
Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My DUNGEON
6
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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in My Dungeon: Volume 6 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10

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Prologue: The Game of a Person's Life

"Ngh! C-Cease, Nell. For just a moment, please."

"Nellie! Play house with us!"

"House! House!"

"Yes... Playing house is fun."

"Nell, how about a match with me?! I'm getting pretty good at this, you know!"

"Okay, okay. Everyone just calm down. I think I'll do that next."

Nell smiled awkwardly as the dungeon residents bombarded her with their requests, but she handled them all like a champ.

"Dang, Nell's pretty mature."

"Yes, she's a fine young lady. I do believe you have a good eye for people, Master Demon Lord," Leila replied to my impressed comment with her usual beaming expression.

It made me surprisingly happy to see everyone in my family accept our newest member so cheerfully. As long as they all got along, I really couldn't ask for anything more.

"I know, right? Well, I won't deny that I had to be talked into the whole shebang, but it sure didn't take the others long to go full speed ahead on making her part of the gang. I didn't even have to do anything."

"That's only because everyone holds you in such high regard. They wouldn't have accepted her otherwise, and they certainly wouldn't be so delighted each and every day living here."

She chuckled a little as she said that.

"Man, I hope so. Although I gotta admit, I don't know what I'd do without you and Lew to help me out. I know I'd have a way harder time handling this place on my own."

“Oh, is that so? Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind granting me a special reward, hm? Specifically, I would be quite pleased to receive a measure of your knowledge in exchange, Master Demon Lord.”

“Sure, I’ll consider it.”

I laughed wryly at her. Though she spoke teasingly enough, I could tell from the look on Leila’s face that she was actually pretty serious. As always, this young woman remained a slave to knowledge. I figured I could at least think about stuff I could teach her.

Just then, I came up with a sneaky idea. I grinned like a loon and strode over to Nell and the others. Once I reached them, I wrapped my arms around the hero’s shoulders from behind.

“Ya know, I’m super glad to see you all becoming best friends so fast. Alas, I have bad news for the rest of you! I’ll be spiriting her away since she’s *my* bride!”

“Ack! M-Mr. Yuki...”

With that, I pulled her into a hug. She looked happy but bashful, her cheeks turning pink. *God, she’s cute.*

“No fair, Yukiki! Nellie’s playing with us!”

“Master, no fair!”

“You must...wait your turn, Master.”

“It is as the wee lasses say, Yuki! I will not permit your interruption!”

“Yeah, my lord, I’m up next!”

Staying cool as a cucumber despite the verbal attacks lobbed my way by the ladies of my dungeon, I gave them my reply.

“All right, fine. Have it your way. Then please allow me to make a suggestion. How ’bout we all play *this* together?!”

I theatrically presented to them “The Game of a Person’s Life: Middle Ages Version.” In short, it was a knockoff of The Game of Life.

“Ooh! It’s the Person’s Life Game!”

“The fun one!”

“It’s...so exciting playing it with everyone.”

“Hm hm! Very well, I shall allow it.”

“I love that game since I’m good at it too!”

“Um...what sort of game is it?”

Nell tilted her head curiously, watching us quickly set up the board.

“You spin the wheel and move your piece the number of spaces you get. It’s like Snakes and Ladders, but whoever has the most money at the end wins.”

“What a fascinating way to determine the winner.”

“Yeah. Having said that, though, whoever reaches the goal first is most likely to end up the winner anyway.”

By the way, you might be wondering why we were playing the Middle Ages version specifically. Well, I’d tried other versions, but explaining different types of occupations to the ladies in my family had been pretty difficult. Having to do that constantly meant the game had never really progressed much, so here we were. We did still play the other versions often enough for even the little girl gang to have some understanding of basic jobs, but we had Nell the beginner playing today, and the Middle Ages version was ideal for inhabitants of this world because of how familiar its contents were to their lives.

“Leila, join us.”

“Understood. I’d be glad to participate.”

She’d been watching from a distance but came and joined us when I called her over.

