced a horde of dragons. None could tell how many would fall. In the worst case, the army could face complete annihilation.

"We...we'll be all right. Look at all the royal knights we have on our side! If we work together, we can get through this!"

"If we work together? Do you have *any* idea what we're up against?!" The older archer next to me replied to my irresponsible optimism with a toothy shout. "We're facing dragons here, kid! And lots of them! Wyverns, drakes...hah, there's even goddamn *wyrms* out there. There's no way we can win."

"But...we're soldiers. We have to fight."

"Yeah, so we're going to fight. Fight, and die. Damn it!"

He let his shoulders droop in despair, and the other soldiers did the same. Everyone's will had been broken before the fight had begun. The battle had

already been lost in their minds. And I, army archer Johan Arment, could not criticize them. My legs wouldn't stop shaking, and if I dropped my guard, I might let out a panicked scream.

A few days ago, the fort I lived in was destroyed by a swarm of about twenty wyverns. We survived because Onyx and his friends came to our rescue, but we would have all died otherwise. That was simply how dangerous wyverns were.

Yet, this time, we faced hundreds. Neither Onyx nor Ed nor Alyosha were present. We were going to *die.* Every last one of us. That fear, that despair, lorded over every soldier on the walls and in the fields.

"Oh God, here they come!"

The dragons had broken their unsettling silence. They came in like a horde.

The first foes coming at my walls were ones I was familiar with, and hated: wyverns, lords of the sky. We launched waves of arrows and spells at them, but their deft, mocking maneuvers allowed them to easily evade them.

Among the dozens of wyverns flooding the skies, one finally slipped through the wave of projectiles to reach the walls. I saw its claws, glinting with murderous intent as it descended.

If I could just get one arrow through...

I'd never felt death so present. So up close. Yet, I was shockingly calm. I drew an arrow from my quiver, straightened my back, got my breathing under control, quietly nocked the arrow, and took aim. The lesson Onyx had given me clearly returned to my mind.

Just one arrow!

I aimed for the wyvern's weak point: the tip of the wing.

Please, God, grant me the strength! Grant me strength like Onyx's, just for this moment!

I loosed the arrow. It zipped off, grazing the wyvern's wing, and missing nonetheless. Then, a moment later, the wyvern let out a shriek of pain.

"Wh...?"

The wyvern twisted and turned in agony as it hurtled to the ground far below. I could not believe what I had seen. My arrow, after missing, had turned around in midair and zipped back-and-forth thrice, piercing the wyvern's wing multiple times and leaving sizable holes behind.

I'd used a normal composite bow. No bow I knew of, no matter how strong, could pull off something like that.

"Diffusion. Smash Growth."

In my confusion, I heard an unfamiliar voice from above. A noble, feminine voice. The wyverns immediately pulled back, as though they were afraid of her.

"Diffusion, to spread Valiant Song, Clear Mind, Keen Sense, and Regenerate far and wide. Limit Designation, to restrict these enhancements to all humans and demi-humans who consider themselves denizens of the kingdom of Eris."

Everyone looked up to see a beautiful succubus sorceress in a violet robe with long blonde hair bound at her back floating thirty feet above the castle walls. She waved her staff and conjured up purple light in the sky. The light spread out like a grand curtain, forming a transparent dome over the city.

Immediately, I felt as light as a feather. My nervousness faded, and I could see much, much farther. I didn't even need to look at the soldiers beside me to see their expressions. Morale filled us all, and not one of us shook in fear any longer.

"Though temporary, I have granted you much greater power." Like a priestess communicating the will of God, the succubus spellcaster addressed us in a grave tone. "The strength to pierce dragon scales. The skill to strike at their weak points. The endurance to shoot and slash for hours without fatigue. These are all the powers I have given you."

The army clamored with trepidation and exhilaration.

"As long as you are in this dome, this Magic Space, you will be immortal heroes. As long as I, the Almighty Magic, am with you, I will let none of you fall."

"Wait, is she...d-don't tell me."

Someone whispered what I had been thinking. Rumor had it the Demon Queen's army boasted one of the Demon World's greatest sorceresses. A succubus who had mastered countless high-level spells at the mere age of twelve, who had honed her art to such a high level that she had become the Demon Queen's right hand. Sorcerer General Shutina. The brilliant and beautiful sage known to the world as the Almighty Magic.

"I am one of the Four Great Guardians of Demon Queen Echidna's army, Sorcerer General Shutina. I come to defend the kingdom of Eris from this horde of dragons, and I lend you my power to do so. Now! Onward, to victory!"

The soldiers cheered wildly. No one had seen reinforcements coming. Especially not reinforcements with such power!

He ran. Like the wind, he dashed along the city's stone-paved roads and atop its tile roofs. The Sorcerer General's enhancement spells had reached the whole city, affecting not just the soldiers, but the civilians, as well. Though not trained fighters, they were putting up a fight. Still, even when powered up by magic,

they were just common folk. Two or three blackened dragons could shut them down.

"Ahhh!"

"Damn!"

"A wyvern got Jessica! Hey, archer, do something!"

"I can't! I might hit her by mistake!"

He heard a girl's scream and the shouts of many men. Glancing over, he saw a wyvern flapping into the air with a traveling merchant's daughter in its claws. It was already far out of reach of sword and pike, and had nearly left bow range.

"Tch."

Shutina *had* limited her enhancement spells to denizens of the kingdom, after all. As annoying as it was, outsiders like that merchant and his daughter were excluded. That was the reason for *his* presence. He would simply do his job. Without hesitation, the manifestation of wind leapt.

He was Shadowless General Mernes, one of the Demon Queen's army's Four Great Guardians and its fastest assassin. Not knowing that help was moments away, Jessica, the captured merchant's daughter, clasped her quivering hands together and closed her eyes.

"Oh Gods, please, Gods, save me..."

"Hey."

The voice came from directly behind her.

"Wh—?"

"Don't close your eyes during a fight."

She opened her eyes when the wyvern howled in pain, and the world abruptly tumbled around her. Someone had sliced up the wyvern's left swing, leaving it in tatters by the socket. Though wyverns were powerful, one couldn't easily fly after losing a wing, especially not with a load in its clutches. Without hesitation, the beast dropped Jessica.

"Eep!" Jessica went hurtling downward. "Ahhhhhh!"

Her vision had shifted. She was no longer looking down at the ground, but up at the sky. Faraway mountains were in view, as well as the blue sky with its blazing sun and endless wyverns. Among them, however, she saw a silver-haired boy...*butchering* them.

Wielding two blades, he leapt through the air in all directions, as though he were jumping off of invisible platforms. His movements were unlike that of any bird, dragon, or man, and the wyverns were powerless before his assault. One after another, they fell, not even managing to scratch him.

"I thought wyverns were lords of the sky." Mernes sounded baffled as he murmured. "You'll have to return that title."

He continued to zip through the air like a gale. The moment he passed over Jessica, he unleashed six attacks faster than even the Demon Queen herself could muster. Three wyverns tumbled and went hurtling to the ground. It was likely they never even knew what hit them.

"W-wow..."

"It's not that big a deal. Really."

"Eep?!"

Before Jessica knew it, she was in the silver-haired boy's arms. They were both falling.

"Leo and Echidna can do the same thing. Lili and Edvard, not so much...but they'd find a way to make it work with brute force, anyway." The boy's green hood flipped up in the wind, showing more of his glittering, silver hair, and revealing his jade eyes.

"We're about to land. Hold on tight."

"U-um..."

"You're dead weight. When you get to the ground, find some basement to hole up in. And take care of yourself."

Though the two fell with incredible speed, Mernes spoke as though he were taking a casual stroll across the plains. It was as if this were something that happened to him every day.



Jessica's mouth hung open in awe, but the boy just glared at her.

"Come on, let's hear an answer."

"O-oh! Yessir!"

The ground grew closer by the second. Jessica clung to the boy as tightly as she could, preparing herself for the shock.

Yet, there was none. She heard a light tap as the boy landed with all the weight of a feather, not even chipping a paving stone.

"Jessica!"

"Father!"

Jessica's father tossed aside his battered hand axe and came running. After giving his daughter a tight hug, he bowed his head to the boy beside her in gratitude.

"Oh, thank you so much! I have no idea who you are, but thank you so much for saving my—"

"Don't drop your guard." The boy's left hand blurred slightly while his expression remained blank. Immediately after, something fell with a heavy thud.

"Aagh!" An archer leapt back in fright. With good reason, too. The fallen object was a ten-foot-long raptor that had been sneaking up on the group from across the rooftops. There were knives sticking out of its head and both of its eyes, and it was already dead.

The boy had thrown all three knives instantaneously, each with the accuracy of threading a needle. It had taken everyone on the scene a few seconds after seeing the fallen raptor to realize that.

"If you've got time to chatter, you've got time to escape. Hole yourselves up

inside. I don't want Echidna yelling at me for letting you die."

"R-right...sure thing?"

"Glad to hear it. Get going."

The boy turned his back on Jessica's father and looked like he was about to run off.

"Wait!" Jessica called out to him. She hadn't even gotten the chance to thank him for saving her life. She knew, of course, that he didn't have the time for idle chatter, but still. At the very least...

"Yeah? I'm in a hurry."