“All righty, peeps, let’s get this show on the road. First, we decide the teams!”

So we’d started playing the Game of a Person’s Life aka the Game of Life, but...

“Oh. I won a prize. Again.”

“Wowie! Your spins have been amazing this whole time, Nellie! You keep

stopping at the best squares!”

“I married! To Master?”

“You and I...are Master’s brides, Shii.”

“Ha ha ha! You must have it tough with so many wives, my lord! Gah! I stopped on a Chance square?! L-Leila, help me!”

“It seems I have no choice, hm? Well, then... Oh my. Your prize doubled, Lew.”

“Nice, Leila!”

While the others excitedly moved their pieces ahead, Lefi and I were tragically left behind.

“Yuki! Whatever are you doing?! Our turn has been skipped yet again!”

“I-I can’t help it! It’s all based on luck, dammit! And how about you look in the mirror, considering you landed us on the ‘Go into Debt’ square earlier!”

“*I*, at least, have managed to land us in favorable conditions more often than not! Whereas *you* have only stranded us in rotten conditions one turn after another!”

We were in, you guessed it, dead last. Not a single cent to our names. Actually, we were in debt. Deep too. Not only were we habitual gamblers, but we were also unemployed. Even though we were only at the halfway point of the game, our standing was so bad that we could see how it would end from a mile away.

Despite this board game being specifically designed to be multiplayer, we always played in pairs because it would go on for way too long with eight of us. Today’s teams were Nell and Iluna, Shii and En, Lew and Leila, and me and Lefi. Our team was the only one not monitoring the other teams’ progress; we were too busy glaring spitefully at each other.

“Jeez, Mr. Yuki and Lefi. You two are getting nowhere fast, huh? Question: is there a way to help another team’s piece move forward in this game?”

“Forget about it, Nell. It’s not that kind of game. Besides, just leave my lord and my lady alone. They always get like this when we play.”

“Put a sock in it, Lew! We’re just plotting our comeback, okay?! If you think you’ve got this match already in the bag, you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Indeed! We have not yet suffered defeat! Aha! Our time has come! A Chance square! We now have an opportunity to turn this around in one fell swoop! ‘Will you fight or not?’ Of course, I will fight! Leave it to me! I shall spin the wheel!”

“No, Lefi, wait! Don’t! Every time you fight, we get screw—”

“Five! Let me see, five spaces forward... Gwaaah! Our debt has multiplied?!”

“You idiot! I’ve literally never seen a debt this high before! Congratulations, dumbass!”

This game was supposed to be super chill and fun for everyone, yet here Lefi and I were getting heated. Nell snickered as she watched us. She freaking would since her life in the game had been smooth sailing. Picture-perfect, even.

“No one would know they’re supposed to be a team with the way they’re at each other’s throats...”

“Lady Lefifi and Yukiki almost always end up like this every time they’re on the same team! They love each other sooo much that they go off into their own little world.”

“Hmm, makes a lot of sense in hindsight. You’re right, Iluna. Oh, look, we have a child now. Heh, a child... I sure would like one of my own someday...”

Nell murmured that last part under her breath. Sitting next to her, Iluna turned to the rest and made a demand.

“All right, everyone! That means we get congratulations money! Pay up!”

“Nellie, Iluna, congratations!”

“Yes...congratulations to you both.”

“Whoa, those two are too good at this.”

“Tee hee. Don’t worry, Lew, we can still catch up, hm?”

“Shit, balls, hell, and damn. You jerks are seriously tryna squeeze us for more cash?”

“Grr... You misers...”

“Enough chitchat, Yukiki, Lady Lefifi! Hurry up and borrow more money so you can gift us!”

Smiling sunnily, the golden-haired little girl spoke like a tiny but vicious loan shark hellbent on getting what was owed to her. *Please, Iluna, not our kneecaps!*

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“Shit on a stick, we got our asses handed to us. How the hell are you two so damn good?”

“Hmm. Actually, Mr. Yuki, I think it’d be more appropriate to say that you and Lefi are just really bad.”