"Your name. Please, at least tell me your name! I'll thank you properly later, I promise!"

"My name?"

"Yes. You saved my life. I'll never forget your name!"

The boy gave a bewildered sigh, as if he were puzzled by her question. It was the first sign of emotion he'd shown. Perhaps he had never been asked his name by people he had saved before. Jessica anxiously stared at his back, until finally, he quietly answered.

"Mernes."

"What?"

"Master of the Assassins' Guild and Great Guardian of the Demon Queen's army, Shadowless General Mernes. If you want to find me, come to the castle's mess hall, the Demon Rat Tavern. We're open from eight in the morning to ten at night." With that, Mernes vanished. There was no sign of him on the streets or the rooftops. Only the gust of wind he left behind proved he had been there.

"Wh-whoa!"

"Damn! Look at that wolf go!"

The massive, white-furred wolf leapt as the soldiers all watched her. Although well over eight feet long, she faced an enormous hydra that was easily twice her size. Its tough, rope-like tail wrapped around the wolf, constricting her in a crushing embrace.

"Come on! There you go, just one more push!"

"You got this! You got this!"

"I...got...this!"

With a snap and a crack, the tail came flying off. Despite the hydra using all of its massive size to hold her, the wolf managed to shake herself loose. She stood before the soldiers, protecting them in her shadow, and spoke. Hers was not the voice of a monstrous beast roaring, but of a young girl. There was no mistaking it: she was Beast General Lili, Great Guardian of the Demon Queen's army.

"Sorry, Mr. Dragon! I know you're just being controlled, really!"

The great white wolf was known by another name: the Divine Wolf Fenrir, Guardian of Erkia. This form was Lili at her full power. For a brief instant, a deadly glint shone in the wolf's eyes.

"Really, I do."

Lucky for the soldiers, only the hydra noticed the sheer violence she now harbored. Her glance was like a clawed hand gripping your heart and could easily overwhelm and kill a normal human. For the hydra's part, it backed up in

fear as Lili growled in a tone unimaginable in contrast to her usual, cheerful demeanor.

"Ever hear about survival of the fittest? The rules of nature that run this world?" She reared back and leapt. "If you're cursing anything, curse the fact that we ended up on different sides, three-heads."

It was as if a gong rang out on the battlefield. Fenrir crashed into the hydra with all the force of a battering ram, and its sturdy bones audibly cracked and shattered. Enraged, it flailed at Fenrir with its claws, only to have them blocked and its forelimbs broken.

Fenrir's movements were predictable, but unpreventable. The sheer power her massive frame generated coupled with her uncharacteristic speed turned her into a simple, yet overwhelming force to be reckoned with. That was Lili's mightiest weapon in Fenrir form. Even Leo had to use all of the magic he could muster to keep her at bay. What hope did a mere hydra have?

The soldiers cheered her on as her fur stood on end, quickly changing shape. Her white coat became a forest of blades, covering her entire body with fangs and claws. In this form, Fenrir was no longer a simple, towering beast. She was a fully automatic murdering machine that extinguished all life in its path as it charged.

She lunged at the hydra before her and sank her fangs into one of its heads, tearing it off of its body. Next, she twisted her body towards the beast's torso, burying her blades deeply into its chest and turning it into mincemeat. Then, she leapt high into the air and landed on the hydra's back, and the numerous blades on her paws pierced all the way through to its abdomen as she stomped all over it.

"This is where it ends!"

With a great roar, Fenrir swung her tail like a mighty blade in the hands of a master swordsman. Its slashing blow stopped the hydra in its tracks. A moment later, the hydra split cleanly in two, and its upper half crumbled to the ground.

"Alriiiiight!"

"Hurray!"

"Victory!"

The soldiers cheered, and Fenrir let out a roar of joy along with them. Then, the great wolf leapt in the air and glowed brightly before returning to her true form, that of a small, young girl. Still airborne, the girl spun around and made a perfect landing atop the roof of the watchtower.

"Hi, everyone! I'm Lili Alyosha, one of Echidna's Four Great Guardians!" Lili politely bowed to the soldiers below, and they excitedly began chattering among themselves. Alyosha! That was the name of one of the heroes who had saved Finoy and Fort Wieten just a few days ago!

"I'm here to beat up the bad dragons! I'm with the Demon Queen's army, but we're not enemies anymore, so let's work together! Okay?"

"Alyosha! Alyosha!" "Lili! Lili!" She was met with the thunderous cheers of a motivated and energized armed force greeting their hero.

"Lord Leo has told me..."

The red-haired giant stepped forward with a resounding boom. Around him lay the bodies of countless dragons, all slain by one strike from his unbreakable greatsword, Aroundight. Now, he faced a great wyrm. Its pitch-black scales absorbed every last ray of sunlight, and its bloodshot eyes, twisted in rage, glared back at the titanic man. He was Dragon General Edvard, one of the Four

Great Guardians of the Demon Queen's army. As the strongest swordsman of the dragonfolk, the duty fell to him to slay blackened dragons.

"There is a clear reason for dragon blackening. That it is not the superstition of Nidhogg's curse, but something more logical. Whether you live in truth and virtue or in evil and slaughter, it matters not. The blackening strikes all. Equally, and unexpectedly."

The dragon simply growled. Wyrms were highly intelligent beings and normally engaged Edvard in conversation, but its berserk state afforded it no ability to converse.

"Right you are. It truly is a frustrating state of affairs."

Still, Edvard managed a conversation with the wyrm.

"If the fate of blackening awaits no matter how one lives, why bother with restraint? Why not attack the sons of man, devour your enemies, tear them apart, and burn them to cinders? That is, I suppose, a way of life. If that is how you live, I will not deny it."

He slowly nodded, then looked directly at the wyrm. His eyes were full of empathy and mercy for his kin, a fellow dragon who had been forced into such a berserk state.

"However," he began as violence entered his eyes, "I will not have anyone deny how I live!"

He pulled the greatsword out of the ground and unleashed a powerful slash. An invisible shockwave whipped out from it, scattering the countless dragon corpses lying around him.

"I am Edvard. Dragon General, Great Guardian, and dragon-slayer. Should my blackened kin bare fangs against the innocent, no matter the cause, I shall strike

them down!"

The wyrm replied with a violent roar, and the world immediately turned crimson. It had breathed fire, with a force easily rivaling the highest-level fire spells. The conflagration engulfed the area, scorching the very core of the land. Even with Shutina's generous enhancement spells, any human caught in the crossfire would be cinders. That was why Edvard had drawn the wyrm away to face him on his own.

"I would expect no less than this pleasant sauna from a dragon of your caliber!"

A figure leapt out from the inferno wielding a sword bathed in flames. He brought it down in a mighty overhead swipe, slicing off half the dragon's wing and giving rise to a fountain of blood. Edvard had made it through the flame-breath without even a single singed dragon scale. In fact, he seemed brimming with power. He stared down that beast which was easily twenty or thirty times his size, and fearlessly bellowed out.

"Have at you! I will bear witness to the dragon you have become!"

"Drake coming in from the left, Leo! Follow my lead this time!"

"I got it, I got it!"

A drake the size of a small fortress stomped towards Echidna and myself and unleashed a barrage of fireballs. They came arcing through the air and threatened to overwhelm us with their numbers. A foe who didn't throw up barrier spells would be burnt to a crisp, and if they did put up their barriers, they would be smashed by the creature's bulk.

Unfortunately for the drake, however, he'd picked the wrong pair to mess

with. Before him were the strongest specimens the human and demon worlds had to offer: Demon Queen Echidna, and former hero Leo Demonhart!

"Blades of light, destroy all obstacles in my path! Sweep Flash!"

"Come forth, breath of Hades! Drop the curtain of silence and death! Cocytus!"

The light bullets I'd fired out pierced through all of the drake's fireballs, making them explode in midair. Sweep Flash was a powerful projectile spell that spawned a large amount of tracking light bullets in rapid succession, launching them with the force of a Gatling gun and leaving the target as full of holes as a honeycomb. It came in handy as a counterspell, too, as I had just demonstrated.

Meanwhile, Echidna had cast the most powerful ice spell, Cocytus. It unleashed a powerful stream of cold, immediately nullifying the heat from the explosions and freezing the drake completely.

"Here comes the next wave!"

It was a perfect ambush. Two hydras the size of houses rushed at us from both sides in a pincer attack, using the explosions as cover.

"Leave the left side to me!"

"Got it!"

I headed left, and Echidna went right. I drew my longsword and she drew Tyrfing as we sprang into action. A moment later we were both on the ground again following a brief melee. As we sheathed our swords, all six hydra heads fell onto the ground, and the frozen drake shattered into pieces.

"Drakes and hydras. They're really bringing out the big ones, aren't they?"

"I knew this would be tough, but damn, not *this* tough. Think the capital's still standing?"

"Believe in the Guardians. If they can't handle this, no one can."

"Good point!"

I lunged forward and drew my blade again, slicing off the head of a raptor that had jumped at me. The two of us were currently carving out a path of carnage through the dragon horde as we ran through the plains near the city.

We had a plan, although it was far too sloppy to call it such. Shutina would power up the city's defenders, granting them the strength to defeat the smaller dragons, like raptors, alone. Mernes would enter the city itself and defend people that Shutina couldn't cover. Lili and Edvard would take out the stronger dragons, with Lili using her Fenrir mobility to defeat medium-sized dragons scattered throughout the battlefield and Edvard focusing on his forte, the larger dragons.

Echidna and myself formed the main wedge of the operation. While the Guardians bought us time, we would break through the dragons' formation and slay Virgo as quickly as possible. It was a plan of sheer brute force, making use of the immense individual power we all boasted. Still, sloppy as the operation was, I couldn't help but smile.

"Heh heh heh..."

"Hm? What's so funny?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking...sure is nice to have people at your back. ...Bone Wall!"

Countless twisted bones rose up from the ground, forming an intertwined mesh. The wall of bones prevented the charge of an armored dragon that bore

a striking resemblance to a rhino. Though this physical barrier, which I'd borrowed the power of Shade to summon, *looked* brittle, it was surprisingly sturdy. Not only that, it drained the life force of all that touched it and kept growing in size and strength. Seeing as how the armored dragon only had a mind for charging, Bone Wall was the perfect counterplay.

"I got really used to flying solo back when I was a hero. This whole division of labor thing...it's pretty damn nice, I've got to say."

There I was, charging through the battlefield with a friend at my side. And not just any friend, but the Demon Queen Echidna herself. Such a scene would have been unthinkable a few months earlier, so an unceasing joy gripped my heart.

"Hey, Echidna. It...really is nice to have companions at your side in battle, huh?"

"Took you long enough to realize, fool! Honestly, I can hardly believe you've lived three thousand years!"

"Ow!"

She smacked me on the head.

"Well, look, I didn't *ask* to live a life of solitude!"

"I know. People will always get hurt on the battlefield, and you wanted to avoid that, so you resolved to take care of everything yourself, and that's how it happened, right? I know you."

Three wyverns screeched as they zipped down at us. Before I could fire off a spell, Echidna lunged at them like a gale. She used Shadowless and Oborobi, Mernes's favorite aerial movement combo. Echidna passed by two wyverns in midair, slicing them with the incredible speed afforded to her by Shadowless and slaying them instantly. Then, with the invisible platforms made by Oborobi,

she stepped thrice in midair, as if dancing, and spun around, hurling an Ice Javelin and skewering the remaining wyvern to the ground.

"Yet," crimson dress fluttering, she made a beautiful landing before resuming her dash, "I am strong, as you can see. The Guardians and I are *very* strong. We won't die easily."

"Yeah. I know."

"So lean on us more. Enough trying to solve everything by yourself, understood?"

The words were music to my ears. I didn't have to fight on my own anymore. I could depend on my friends.

I started to thank her, but stopped. We both recognized something was off and froze immediately. The endlessly replenishing waves of dragons had stopped lunging at us several seconds ago.

"Looks like we're here."

We had arrived in a wide clearing separate from the carnage and violence we'd cut our way through. A gentle wind rustled the grass, and the sounds of battle rang out from afar. Soldiers shouted, and dragons roared. Yet, before us was a being who seemed apart from it all.

A woman in a black robe.

"Yo." Canaan...no, Virgo in Canaan's body, smirked.



"Been a long while, Leo. You been doing good?"

The moment I heard that voice, my legs were already moving.

"What—"

I drew my blade as I dashed forward, bringing it down in an overhead swing. The voice was Canaan's, there was no doubting that. And all it had said was "been a long while," sure. Yet that was all I needed in order to see the shadow of the other person looming over Canaan, clear as day.

"What the *hell* are you doing, Virgo?!"

"Gahaha! Ahahaha!" Virgo let out a fierce laugh with Canaan's face, raising his bare hand to catch my longsword. "Hahaha!"

Still, I brought down my blade with all of the force I could muster. I put *everything* into that slash. The attack would cut down to the bone in an instant, slicing from palm to elbow, yet...

Canaan's slender hand had caught my blade, easily. The flesh was not even rent. Or was it? I felt the blade sink into flesh, yet...no, the moment I had cut through, he regenerated!

"Gah!"

"Come on, don't tell me you forgot my abilities! Forgot what I'm all about!"

I pulled out my blade before it ended up fused into his hand and hurriedly leapt back. Immediately following, Virgo grazed my stomach with a fierce roundhouse kick which was blazing fast and very agile. He seemed to have multiple enhancement spells on him. The friction from the graze left white smoke drifting up from my shirt in its wake, and it felt like it might catch fire at any moment.

"How could I forget?! That insane regenerative ability, that near bottomless life force that makes you unkillable...you're about the only one in this world

with powers like that."

"Haha, I'm glad you remembered me, brother! However, I must say," Canaan...no, Virgo, took a glance at Echidna beside me, "It looks like you've changed quite a bit. You were always so stiff, so by-the-book, and now you're one of the dark army's executives? Sounds like a bad joke to me!"

"I could say the same of you."

I signaled Echidna with my eyes, and she immediately understood my meaning. We started to inch our way in opposite directions, looking for the right timing to lock him in a pincer attack. There were, of course, many problems. Virgo had nigh-unlimited regenerative abilities, and his Erosion Fist made use of them to immediately slay his foes. He was built just as strong as I was and defeating him would be no easy task.

The big issue with Erosion Fist was that until the attack landed, it was a humble physical attack. Dispel and antimagic wouldn't work, so you'd need to either dodge the attack or ward it off with a physical wall, like the Bone Wall I'd used a while ago.

If Erosion Fist actually landed, your body would be overloaded with far more life force than it could take. Imagine a balloon popping if you put too much air into it and you'll have an idea of the outcome. The higher the level of the user and the more life force they could command, the more dangerous the attack. If Echidna or I got hit, we would be in serious danger.

And most of all, we've got Canaan to worry about.

Virgo had control of her body, but was there a way to save her? Was killing her all we could do? And what of her ego, her consciousness? Was it pointless to try to reach out to her? My mind desperately searched for answers as I kept

up my conversation with Virgo.

"What you're doing here, Virgo—*that's* the bad joke. We of the DH Series were made to defeat evil and protect humanity, yet here you are attacking a city with dragons!"

"And how about you? Look at you, a decorated officer in the Demon Queen's army!"

"There's more than one way to protect humanity. And I...after three thousand years of life, I've gotten greedy. I've decided to protect both worlds, human and demon. That's all."

"Don't give me that crap!"

Virgo leapt, but not at me. He went in the opposite direction, towards Echidna!

"Look out, Echidna! You can't let him hit you!"

"I know!"

Suddenly Echidna split into multiple copies of herself. It was Mirror Image, a spell that conjured up illusory clones to evade attacks.

"Playing magic tricks? Not gonna work on me!"

Yet the eight illusions, no matter how well made and detailed they were, did nothing to stop Virgo. He could see life-waves, the invisible vitality every form of life emitted. Virgo would be able to see her true form as if looking through thermal goggles.

He ran straight at the real Echidna, while the clones dealt out impotent, illusory attacks. They did nothing to slow him down.

"You're mine, lady!"

"Oh? Virgo, was it? You're rather sharp, I'll give you that." Echidna seemed to have predicted that outcome. "However...!" She hadn't cast the spell in self-defense. No, Echidna picked the spell after quickly grasping Virgo's personality, abilities, and battle style. "You face the Demon Queen herself! Mirage React!"

Mirage React was a combination of light and fire elements, a spell that would cause the clones spawned from Mirror Image to violently explode. The clones around Virgo grew white-hot with heat.

"Did you think this was a mere trick of the light? That you could ignore the illusions because you could see the real deal?"

Echidna's magic power continued to climb, causing the temperature in the surrounding area to leap.

"That overconfidence spelled your doom! Curse your foolishness in hell!"

She made a complicated sign in the air, conjuring up a blazing magic circle. That's when I realized she was adding another spell to the mix, aiming to end the battle in one move!

"*Howl, o inferno! Dance, o conflagration! May the almighty blaze shake the earth with its awakening, scorch the heavens with fiery death!*"

"Tch." Virgo disgustedly clicked his tongue as he went on the defensive, but it was too late.

"*Be burned to cinders by the fires of purgatory! Blei Levi-dict, Inferno!*"

Mirage React and Inferno, two high-level fire spells, exploded at the same time, engulfing the surrounding area in flames. It wasn't for nothing that Echidna had the title of Demon Queen. She boasted mastery over all elements of magic, but fire magic was truly her forte.

All life in our worlds received the blessing of the spirits at birth to some

extent, but she was beloved of Ifrit and Salamander, the flame and fire spirits. She leapt out of the flames without a scratch on her and landed next to me.

"Did you get him?"

"It was a solid hit. But going off of what you told me about Virgo—"

"Gahaha! Ahahaha!"

Laughter from the flames interrupted Echidna. Canaan's voice. Virgo's voice.

"Hahahaha! Ahahahaha!"

"I knew it would not be this easy!"

We saw a figure slowly stand up in the raging flames. Virgo was far away, but I could still tell he'd been deeply wounded. However, a golden light suddenly covered him, immediately restoring his broken body.

Virgo's specialty was hyper-regeneration. No matter how close he came to death, as long as the Wisdom Stone of his core still lived, he could recover. The flames, blazing away, kept us separate from him. We had a little time before they went out.