Nell giggled as she stood next to me while we took down the laundry. Her hands moved briskly the whole time.

“Grr... Next time we play, we’re teaming up, Nell. And when we do, you better help me win.”

“Ah ha ha! Okay, okay, I will.”

Maybe it had something to do with her enormous Luck because she was a hero, but Nell was a freaking monster at The Game of a Person’s Life, aka the Game of Life. Iluna had really great Luck too, so the two of them together were unstoppable. I guess me and Lefi coming in dead last was inevitable.

Then there was me, with the worst Luck out of everyone in the dungeon. But if I joined forces with the hero, surely her blessed powers would lead me to paradise. Sort of like warriors being led to Valhalla. *So does that make Nell a Valkyrie?*

“Huh. Have you been a goddess this whole time?”

“What?! Wh-Why would you even say something like that?”

Oops. I let the cat slip outta the bag, eh? I cleared my throat while Nell turned red from embarrassment.

“Aaanyway...have you gotten used to life here yet, Nell?”

“I have! It’s so much fun and everyone is so lively. Every day is truly the best!”

She smiled, looking genuinely happy.

“Really? I’m glad to hear that. But you gotta admit, it’s not exactly a cakewalk having everyone lead you around by the nose, right?”

“Well, I won’t deny they’re all extremely energetic.”

Nell gave a rueful chuckle before continuing.

“Which reminds me, Mr. Yuki. I... I had a thought when we were playing that board game earlier.”

“Lay it on me.”

“I just wondered if I could create a warm home with you and everyone else like we did in the game. Thinking about living life like that every day made me incredibly happy for some reason, you know?”

“Not to rain on your parade, but if that round actually came to life, Lefi and I would be drowning in debt.”

“Ah ha ha ha! That’s so true. Except your lifestyle here is entirely self-sufficient, so technically, you don’t actually need money, do you? All’s well that ends well, then.”

Huh. She’s not wrong. As long as I lived in the Demonic Forest, my life would continue to remain untouched by the economic headaches of the outside world.

“At any rate, I feel a warmth well up in the depths of my heart when I think about the future being like this. It makes me feel fulfilled. I can truly say that I’m happy right now, so...thank you, Mr. Yuki, for making me this happy.”

Her beautiful smile nearly blinded me. A bit embarrassed, I could only respond by gently patting her head.

Chapter 1: The Werewolf Clan

Late at night. The frontier town of Alfiro. Two men stood in a back alley, under the cover of darkness so black that not even the moonlight could penetrate it. One had his hood pulled low over his eyes and the other was leaning back against a wall, his face swollen with bruises.

“Speak. What do you know?”

Those words came from the man hiding his face behind his hood—Belgrus Groll, a therianthrope with dog ears. The other man rattled off his answer in a harried rush, his face stiff.

“I-I don’t know any details, all right?! Alls I know is that the syndicate that used to be in charge of this here territory was destroyed by a demon lord and his underlings!”

“Oh? And what business did a demon lord have in this town?”

“A-According to the rumors, the syndicate kidnapped his daughter. The abduction sent him into a right fury, and he came here to attack. Brought along a passel of dragons living in the forest.”

The humans’ avaricious nature is truly beyond salvation. Demon lords were foolish simpletons, every last one of them indulging in power. “Restraint” was a word they had long since forgotten. Yet the humans’ greed was no less great.

Belgrus snorted derisively, for he found both creatures’ existences revolting. Then, he continued interrogating the other man.

“Next question. There must be beast—no, slaves other than humans in this town. Slaves for war as well as captured outlaws. What of them?”

“Th-The slaves who could fight’re out on the battlefield, both the men and the women. As for the rest, the demon lord took ’em with him when he retrieved his daughter. And that ain’t a rumor. Lotsa people saw him do so with their own eyes!”

I see. In exchange for their lives, the humans sacrificed those slaves to the

demon lord. Which meant that his daughter, Lewin Groll, was now in the hands of that accursed beast.

“Where does this demon lord live?”