"Leo, let's strike him at the same time next. If his specialty is hyper-regeneration, we need only crush him so quickly he won't have the time to recover. We won't let up until he dies!"

"Hold on, Echidna. Leave this to me."

"What?!"

I held up my hand before she could continue.

"I'll defeat Virgo on my own. I don't want you getting caught in the crossfire, so stand aside."

I had a trump card. Something I'd prepared beforehand. I hadn't told anyone about it, of course. Trump cards are meant to be kept secret. I didn't want Virgo to figure out my plan, either, so I didn't tell Echidna I had something up my sleeve. Instead, I looked at her and nodded.

"Ah. I see." Luckily, Echidna figured out what I was trying to say immediately. "I don't like that you kept it a secret from me, but I'll forgive that and stay at the ready should you fail. Fight your heart out."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Suddenly, sparks flew through the sky. The dome of light covering the city changed from purple to red. Shutina had upped the juice in the Magic Space she'd cast over the area. That most likely meant the battle wasn't going well. The Four Great Guardians wouldn't die to the dragon hordes, but the human soldiers were a different story. And the Guardians could only cover so much ground. With the huge number of dragons pushing on the city, it was only a matter of time before soldiers started dropping.

"Unfortunately, killing Canaan may be our only choice." Echidna looked bitterly reluctant about that. "We might have found a way to separate them if we had the time, but the situation allows for no such thing. If we do not defeat Virgo as quickly as possible, the humans are as good as dead."

Her tone allowed no objection. I could tell that she was saying that as both Demon Queen and as my leader, with care for my feelings—that I didn't have to hesitate.

"I will break the news to Shutina, Leo. Give up on Canaan. No matter what happens to her body, you *must* slay Virgo! That is an order!"

A soldier could not disobey orders, generally. Killing Canaan being an order

meant all the responsibility would fall on Echidna, my commander. A woman with a soft heart, really. I was glad to be under her.

"Hey, Echidna."

"What?"

"You told me to depend on my friends more a while ago, yeah?"

"Guh." She blinked in confusion, as if wondering what I was getting at. "I did, but what of it? This is no time to be talking about—"

"There's something I want to ask you to do. I've got a bit of a plan."

I figured it would be a little too tough to communicate without words, but I didn't have time to explain. So I grabbed Echidna's hand and put my forehead against hers, casting Mind Link. Everything I was thinking should have been beamed into Echidna's mind. Her eyes went wide in surprise.

"You get all that? ...You did, right?"

"Are you *serious*?! This isn't a plan, this is madness! It has no chance of success!"

"I'm dead serious. If this works, we might be able to save Canaan. It's worth a try!"

Exactly ten seconds later, Echidna dashed off towards the capital. Virgo stepped through the weakened flames at roughly the same time. I had no idea if my plan would work, but all I could do for the time being was believe in Echidna and wait.

"Phew. So that's Demon Queen Echidna, huh?"

Virgo had taken an all-out attack from her, but he didn't have a scratch on

him. Killing him definitely wouldn't be straightforward. What was more, only his body was unharmed. Canaan's favorite black robe had been burned to ashes, and all that covered her nude body was her long, thigh-length hair.

"They don't call her Demon Queen for nothing. That attack would have blasted anyone other than me out of existence. ...So tell me, Leo, why'd you let Echidna go?"

"No big reason. I just wanted us to have a chat between brothers."

"Sounds like you're full of it. You were plotting something, weren't you?"

"I'm serious. There's a ton I want to ask you. For starters, aren't you cold without any clothes?"

All right, I was half-serious about wanting to talk. There was still something I hadn't asked him.

"Hey, Virgo. Why are you doing this? I know how you operate, and how good fights are what you live for, but putting people in danger just to get what you want? That isn't you!"

"You're right. If I came back to life normally, I wouldn't have done any of this." Virgo readily agreed with me. He didn't seem to be manipulated or forced by anyone. No, he had come of his own free will, to fight me. "But I came back as nothing but a core. Couldn't even regenerate my body, and I had no idea when my core would shut down and take me with it. So I wanted to have a bout with you before I kicked the bucket, that's all."

"Just a core, huh? So, you came back incomplete, then."

"Yeah. And I was shocked to be back, let me tell you. Woke up in this dingy dungeon underground with some strange curse-maker in front of me. Hell, just being able to talk with you like this is a miracle. For all I know, I'll be dead a

minute from now, or maybe even a few seconds."

Light covered Virgo's body. He wasn't casting a healing spell, but Disguise, magic that conjured up clothing. When the light cleared, Canaan was wearing a familiar looking black suit that covered her whole body.

Some things never changed. It was the close-combat suit Virgo loved back during the war.

"So I wanna do what I want before I die."

Virgo slowly put up his fists, pivoted his body slightly away from me, and dropped into a crouch. It wasn't a speedy stance, but it allowed him to step into a single, powerful blow.

"I don't want to go down regretting anything. I'm the only one who gets to decide my path, and how I live my life. The decision is mine!"

"Don't be an idiot! That's no reason to put others in danger!"

"Then how about you?!"

Virgo's fist was inches from my face before I heard his voice. He must have used Over Accel!

The spell did immense damage to the body in exchange for granting a massive burst of speed. It was normally too risky to use in battle, but Virgo's regeneration made short work of that penalty!

"D-damn it!"

I had no choice. I forced out a silent Over Accel of my own, violently slowing down my perception of time. Only Virgo's fist was moving at normal speed. I bent back as his Life-Erosion Fist barely passed over my head. I then pushed him away with a counter kick, and both of our Over Accels ran out. Immense pain

followed.

"Grrk...!"

"Gahaha! No need to push yourself so hard!"

Pain tore through my body and I gasped for breath. My focus scattered as my bones creaked, my lungs burned, and my heart felt as though it were about to burst. Damn it all, that spell's recoil was far too much! While the pain hounded me, a fully healed Virgo stomped my way.

"How about you?! You've lived for three thousand years. Did you never want to forget about your purpose? Did you never want to throw this hero business aside and live for yourself?!"

"I...no, I ne—"

"Oh yes, you have. I won't let you say you haven't, Leo!"

"Frost Nova!"

I cast three Frost Novas, hoping to freeze his legs, but he predicted my move and jumped out of the way.

Have I never wanted to live for myself...? The past few months immediately came to mind as I ruminated. *Of course I have! That's what I wanted until just a few months ago!*

Just a few months ago, right after I'd defeated Echidna, I'd been *tired.* Cast out from the human world and deprived of my life as a hero, I had nothing else I wanted to do. I'd done my utmost to live out my duty for all of three thousand years, and figured I was due a break. The entire reason I'd joined the Demon Queen's army incognito was to find a place to die. After living so long as humanity's guardian, that was my last decision. Like Virgo, I chose to live for myself.

Virgo had no idea what would come tomorrow, but he wanted to live life without regret. And I understood that, painfully so. I could feel my will to slay my brother dwindling.

Crap!

But if I didn't stop Virgo, he'd just keep up his rampage. If I lived, he'd come after me. If he defeated me, he'd search for another worthy opponent, like Echidna or the Guardians, destroying everything in his path to them. And there wouldn't be any hope of peace between humans and demons for ages to come.

"All right, Virgo. Let's settle this as brothers!"

Virgo came at me like a wild animal, and I calmly dodged his killer fists. A dodge behind, a dodge to the side, then a feint back into a White Mist spell to shut down his vision for a moment. I leapt over his head and launched an Ice Javelin, freezing Virgo and the mist alike. That would immobilize him for a few seconds. I steeled myself for what came next.

Changing Virgo's mind would be no simple task, which meant there was one thing for me to do: slay him. With unyielding resolve, I chanted my trump card while making the spell signs with my left hand.

"*Wee Amun Zor Dah Lo! O flow of life, cycle of souls! Crash thyself upon this wall!*"

"Aaargh!"

A sound like glass shattering echoed throughout the clearing, followed by a howl. Virgo had broken the ice-tomb from within and came running right for me.

"This..." Virgo's right fist radiated with the light of countless healing spells he'd repeatedly cast. It was no longer Life-Erosion Fist. No, it had become Hyper

Life-Erosion Fist! If that hit me, I would *absolutely* die! "...is *everything* I've got!"

"Guh... *From life to death and light to dark, I call upon the forbidden power that twists all!*"

I began casting, but I had to release it at just the right moment. And it took immense energy by default, so I didn't think I could cast another one. I had to buy as much time as I could, no matter how dangerous!

After three steps...two, one...

"Curtains, Leo!"

Now!

"*Hear my call and open the otherworldly gate! Destroy Star Formation!"*

Virgo's Hyper Life-Erosion Fist struck my stomach at the exact same instant a black barrier engulfed us both.

"What...?" Virgo furrowed his brow in disbelief. His attack had landed, yes, but my body showed no sign of reaction. And that was no surprise. The twenty-yard-wide rectangular barrier we were in nullified his Life-Erosion Fist. That was my trump card. "What did you do?"

"Fallen Jungfrau," I answered his angry glare with a sharp glare of my own. "Right before I joined the Demon Queen's army, I'd set up a plan to revive everyone in the DH Series."

"You what now?"

"The new DH Series would attack the world and I would come to the rescue, showing everyone they still needed my heroics. Sounds like a riot, huh?"

"Yeah, it's pretty ridiculous. Seems that you made the same choice as me." Virgo laughed, but I could hear an inkling of disappointment in his voice.

Perhaps he saw a bit of himself in me.

"But things are different now. I've decided to protect both worlds with Echidna and the others. This spell...it's an original. I came up with it myself for the sole purpose of killing your new form."

"No fooling?!"

Virgo's leg sliced through the air. With all of the enhancements on it, his kick could easy slice through a steel pillar. I put on my own buffs and countered him with the same attack. Our kicks collided in the air with a crash, but there was no erosion from him.

"Nice. Very, nice!" Virgo sounded as happy as could be. "You're pretty good! Dunno what magic trick you have going on here, but I can't believe you shut down my Life-Erosion Fist!"

"I know all too well how dangerous your fists are. As long as we're in this barrier, the Spiritual Realm vibrations you use to manipulate life force are all blocked out. You can't use your Erosion Fist in here."

"I see, I see. So taking me out now will be a walk in the park, huh? Hahaha..." Virgo gave me a murderous look and launched a palm strike at me. "Don't you underestimate me!"

"Oh, I'm not!"

I parried his blow with my hand, and he came at me with mid-level kicks from left and right. I warded those off, too. He managed to land a final kick which I did my best to deflect as I leapt back and spun through the air, putting distance between us. That gave me room to draw my sword.

Virgo was already charging, but my sword was halfway out of its sheath. I finished drawing and slashed at him in one smooth motion. He had the reflexes

to dodge, but he didn't. Instead, he took the blow and continued his charge. The blade rent his flesh, opening a great wound from his side to his shoulder. Such damage would render a lesser human unable to fight.

Not Virgo, though. It would take far more to stop him. Ignoring the injury, he launched a powerful left hook into my temple, sending me reeling to the ground with a cry of pain.

"Not bad, Leo! You're way better with your fists and a sword than you ever were. One thing you missed, though." Golden light covered his body, wiping away the wound on his chest. "I'm Virgo. Demonhart Series Six, Virgo the Immortal! As long as I've got my regeneration, I'm not gonna die!"

"D-damn it!"

"If I can't die, that means I can't lose. It wasn't my Erosion Fist you should have countered—it was my regeneration!"

His punch had had a Brain Shake attached. The spell passed through any and all defenses to deliver a shock directly to the internal organs. My vision wavered, and I saw multiple Virgos in front of me. I couldn't even stand up.

"You lose. And this is a real fight, so I'm not holding back."

My vision continued to swim, and Virgo looked like a mirage as he came stomping toward me. He was ready to crush my head.

"R-right you are, Virgo...you've got that hyper-regeneration..." I quietly groaned from my pathetic perch on the ground. "That regeneration is your strength. There's no way you'd go down in a regular fight."

"Mulling over what you did wrong at the very end, huh? Still by-the-book, even three thousand years later."

Well, he would be right if it was a *regular fight*. Hopefully he remembered

what I'd said about my spell: it was developed *specifically* to kill him.

"Gahhhhh?!"

Virgo's scream echoed throughout the barrier. The wound he'd sealed up, the one I'd dealt with my blade, swelled then split apart again, as if the clock were turning back. Then parts all over his body began to turn shiny black and violently burst open, like he'd been hit by an Erosion Fist.

Fallen Jungfrau, Destroy Star Formation Virgo. Within this formation, all healing magic was rendered taboo. Cure Light, Antidote, Resurrection, *everything*. Anyone who cast a healing spell inside it would be struck with equivalent damage. To cast a healing spell in this world was suicide, like rubbing salt in one's wounds. And of course, the stronger the spell, the worse it would be. The end result was unrecoverable damage, of both the Material and Spiritual Realms, as Virgo was finding out for himself.

"Gahh! Grrahh!" Virgo did not even have the strength to stand. He could only scrape the ground as he writhed in pain. Parts of his body kept flying off, and his legs and left arm had been rendered completely useless. He wouldn't be able to fight any longer, and the Wisdom Stone that was his core was likely damaged, too.

"Looks like you believed in your own power a bit too much. Sure, you can recover from any wound no matter how deep. Nothing can finish you off. Too bad that's exactly what kills you in this space."

This was the true power of Fallen Jungfrau, my original creation. The spell made solely to kill my brother.

"One more thing..." As I stood up, images of the distant past came to mind. Not wanting regular soldiers to die, Virgo always tried to take to the battlefield

alone. I remembered him standing in a barrage of artillery fire after letting me escape, too. Virgo was too dull to his own pain. At any given opportunity, he would sacrifice himself first. "If you saw a chance to take someone down with you, you'd jump at the opportunity. I believed in you, brother."

With a grunt of pain, Virgo crumbled fully to the ground. As he did, I fell to my knees.

"D-damn, this spell really takes it out of you..."

It probably seemed obvious, but Fallen Jungfrau wasn't your average spell. It targeted a specific DH Series model and completely sealed off its abilities, much like Echidna's Anti-Leo spell. Maintaining it while fighting annihilated your magic power reserves. When my knees hit the ground, the field automatically dispelled itself.

The sounds from the outside world returned. Through labored breaths, I fought the desire to fall over onto my back.

"D-damn, that...that was rough..."

I looked around. No one else was in the area. The plains were completely empty, but wyverns flew in the skies above, and I could hear sounds of combat coming from the capital.

Is Echidna not going to make it in time?

It looked like the secret plan I'd passed on to Echidna was going to end in failure. It might have worked out if I had a few more minutes, but I couldn't leave the soldiers in danger any longer. I had no choice. I had to give up on saving Canaan.

The tables had turned. Virgo was down, and it was time for me to deliver the finishing blow. I turned to face him.

"What the—?!"

"Hah, hah...! You...really did it...Leo...!" Virgo was standing, barely. And gradually healing, no less! "You're not the only one with a trump card up his sleeve."

"You can't be serious!"

Everything looked normal with the naked eye, so I immediately cast Mana Detect. Countless tiny strands of life energy were pouring into Virgo from both land and sky. *Absorption!* And from everything in sight, no less!

"It doesn't have a cool, trump-card name like yours does. I didn't give it one because I didn't want to use it."

Two nearby wyverns fell from the sky and smashed into the ground. They were on death's door, with most of their life force drained. They weren't blackened anymore, either. Fear...and pride swelled up in me. My brother truly *was* strong.

"I am Virgo, Demonhart Series bioweapon! Virgo the Immortal!" His near-shattered left arm crunched and cracked back into shape. He wasn't even healed a quarter of full strength, but he was still willing to fight. "This fight isn't over until I say it's over!"

"Sure." I admit, I had harbored sympathy for my brother. And had made the mistake of thinking I could save Canaan. All that, though, was in the past! It was time for Virgo to die! "Let's do this, Virgo! Bring it on!"

"Grahhhh!" Virgo leapt, and I began making spell signs with my left hand in order to cast Fallen Jungfrau again. Suddenly there was a loud *bonk*.

"Stop this foolishness, Canaan!"

Shutina had bopped Virgo on the head (Canaan's head) with her staff. Virgo

and I both froze, and she used the opportunity to launch into a lecture.

"How long are you planning on sleeping? Did I not warn you only a few days ago about the dangers of flipping your sleep schedule with all those late-night rituals a curse-maker must do? The next time you oversleep, I'm disowning you!"

"For..."

Strangely enough, Virgo had grown even more petrified as he stood there listening to Shutina's scolding. The moment it ended, he deeply bowed his head.

"Forgive me, Masterrrr!" He (she?) pleaded for Shutina's forgiveness, bowing over and over. "I'm awake! I'm up, I'm up! P-please, don't disown me, anything but that!"

The wavy black hair, now long enough to cover both eyes. The constantly darting pupils. There was no mistaking it: Curse-maker Canaan was back in control.

"If I had to leave you and Her Majesty, Master, I would rather be dead!"

"W-wait, what the hell is going on?!"

Virgo's voice spilled into Canaan's voice. He hadn't sounded surprised in the least when he was caught in my Fallen Jungfrau, nor when he was paralyzed and on death's door, but *this time* he was.

It wasn't just Virgo, either. Neither Shutina nor Canaan—surely no one had any idea what was going on except for me. I was just surprised the plan worked out at all. See, all I'd asked Echidna to do was go get Shutina.

I'd sensed something was off the moment I encountered Virgo. Every time he used a spell, some of Canaan's mana leaked through. For some reason, Virgo

hadn't taken *full* control of her. It became clearer when Echidna had launched her Inferno spell. The more power Virgo put into healing himself, the more I felt Canaan return. If she had even a little bit of consciousness left, there was still a chance. My plan was to bring Virgo to the brink of death and call someone close to Canaan to confront her.

"Are you *serious*?! This isn't a plan, this is madness! It has no chance of success!"

"I'm dead serious. If this works, we might be able to save Canaan. It's worth a try!"

"You know more than anyone that Virgo's not a foe you can afford to go easy on. This may cost you your life, Leo. Give it up. Leave Canaan to her fate."

"It's too early for that. Please, Echidna, just give me this one chance."

"But, why? What drives you to save Canaan so?"

"I haven't given anything back to you yet, that's what."