“I-I don’t know. But supposedly, he and his underlings came from the Demonic Forest north of this town.”

The Demonic Forest, eh? Belgrus had heard the name. An uncharted region inhabited by terrifying, powerful monsters. If he was to make his way there, he would need to be fully prepared *and* fully equipped.

Perhaps it was his favoritism speaking, but Lewin was exceptionally beautiful. And a demon lord was only faithful to his own appetites. Belgrus could surmise what sort of depravity his beloved daughter was suffering at the monster’s hands. The moment he imagined it, he unthinkingly, furiously ground his teeth, which were much sharper than any human’s.

“I-I told you all I know! That’s enough, ain’t it?! So just let me gaaah—”

Before he could scream any louder, Belgrus punched the other man in the face hard enough to send him flying. After confirming that he was unconscious, Belgrus turned on his heel and walked away. Now that he knew his daughter’s location, he had no reason to linger in this place.

Werewolves’ night vision was leagues better than humans, allowing him to skulk in the shadows here with ease. But at the end of the day, this was a human town, and staying too long risked exposing his people to unnecessary danger. It would be best for him to withdraw as soon as possible, especially with his next destination determined.

“Finally... I’ll be there soon, Lewin...”

He clenched his fists tightly in resolve, then raced to the rendezvous point where his comrades waited.

His daughter, around the same time.

“My lord, guess what!”

“Sup, Lew?”

Yuki gave the dog-eared, maid-uniformed girl named Lew a lazy response. He was lying down, flipping through a book.

“Um, my lord? I’d appreciate it if you could put some more pep into your voice.”

“Mm, my bad. Let’s redo that.”

He placed the book down next to him.

“My lord, guess what!”

“What up, Lew?!”

At his enthused reply, Lew spread one arm and spoke at the top of her voice.

“Listen and be amazed! *Look* and be amazed! I have absorbed your teachings and at long last achieved mastery! Of the legendary art of the ‘Maid’s Divine Fist’!”

“Oho! At long, long last you have mastered it, you say?! Then prove to me your might! Beguile me with your movements!”

Yuki rose and stood imposingly, arms akimbo, like he was testing a challenger.

“As you will it, so shall it be done, my lord! Experience my myriad secret techniques with your body!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! Come, Lew! Show Great Demon Lord Yuki all that you are capable of!”

Nell and Lefi exchanged idle remarks, watching Lew and Yuki from nearby.

“Those two really get along, don’t they?”

“Indeed. Two birds of an imbecilic feather most certainly flock together. They always become even more animated whenever they act up like so.”

The werewolf clan had yet to learn that Lew lived each day frolicking joyfully.

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A calm day a little while after Nell came to live with us.

“Well, then, Miss Lewin Groll.”

“Wh-What is it, my lord? You’re looking awfully serious there.”

Lew’s reply was uneasy since I’d addressed her by her full name.

“Please take a seat. Right over here.”

I sat down seiza-style and patted the spot across from me, prompting her to walk over to me. The dog-eared girl couldn’t figure out what would happen next. Looking kinda scared, she gingerly sat down the same way.

“Well, then, Miss Lewin Groll. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a question.”

“Wh-What would that be, my lord?”

“Would you perchance be hiding something from me?”



“H-Hiding something? From you? I-I don’t think so. I-I’m definitely not hiding

the fact that I broke a dish—”

Lew gasped and hurriedly shut herself up. *Not what I wanted to know, but I’ll have Leila give her a very stern talking-to about it later.*

“To be clear, what I want to know is about your family and your home.”

“Ngh!”

She inhaled sharply and froze. I knew she finally understood what I wanted to discuss, so I kept talking.

“Based on what I’ve been told, it seems you’re currently a runaway. Do I have the right of it, young lady?”

“I-It was Leila, wasn’t it?! She told you, didn’t she?!”

“Correct, but she is not to blame. Do you truly think this is something you should have kept from me?”

“Urk. Um... I-I’m sorry...”

I watched a cold sweat trickle down the dog-eared girl’s face as she apologized to me in a reed-thin voice. When I unthinkingly sighed heavily, she flinched in response.

“Look, I’m happy that you wanna stay here with us. I really, honestly am. But correct me if I’m wrong, you moved in with me after being kidnapped, right? That’s not good, Lew. Although it’s my fault too for not thinking harder about our situation either.”

Up until now, I hadn’t really talked about their families and backgrounds with the rest of the dungeon residents. Part of it had to do with the fact that I considered our little group a family unit in itself, but the biggest reason was Iluna. Since all her relatives had been murdered, I’d been careful not to bring the topic up at all. In hindsight, though, I shouldn’t have been so indifferent about the issue.

Leila was the perfect example. She’d been captured by humans while traveling alone, so I knew that no matter what I said or did, she’d insist on taking responsibility for herself. She was her own woman. Plus, Leila herself had told her little sister that she was just fine living with us when we’d met the girl

in the demon world's capital. In short, I had no problem with how Leila wanted to deal with her problems.

But—and this was a huge "but"—getting kidnapped while running away from home? That was another story entirely. God forbid Iluna ever decided to run away from home and ended up vanishing without a trace. What would I do in that situation? There was only one answer: immediately start a desperate, all-out search for her. And I'd destroy everything that stood in my way to find her, come hell or high water.

You wanna know what else Leila'd confided to me? It turned out that Lew was the daughter of her clan's patriarch. The first thing that'd popped into my head when I'd found out was, "No way." Obviously incredibly rude, but I couldn't be faulted for thinking as much given how Lew behaved. The more I'd thought about it after that, the more things had started to make sense. Her being a sheltered girl explained her astoundingly natural bumbling when it came to chores.

That little tidbit of info also made the current situation even worse. As the head of their clan, her father might've immediately mobilized every one of his people to search for his daughter whose whereabouts remained unknown. He probably wanted to exact painful vengeance on whoever'd kidnapped her too.

Naturally, I'd end up as the most likely target of said vengeance since Lew currently worked for me. From my perspective, she lived with me and everyone else in the dungeon of her own free will because she'd wanted me to employ her after I'd rescued her way back when, but from *his* perspective... Well, he wouldn't know any of that, would he? The worst-case scenario had to be the only thing on his mind.

"Ugh... P-Please forgive me. I... The truth is, I didn't really get along all that well with my family... I don't think I ever want to go back..."

The hesitation in Lew's voice and the look on her face clearly conveyed her discomfort over the topic. In response, I exhaled softly.

"Then how 'bout I make the trip to your home with you? If things get dicey or whatever, I'll take you back with me, even if I have to fight your family to do it. So go home just this once, okay?"

“Huh...? A-Are you serious, my lord? You’ll really go with me?”

Lew jerked her head up, looking at me like an abandoned puppy afraid to believe she’d finally been rescued. I smiled wryly at her.

“Yeah. ’Cause I’d be lonely without you.”

She sniffled tearfully.

“Th-Thank you so much, my lord! I-I had no idea you cared so much for me!”

“I mean, who else in the dungeon am I supposed to dunk on?”

“That’s the only purpose I serve?!”

“Hey, don’t knock it. You’re a walking treasure trove of jokes and stories just waiting to happen. You’ve got a real knack for it, y’know. So yeah, I’d totes be sad without you.”

“How can you say such awful things with such a refreshing smile on your face, my lord?!”

She whacked my shoulders repeatedly with her fists, then started yelling.

“Y-You’re so mean! Give me back my feelings of gratitude!”

Of course, all I did was cackle hysterically. Laughed so hard I almost pissed my pants.

Folks, that talk took place yesterday.

“Hmm...?”

Maps suddenly opened with a *whoosh* while I was out on a hunt with my dungeon’s pets. As usual, it indicated the presence of intruders. I went to check how many and learned that it was a group of people this time.

“Ah, dammit!”

“What is it, Mr. Yuki?”