Well, "anything" was probably the wrong word there. I'd helped out the Guardians and improved work efficiency. Small details like that. But...that wasn't what a *hero* was. A hero brought light in desperate times, turned despair into hope. Call it a bad work habit, but even after quitting heroing, I was still attached to that. I wanted to be appreciated.

"You gave up on your dream of getting the Wisdom Stone to save me. I want to show you that you made the right choice, by saving both Canaan and the humans!"

"Leo...are you serious?"

"I know I'm being selfish. Really, I do. That's why I'm giving you the last say."

Silence.

"Please."

Instead of answering, Echidna gave me a strained smile then sprinted for the capital.

Someone had to cover for Shutina while she was gone, so I figured Echidna was guarding the walls. I imagined the soldiers were surprised to see first a dark army general protecting them, then the Demon Queen herself. Meanwhile, Shutina let out a sigh at her disciple's excuses and poked her forehead.

"Good morning, Canaan. Looks like you're finally awake."

"Oh, Master, I-I'm so sorry. I...I just wanted to be useful to you, and to Her Majesty, I just...didn't want to go back to the Demon World after losing so shamefully, so..."

"I understand. Let's talk about this later, shall we?"

"I'm so sorry, Master, I'm so sorry..."

Stop! Quit it, lady! Quit talking to Canaan!

Virgo's voice grew gradually weaker, showing that his grip on her was loosening. Shutina reached out and stroked her disciple's hair, then hugged her lovingly.

Damn it! Why?! Why is this what it takes?!

"You must have been tired. Just rest for now."

"I will, Master..."

Then, like a puppet with its strings cut, Canaan slumped over, and Shutina caught her. When she did, the overwhelming life-waves Virgo had been emitting over the city grew much weaker. The dragons stopped immediately,

and their black scales began to return to their original color.

Like waves receding, quiet returned to the plains. Then, a small, rainbow-colored orb slipped out of Canaan's pocket and onto the ground.

"Oh!"

Shutina let out a silly-sounding cry. And why wouldn't she? The orb looked exactly like what she'd seen when she fought me on the mountain. It was a relic of ancient times, an artifact of magical science, the source of power for the DH Series: a Wisdom Stone.

"Why?" I could hear Virgo groaning from the stone. Well, not "hear," exactly. It was more like he was speaking through telepathy. "Why did this happen? I had complete and total control over her, and all it took was hearing her name?"

"What, you really don't know? Isn't it obvious? It's because they're pupil and teacher."

"Come again?"

I sheathed my sword and walked up to Virgo.

"Shutina loves her disciples. Treats them like family. And Canaan, too, loves her teacher. Even with you in control of her body and her just about to lose herself...no, actually, it's *because* she was on death's door that the voice of her loved one reached her heart. That's what I figure happened, anyway."

"Oh, don't make me laugh! 'Heart' my ass! What good's that going to do you on the battlefield?"

"Well, it did a lot of good for her here, and we all saw it. And hey, Virgo, have you really forgotten why they made us in humanity's image?"

"What?"

When you thought about it, it was silly, right? The DH Series were people-shaped bioweapons, made with a devil's power and a human heart. Why make us look like humans, though? Most weapons of war are in optimal shapes for their purposes, so why not do the same for the DH Series?

If they made us like ogres or trolls, we'd have much greater strength than any human, easily. The form of a succubus or elf could have afforded us great magic power. How about making us in dragon form, like the dragoneers? That would have granted us incredible magic power, mobility, and defense.

The scientists must have known all of that, yet they made us in human form and gave us hearts. The reason was clear: we were not made as weapons. We were made as *guardians* of humanity, and that's why we were given hearts.

"You might have to shutter a normal weapon when the war is over, but that's not the case with us. We may be devils, but we're *human* devils, and they wanted us to live in a peaceful society after the war was over. That's why the scientists gave us hearts."

Virgo took the words in. Really, I'd only realized it myself very recently. It was after the battle with Echidna and the Guardians on that snowy peak, the event that led me to officially join the dark army. Until then, I had only seen my human heart as a curse. Like leaden shackles, I wanted to cast it off if I could. Yet, when I exposed my heart, and Echidna and the others accepted me, it hit me.

If I *hadn't* had a heart, if I were nothing but a weapon, I wouldn't have had such an ending. I wouldn't have experienced the bonds of friendship.

"Your heart's what lets you make friends. It lets you experience life with those important to you. And human bonds...that's what true power is. The moment you denied that is the moment you lost."

"Rubbish," Virgo said after a long pause. "Bonds? Bonds my ass. Don't regurgitate that shonen manga nonsense to me with a straight face."

"Why not? I like that kind of stuff."

"Hah!"

"Another thing, Virgo. You hadn't actually fully taken Canaan over."

Silence.

"You'd lived with her so long that you started to care about her, didn't you? You said I was always by-the-book, but...your softness never changed, either."

"Shut up! I'll murder you!"

If he had a body, I was sure Virgo would spit on the ground and look away. After a few more moments of his unpleasant silence, he spoke up.

"So...that's the reason we have human hearts...huh. Pretty boring story...but probably a perfect fit for before I sleep."

"Virgo?"

"I'm...tired. Just going to sleep for a little..."

The light from the Wisdom Stone slowly faded. The flow of life. The golden light, symbolizing unlimited regeneration. It faded.

"...Hey."

"What?"

There was a long, long pause. Then, I heard Virgo's tiny voice.

"Sorry for all the trouble."

"Hah. Don't worry about it."

No need to be all proper. We're brothers.

My whisper didn't reach Virgo. It faded into the wind.

Epilogue

Three days later, in the castle's council room, six executives were present. The Four Great Guardians, Echidna, and me.

After the battle, peace quickly returned to Eris. Fully blackening such a large number of dragons was difficult even for Virgo. He'd been keeping them under his control by constantly emitting life-waves, so when he went down, they all turned back to normal.

Dragons are smart beings by nature, and they avoid conflict with humans when possible. Back in their right minds, they left Eris one after another, heading back to their homes.

Shutina's bid to fill the capital with enhancement spells worked splendidly. Fierce dragon attack aside, not a single soldier or civilian ended up dead or wounded.

Still, I'm surprised Shutina had such powerful support magic up her sleeve.

I took a look at her as she gracefully sipped chamomile tea in her chair.

"Hm? Do you need something, Leo?"

"No, I was just being impressed with you."

If I was being honest, my time with her in Canaan's dungeon had lodged the image of her being whimpering and pathetic in my mind, but...she truly *was* the army's great spellcaster, I had to admit.

"That said, this battle had a pretty big lesson to it."

"A big lesson?" Lili asked.

"Nothing good comes of mixing work with your private life, that's it. Hey, Mernes, give me one of those apples."

"Peel it yourself."

"Oh! Oh! I'll peel it for you!"

"That's...that's okay, I'll do it myself."

"Aww!"

The whole affair had started with Canaan happening upon a Wisdom Stone. She didn't want to bring shame to her master's name, and wanted Shutina and Echidna to acknowledge her if she took me out all by herself. That drove her to act on her own, ending with her stumbling into this whole mess. If she'd simply told Shutina or Echidna about the artifact she'd found, none of the rest would have happened.

Virgo would have needed a lot of time to take over those two, and they could have easily come up with some sort of countermeasure. Canaan, however, let her personal life blind her to what she should have done on the job, sapping her ability to make a calm decision and allowing herself to be swayed by Virgo's honeyed words.

At the end of the day, I contemplated while sipping my green tea, one should probably keep work and home life separate. As I tasted the warm brew, I thought of the monthly motto we had posted at the entrance of the castle. It was something the Guardians, Echidna, and I all took turns with updating at the first of the month. Next month was my turn. Perhaps this lesson would make for a perfect motto.

"Well?" Mernes, face as blank as ever, munched on an apple in his seat. "What happened with the meeting with the king of Eris? You and Echidna were the only ones who went. How about you finally tell us about it?"

"Aye, I was curious about that myself," Edvard chimed in while munching on a meaty sandwich as a snack. "Om...we did end up protecting their city, so I can't imagine they'd treat you too coldly, yet...we were sworn enemies before. So I wouldn't think they'd accept us immediately, either."

"Not that I'd mind. I don't really expect much from the humans, anyway."

"Hold on, everyone. I called you all here precisely to speak about just that. Do listen."

Echidna straightened up in her seat. The tension in the room immediately rose. Shutina and Edvard took on a serious air as expected, but even Lili had her tail standing on end as she waited nervously for Echidna's next words.

Like Edvard said, the situation was a complex one. Yes, we had protected the capital. Twice, if you included our exploits while disguised as adventurers. It was only natural to be treated as heroes after saving the kingdom two times. Still, we *were* the dark army. A force that had invaded the human world as its sworn enemy not a few months earlier. Could we turn that reputation around so easily? Of course the others would be nervous to hear how the conversation with the king went.

After a long pause, Echidna's expression abruptly settled into a satisfied grin.

"Rejoice, everyone! We have an official, diplomatic relationship with the kingdom of Eris now!"

"W-we do?! Sweet! Yayyy!" Lili jumped up and began to applaud. Shutina and Edvard's eyes widened in surprise, but Mernes looked completely unaffected.

"Oh yeah? What was the deciding factor?"