I’d scowled without thinking and Nell questioned me, her voice puzzled. She’d tagged along with us because she’d wanted to check out the forest.

“Weeell...we’ve got intruders.”

“Intruders? In the dungeon?”

“Oh, yeah, I never told you. I’ll tell you now, then. Thanks to a dungeon feature, I know right away whenever people enter its territory.”

“Wooow... Aha! So *that’s* how you knew about me the first time I came.”

“Yeppers peppers.”

While chatting with her, I opened another frame on the Maps screen and watched the images transmitted by the Evil Eye, my golem-type summon, of the intruders. The group that’d set off the flashing red dots on Maps weren’t humans. As it turned out, they were actually therianthropes. Specifically, werewolves. The same race as Lew. They numbered more than fifty but less than a hundred. Any way I analyzed the situation, these people were definitely related to our family’s klutzy maid.

She’d begged me to “P-Please, just give me some time to prepare myself emotionally!” so I’d postponed the trip for a bit. If I’d known shit was gonna hit the fan anyway, I would’ve just dragged her ass home sooner rather than later. Or maybe not, because then we would’ve missed them entirely, what with us going there and them heading here. Actually, their timing was perfect. Them coming to us might’ve actually been a godsend.

“Uh-oh, spaghetti-o. This is *not* good. They’re totally under attack.”

Unlike the humans who’d tramped their way into the forest before, these guys didn’t have a magical device that kept monsters away. From the looks of it, they’d stumbled into my dungeon’s territory almost by accident in their efforts to escape the monsters relentlessly chasing them through the Demonic Forest. And it looked like the monsters had been after them for a while. Still, the members of the werewolf clan seemed to be outstanding specimens, judging by their well-coordinated counterattacks. They were fighting back while avoiding any fatalities on their end. That said, based on what I could see from the images sent by the Evil Eye, the number of wounded seemed to be slowly but steadily growing.

I can’t just ignore this. They’d be annihilated if I did. My conscience definitely wouldn’t let me rest if I let Lew’s people die without even *trying* to help. *Besides, rescuing them means they’ll be in my debt, which might give me a*

chance to discuss Lew's situation with them peacefully. Despite having a bit of an ulterior motive, I realized that my only real option was to save them.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, I guess... You lot head out first and kill the monsters trying to devour the beast folks. Oh, but wait. They'll probably try to attack you because they won't know you're the good guys, so run away as soon as you take care of the monsters, then wait for me nearby."

Orochi the red snake, Yata the crow, Byaku the bakeneko, and Seimi the water sprite acknowledged my instructions and immediately went to work. Within moments, they'd disappeared from our sight.

"Rir, you take Nell home. Sorry, Nell, the monster hunt's over. Wait for me back in the dungeon."

"Grr."

"Okay, understood. Be safe. We'll all be there when you return."

She smiled at me, then turned to Rir. With a "Please and thank you, Rir," she jumped on his back. I watched them race toward the cave that hosted my dungeon's entrance.

"Guess that means it's time for me to play the part of the mysterious guide."

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I found the werewolves in a slightly open space. Their wounded were in the center of the group while warriors who could still fight surrounded them. They were currently resting, but everyone stayed alert. Maps told me that there weren't any hostile creatures in the immediate vicinity.

My pets were fighting the monsters some distance away from their location. Seemed they'd done a damn good job of attracting the monsters' attention. *Dang, when did they get so good? And without me even noticing.* I wondered if Rir's guidance had played a part. I bet that having competent subordinates right out of the gate made things a whole lot easier for him too.

I headed toward the group of werewolves with those thoughts running through my head. Despite the distance between us, the warriors forming the outer wall sensed an unknown presence approaching their group and

immediately took up fighting stances, weapons at the ready. I'd have to remember that they could perceive enemies from a fairly long distance.

Hey, aren't Lew's hearing and sense of smell really good too? Especially her nose. Seventy percent of the time, she could correctly guess what Leila or I was making in the kitchen while she hung out in the real throne room. Must've been a trait specific to werewolves.

"Yo. I'm over here."

I stepped through the grove of trees and announced myself—but that only made them even more cautious of me, if their hard glares were any indication. That, and also the part where they didn't lower their weapons so much as an inch. *Welp. Totally didn't expect this reaction.* I knew they'd still be wary of me, but to keep their weapons drawn? Wack.

"You! Are you some sort of deceitful monster?!"

"Huh? No, just a normal person..."

"Like we will believe you so easily! Tell us why someone like you is in a savage forest such as this?!"

Ahhh, now I see the light. Because of where we were, they apparently thought I was some kind of monster.

"Weeell... Let's just say that it doesn't really matter who or what I am at the moment. I mean, can you honestly tell me that *you* guys have time to discuss it right now?"

"Nh...!"

I accompanied my remark with a casual glance behind them, toward their wounded. When they saw me do so, their expressions hardened even more. The anger and distress on their faces told me that they knew what a tight spot they were in. As a group, they weren't *quite* treading the line between life and death yet, but they already had a few folks who'd had various limbs torn off. If they didn't get medical treatment soon, they'd probably die of blood loss.

"I know a safe place where you can tend to your wounded. If you follow me, you'll all be saved. And if you don't...that's your business. Do what you want."

Taking them back to the dungeon also meant a confrontation with Lew, which was something she'd been putting off for too long anyway. Should they choose to stay, I'd decided I'd do a little monster hunting with my pets. Just enough to give the werewolves the opportunity to retreat. It'd be an annoying little exercise, but my conscience would stay clear. I had to do what I could to help. They were Lew's family, so there was no way I could abandon them. I just really, *really* hoped they'd choose to go with me because I really, *really* wasn't in the mood for a battle.

Maybe my thoughts showed on my face because for some reason or other, they quietly started to discuss their options among themselves. Naturally, though, their guarded attitudes didn't waver. I waited patiently, arms folded, and after a while, they seemed to arrive at a conclusion. One individual, a young man, stepped forward aggressively and stared hard at me before answering.

"Tell me...will we regret putting our faith in you?"

"From my perspective, the only thing I can say is 'trust me.' I don't plan on doing anything bad, so take that as you will."

"...Understood. We'll trust you. Lower your weapons."

"B-But, boss! We can keep going! We can keep fighting! You can't ask us to stop here, of all places!"

"I'm grateful for your devotion, truly. But we have suffered more damage than I had anticipated. It's important for us to regroup now and put ourselves in a better position for the future."

"Understood!"

The surrounding werewolves acknowledged the young man's words and put their weapons away. Then, they started making the necessary preparations to transport their wounded.

"Ohhh, you must be the werewolves' leader."

"I am. My name is Belgrus Groll and I lead the Groll family. I'm indebted to you for your aid on this occasion."

Let's check out his stats, shall we? Yup, just like I'd thought. His values were

the highest in the group, and he had “The Werewolf Alpha” as a title to boot. *Which makes him Lew’s father? Damn, dude, you’re way younger than I imagined.* He didn’t even look thirty, for Pete’s sake. When Leila’d told me that he was the leader of their clan, I’d just visualized an old dude, but clearly I was way off base.

Hold on just a dang minute. Suppose he was around thirty, give or take. When, exactly, had he gotten married? Had kids? If I remembered right, Lew was seventeen years old. That meant he’d gotten married at thirteen and had her not long after. There was no way. There was no freaking way...

I know! He just looks *young. He’s actually older.* Yup, that had to be it. If he was around thirty-five, he would’ve had Lew at about eighteen. That was much more reasonable. Yup, that sounded just fine. I’d roll with that.

“So you’re Lew’s father, right?”

“Ngh! You know of my daughter?!”

Her dad jolted at the sound of her name. An intense expression settled on his face as he interrogated me further.

“Th-That means you are the d-demon lord?!”

“Huh? Yeah, I am—”

“Y-You dastardly monster! You deceived me! I’ll take your life here even if it means sacrificing mine!”