"All of you, of course." Echidna glanced at each of them in order. "Mernes, Edvard, Lili, Shutina...because of your efforts in defending the castle, not a single man, woman, or child was hurt or killed. That made a lasting impact on the people's hearts."

"Yeah, seriously. Hell, that battle show Lili put on got her a fan club."

"A fan club? Wuzzat?"

"Think of it as a group of people that really like you."

"Yeah?"

Lili nodded back, definitely not getting it. Echidna stroked her head and continued.

"The defense of that fortress the other day had a big hand in swaying popular opinion. They've started to think of us not as an evil group, but as comrades worth preserving peace with. From now on, we can trade with them, as well as move freely within their borders!"

"Wait, that means we can get looooots of tasty meat, right?!"

"Precisely."

"So I can simply walk into their marketplaces and buy goodies for my men there?"

"Precisely!"

"That's splendid, Queen Echidna! I hadn't dreamed we would be able to form a treaty with a major power this quickly! Why, if this keeps up, peace between our worlds will be a reality!"

"Hold, Shutina. Let us not get ahead of ourselves." Echidna cautioned Shutina

before she could break into tears of joy. "As I am sure you understand, this is but the first step. We've only come to peace with the kingdom of Eris. The rest of the world still sees us as evil invaders."

"Ah...yes, of course, as you say."

"Which is precisely why we cannot rest on our laurels. If we are not on our absolute best behavior outside, it will reflect poorly on Eris. Understood?"

"I'll be good!"

"As you wish!"

"I'll give it a try."

"It sounds like we'll be able to make use of Leo's network now. You know a lot of people in Eris, don't you?"

"More or less. I know a couple blacksmiths and merchants. Should come in handy."

"That sounds fantastic! The army's greatest weakness is our lack of connections in the human world, so your connections will be key. I expect great things, Leo!"

Right as Echidna enthusiastically nodded back, however, there was a knock at the door. It was barely audible. I wasn't just imagining it, either, because another two knocks immediately followed. They were also nearly inaudible. After we all exchanged looks, Echidna answered for us.

"Come in. The door is unlocked."

"O-oh, excuse me..."

The person who timidly stepped through the doorway came as no surprise. It was Curse-maker Canaan. Disciple of Shutina and, well, cause of the whole

mess. Her eyes were concealed behind her long hair, and in one of the bony hands protruding from her roomy, dark robe she gripped a black bag filled with catalysts. Just looking at her made me feel the curse-maker's dark aura.

"I-I wanted to...apologize, to everyone." Canaan knelt down before us and struggled through her words. "I, Curse-maker Canaan, not only drove the Wisdom Stone to cause this chaos because of my selfish acts, but I also caused i-immeasurable trouble for so many. I-I am truly sorry to put the lives of Her Majesty and the Four Great Guardians in danger, a-as well."

"At ease, Canaan. Raise your head."

"I realize that no matter my reason, this sin cannot be forgiven. I-I know it will hardly make up for anything, but the l-least I can give is my lowly life."

"Canaan!"

"Eeps!"

"I told you to raise your head. There will not be a third time."

Canaan finally looked up. Silence filled the room for several heartbeats, then Echidna made an announcement with all the authority of a queen.

"I understand what you wish to say. All of the responsibility for this lies squarely with you. I agree. Your master, Shutina, bears no guilt. Am I correct?"

"O-oh...y-yes, Your Majesty! Master has done nothing wrong!"

"I see." Echidna nodded. I didn't miss the tiny smile that passed over her lips. "Now, then. Throughout history, one universal constant is the teacher's role in punishing her students. And in the world of sorcery, the master is absolute. Our castle is no exception."

"Y-yes, Your Majesty...it is as you say."

"Therefore, I believe I will leave your punishment to Sorcerer General Shutina."

The Demon Queen was a real softy. I understood what Echidna was trying to do, and it didn't look like me butting in would have much meaning. I decided to keep quiet and watch things play out.

"Death, exile, imprisonment...disowning. No matter the punishment you sentence Canaan to, Shutina, I will raise no objection. I trust you have no issue with that?"

Canaan's shoulders twitched at Echidna's fourth suggestion.

"No, Your Majesty. I shall do as you have commanded."

Canaan's face was deathly pale. That I understood. So much had she admired Shutina that she chose the path of the arcane, studied and trained as hard as she could, and became a quasi-executive in Echidna's army. To be disowned by her teacher, to be told she was unneeded, would feel far worse than death. Execution would have been a far more comforting punishment, I was sure.

"Very well. Canaan, as your master, I will announce your punishment."

"Y-yes, Master."

"I am sure you need time to prepare your mind. If you wish it, I will give you three Demon World minutes to pray."

"No, that will be all right."

Canaan shook her head and looked right at her master. I could see the resolve in her eyes. She was prepared for Shutina's next words to be the last words they shared together.

"I am a criminal, and my crime is unforgivable. That you elected to judge me

here rather than kill me with Virgo outright is an honor too great for me. I-if...if you are the one to judge me, Master, I will accept any punishment without objection."

"Very well, then. Curse-maker Canaan."

"Y-yes, Master?"

"I sentence you..."

A long pause followed.

"I sentence you to write an essay about what you did wrong."

"Yes, Master, I will gladly offer this life to...huh?"

Canaan looked up with her mouth hanging agape.

"Be sure to touch upon why this incident happened and what you will do to prevent another one. You must also write about how you can make it up to those you inconvenienced, in ways *other* than hastily giving up your life. Submit to me no more than twenty pages, written on that narrow-ruled paper popular among the human world's higher-learning establishments."

"Huh? Uh...huh?"

"Your deadline is three days from now. That is all."

Shutina completely ignored Canaan's reactions while assigning her punishment. Canaan realized from her tone she was serious, and grew even more confused.

"Wha...bu..." The situation had surpassed the limits of her comprehension. Canaan stood up and clung to Shutina with teary eyes. "But why?! I-I've done so many awful things!"

"We, too, know about the power of the Wisdom Stones." Shutina glanced

over at me. "You know that Leo joined the army while you were gone, correct?"

"Y-yes, I have heard what happened."

"Before he joined us, we fought. To the death. He nearly killed every one of us here, so I know full well how powerful the Wisdom Stones are. The moment Virgo found you, your fate was sealed."

"Master..."

"Now, I cannot say you are blameless. How many times have I told you to report immediately to me if you find a strange magic item?"

"Guh...I-I'm really sorry about that, truly, I am!"

"Then get to work on that essay, because I have an immense amount of work I'd like to pass on to you. Just cleaning up this mess will take three days with no sleep, so do prepare yourself."

"Y-yes! Yes, ma'am!" Big, watery tears fell from Canaan's eyes. While gripping her teacher's hands, she nodded so vigorously and enthusiastically I thought her head might fly off. "Leave it all to me! I will do anything for you, Master! Whether three sleepless nights or ten, I'll do it!"

"Ahem! My, my. Awfully soft on her, aren't we?" Echidna theatrically cleared her throat. Her rhetorical question made sense. If Shutina was that soft, then Echidna would have to pick up the slack as her boss. The carrot and the stick, that kind of thing. "I personally wanted you to sentence her to death, but...I did say I would leave it all in your hands, and I cannot go back on my word. I hope I don't regret my decision."

"I am sorry I could not meet your expectations. Our army is still hurting for personnel, and a high-ranking sorceress like Canaan is a valuable asset. I guarantee you that she will be far more useful to us alive than dead."

"Hmph. Well, if you say that as her master, I will have to believe you. ...Oh." Echidna gently clapped her hands together. "Ah, I had forgotten entirely! Shutina, you were once my magic teacher as well."

"Indeed. When I was but twelve years old, you asked to be my disciple. Being much older, no less."

"Ahh! Alas! If this is the decision of my teacher, then, that's all the more reason I cannot overturn it!"

"What is this nonsense?" Mernes mumbled in disbelief at the cheap theatrics he was witnessing. You knew it had to be pretty poor acting if he was bothering to comment.

The teacher punishing the pupil. I'd seen what ending was coming when Echidna brought that up, but she was a far worse actor than I'd imagined. Hell, she'd basically just shown me one of her weaknesses. Another thing I'd seen coming was that no one complained about Canaan's verdict. Like Queen, like general.

"Oh, Canaan. Correct your previous statement."

"H-huh?" With the attention on her again, Canaan shrank back. "F-forgive me, Master, but...wh-which statement?"

"When you said you 'put the lives of Her Majesty and the Four Great Guardians' in danger. You and I both know there was another person who risked his life for you!"

"Guh..."

"As your master, I order you to properly thank Leo."

Canaan groaned and finally bothered to look at me. I'd been standing next to Echidna the whole time, so it wasn't like she'd just noticed me. She'd simply

been purposefully ignoring me the whole time. And that, too, I understood. We'd been enemies until very recently. Worse than that, I'd defeated most of their top leaders, sending them back to the Demon World, and foiled Echidna's ambitions. I was, in essence, her sworn enemy. I'd gotten too used to the friendly treatment from the army lately and forgotten, but really, that sort of cold shoulder was only natural.

"Urgh...H-Hero...Leo."

"You can drop the hero part. I've quit."

She lowered her head so awkwardly I could hear her neck creak.

"Th-this was...a-all my fault, s-so..."

"Yeah?"

Silence.

"...Uh, hey?"

Canaan stood motionless with her head still bowed and said nothing. She was like an automaton that had run out of magic power. Hell, if I left her like that for an hour or two, she'd probably be in the same position.

"Canaan, must you be so—"

Right as Shutina came in to bail her out, it happened.

"Geez! Stop dragging your feet and apologize already!"

A small figure leapt out of the small case Canaan was carrying and gave her a proverbial kick in the backside. The voice sounded awfully familiar.

"You're my partner in crime here, so hold your head up a little higher! What, you want me to take over your body again and talk in your place? Huh?!"

"H-hey! You promised you would keep quiet until I'd finished talking with everyone!"

"I've kept quiet long enough!" The voice came from what appeared to be a cloth doll Canaan had (probably) made. It had buttons for eyes, and a zigzag mouth sewn on with thread. The strange, human-shaped doll stood barely eight inches tall as it boldly crossed its arms on the floor of the throne room. The voice was unmistakably Virgo's.

"Guh...wait a second, Virgo, most of this was your fault. Aren't you going to say you were wrong? Or you had a change of heart, or something?"

"Excuse me?" Virgo tilted his head in the most mocking way he could. "I've said it once and I'll say it again. I just did what I wanted and chose my path without regrets. I don't have a damn thing to apologize for."

"Wh-why, you! Do you have any idea how merciful Her Majesty and Master were?!"

"Ohmygosh, how cute!" Lili ignored Canaan completely and pounced on the little Virgo doll. She scooped him up in both arms then gleefully spun around while hugging him tight. "Virgo! So you're Virgo, huh? Ohhh, you're so tiny and cute!"

"Hey, kid, put me down! Quit pinching me! Quit pulling me! Quit holding me upside down!"

"Hey, Canaan, can I hug him when I sleep? Pleeaaase?"

"G-General Lili, are you serious? I r-really don't think you should. His vileness will rub off on you!"

"Whaddaya mean, vileness? How about you look in a mirror, you creeper?!"

"Hmm. A doll for holding a Wisdom Stone. I must say, this is rather well

made."

Shutina took a good look at the doll. Er, Virgo. I could feel strong magic power coming from within him which I knew was Virgo's core, the same Wisdom Stone that lived in me.

"Well, I was told to make a temporary vessel until his judgment was decided. He may look thrown together, but I used highly magically-conductive mithril cloth to make most of his body. And for the stuffing inside, I used S-grade black cotton from the Wirten Plains in the Demon World soaked in my blood."

"My, that sounds like more than enough to make a suitable vessel. And the safety countermeasures?"

"I left no stone unturned. I can make his body self-destruct with a word while a bunch of geas spells take effect on his Wisdom Stone...in theory, anyway."

"Hah! Like the spells of a third-rate curse-maker like you would have any effect on me!"

"Who are you calling third-rate?!"

"If this wimpy body is all you could put together, I'd say you're third-rate, yeah! If you want a reevaluation that badly, how about you make me a more powerful vessel, huh? Like, I can't punch people out with this body!"

"That's way too tall an order! You're lucky you have a body at all!"

"Well, no wonder you couldn't make me a better body, with that attitude!"

"Wow! This doll's so warm and fluffy!"

"How long are you planning on playing with me?! I'll tear you apart!"

So, I was the one who asked her to make Virgo a temporary vessel that could contain a Wisdom Stone's power. Virgo was a valuable being in himself. He had

enough power to go toe-to-toe with Echidna and the Guardians, sure, but his ability to manipulate vitality had a variety of uses too. Whether we returned to the Demon World or strengthened our position in the human realm, we wanted to use anything handy we could. That conclusion was arrived at after a long discussion, during which Canaan suggested she would make the vessel.

Having Virgo stay as an exposed core would only worry him, and it was that worry that led to the mess that followed in the first place. Canaan considered Virgo a friend, a close friend. And she wanted to help him, including wiping his worries away. She said that even though he'd taken over her body a few days earlier. I didn't know what went on between them, but they appeared to have some sort of bond. Even as they argued in front of us, Virgo's words didn't *actually* seem to hold any aggression.

That worked in our favor. They were both key members of the dark army, and I'd rather have them get along than argue. Canaan herself didn't seem to have noticed, but she stopped stuttering and stammering when speaking to Virgo, and only him. I imagined that meant they were close.

Yet, I was genuinely surprised that she managed to make a body able to contain a Wisdom Stone. She had immense talent in creating dungeons, certainly, but she might have had as much talent as I did in item creation, as well. Her specialty, geas spells, had a variety of uses, yet...she'd probably be useful in other surprising fields too. I decided to put her to work starting tomorrow.

As my newfound respect for Canaan came bubbling up inside of me, I leaned over to Virgo, whom Lili had finally released.

"Hey there, Leo. What's up?"

"Oh, I was just surprised that someone as proud as you could just accept

being in this raggedy-looking doll."

"Of course I do. I came at you with all I had and lost, fair and square." As he spoke of his defeat, I could hear a deep satisfaction in his voice. "The defeated have their pride. I'm not going to embarrass myself any further, so do what you want with me. Kill me. Put me to work. The choice is yours."

"I can't really tell if you're being honest or not, but then again, I never could."

"Maybe I haven't changed that much, but you sure as hell have. Is that due to that 'growth' of yours?"

"Yeah. I've fought a lot since the old war, and grown just as much."

Virgo jogged my memory, making me reflect on my life. I'd seen countless battles after defeating Belial, and I'd overcome them all on my own. Yet, more than any of those, my most recent battle changed me the most. The one I started just to quit heroing.

Man, I want to tell Virgo all about my life! How I lived these past three millennia, how I've grown...

"You know what, Virgo, I get it."

"Get what?"

"Well, I've fought a lot and grown a bunch, and I'm just going to keep on growing. That's who your brother is, Virgo. That's DH-05 Leo."

"Yeah? Glad to hear I've got such a tough brother, then." Virgo's expression didn't budge. Still, I could feel some joy and satisfaction in that voice. "Well, whatever. I'll be good for a while. Hell, I'll even stick around in your army as Canaan's adviser."

"Seriously? I'd rather not have a brute like this telling me what to do..."

"Oh no you don't." Echidna shook her head, immediately shutting down Canaan's complaint. "You awakened Virgo, so you have the responsibility to keep watch on him. Don't let him out of your sight for a moment. Any problems he causes in the castle will be considered problems you've caused."

"U-understood, Your Majesty." Canaan hung her head. She was on the verge of tears as Virgo hopped on her shoulder and began bullying her. Yet, as I watched them, my mind was in a different place.

The Demonhart Series, huh...

The twelve bioweapons humanity made in hopes of saving the world from Demon King Belial's invasion three thousand years ago. My siblings, my family. The fight against Belial was to the death, and I thought I was the only one who survived. Yet, when I thought about it, our cores held immense energy. Perhaps if our cores remained, like Virgo's, some sort of event could bring us back.

Which got me to thinking. If the others were somewhere out there, still alive...

"Echidna."

"Hm? What is it?"

I whispered quietly to Echidna, trying to keep the others from hearing. Luckily, everyone was too taken by Virgo to pay us any mind.

"This fight has given me a goal. I thought I'd hang up my hero's mantle, join your army, and spend the rest of my retirement making your dream come true, but...there's something I want to do."

"Let's hear it, then. What is your goal?"

"Find my siblings, the other DH Series units. I want to try looking for my family again."

Echidna raised an eyebrow.

"Did they not all die three thousand years ago?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But after seeing Virgo, I changed my mind. The chances are low, but...they might have come back, like he did. Maybe one or two of them, or maybe more, are living quietly somewhere in the human or demon realm."

"So you're holding onto hope your family may yet live, then. Well, if it's on your free time, I have no objections, but...what if they *are* alive? What then? Will you invite them to my army?"

I hesitated to answer Echidna's question. My desire was so childish, even I thought it was a little wrong-headed.

"I-I want...to show off."

"Come again?"

Echidna gave me a baffled look.

"I want to show off to them. I want my family to see how much I've grown and the great friends I've made."

That was something I'd wanted to do since my reunion with Virgo. Hell, since I felt the faint trace of his mana from Canaan. I wanted them all to see how much I'd grown, how hard I'd worked as a hero. How at the end of my adventures, I'd gained such amazing companions. That's what I wanted them to see if they were alive, that was. And...I wanted them to acknowledge my growth, and to praise me. I was shocked that I had such a childish desire inside, but...that was most definitely what I wanted. And luckily, Echidna didn't mock me. Instead, she giggled with me.

"Well, why not? Those of the Demon World prize their families above all."

With a satisfied smile, she patted me on the shoulder as if to wish me luck.

"Very well, I'll allow it. Search for your siblings to your heart's content. And if you find them, show off as much as you desire."



"I am truly grateful for your boundless generosity, Your Infernal Majesty."

"Enough, you! You'll make me retch!"

"Hahaha, seriously."

Soft sunlight poured into the throne room through its grand windows. Shutina was deep in conversation with Canaan, Virgo was squirming and screaming in Lili's arms, Edvard was comforting Lili, and Mernes was heading for the door.

Peace had returned to the castle, and we had new members on the team to boot. What started out as a simple, humble dungeon crawl and went on to become the Virgo affair had finally come to an end.

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