Fury exploded inside him and he drew the weapon hanging at his waist, brandishing it at me. *Whaaat?*

“W-Wait a sec, Lew’s dad. It’s definitely not what you think.”

“Silence, demon lord! I have heard of your evil deeds! Don’t think you will fool us again!”

The head of the werewolf clan howled with rage. *What the hell did Lew’s pops even hear about me?!* I sure didn’t remember doing anything awful enough to warrant someone roaring at me like this.

No, hang on... I guess I did *invite Lew to live in my dungeon* after *I attacked the human town.* It was entirely possible the humans had misconstrued my

rescuing her and the other slaves as recompense for the hassle they'd put me through in the first place. The fact that he'd come all the way here in search of her made me think he'd gotten his information from someone in Alfiro—information that more likely than not had been exaggerated to worsen my already bad rep.

Damn. If I'd known things were gonna end up like this, maybe I should've asked Rir to stick around. No, that wouldn't have helped. Though I thought of him as family, the collar around his neck marked him as a pet. And since werewolves considered fenrirs holy beings, instead of his presence convincing him of my innocence, the collar would probably just piss her dad and his people off even more.

"Calm down, boss man. Your daughter's safe. If you come with me, you'll see for yourself that I'm telling the truth."

"I don't believe you!"

"Okay, how about this? Believe me or not, there's no doubt that staying here means annihilation. Since you're in a sink-or-swim situation anyway, why not just trust me?"

"I will hear no more of your treachery, demon lord! Death is something we prepared our hearts and minds for before we took our first step on this journey! Every last one of us shall die fighting if it means ending your worthless life!"

Ughhh... You're killin' me, smalls! What a pain in the goddamn ass, I swear. I could tell that he could see in my face how fed up I was getting with all this. Still, I tried my best to get him to cool his jets.

"I don't know who told you what, but I'm almost positive they were lying. Regardless, we're wasting time arguing here, so can you please just calm down —"

Instantly, the alpha rushed toward me. He caught me literally off guard because I'd had zero intention of fighting *and* I was intent on convincing him. I hurriedly took evasive action, but Lew's dad moved so insanely fast that I couldn't dodge in time. His front kick got me right in the guts, blasting me off and sending me crashing into a tree, which smashed into pieces. A cloud of dust kicked up around where I landed.

“Stand up! I will choke the life out of you here and now!”

“Oh, yeah? Understood. Under-freaking-stood.”

Still lying on the ground, I moved an arm and abruptly opened the rift in space. My HP hadn’t dropped much at all, but I couldn’t deny that I was kinda irritated at this point. I took out a greatsword from Inventory—a dull wooden one I used for practice—and thrust it into the ground like a staff, using it as leverage to slowly pull myself up.

Fine. Have it your way. Lew’s dad, his comrades, whoever. I didn’t give a shit anymore. I wouldn’t kill them, of course, but no matter how much they hated it, I would make *damn* sure they listened to what I had to say.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Welcome back, Yukiki!”

“Ah, you have returned. Yuki, what is that?”

When I showed up in the meadow area of my dungeon, I found Lefi watching over the little girls as they played. She stared in my direction with a baffled look on her face.

“I... Just don’t even ask.”

A giant pile of werewolves was hanging out behind me. I’d had my pets help me truck them to the dungeon, pushing and shoving them through the door when we’d gotten here. And lemme tell ya, it’d been anything *but* a walk in the park. Who’da thunk it’d be such a massive pain in the ass to transport unconscious people? Not me, that was for sure. I really shouldn’t have wilded out like that just because I’d been madder than a hornet’s nest for a split second there.

“Haah... Yo, wake up, Mr. Alpha.”

I slapped Lew’s dad in the face repeatedly and he finally groaned, slowly opening his eyes.

“Wh-Where am I...?”

“My place. I brought you all here while you took your little naps.”

My voice apparently had the same effect as a bucket of cold water to the face because his eyes snapped wide open. And just like that, he snapped back to reality.

“Y-You! You dare kill my people—”

“Bruh, can you use your eyes? They’re all still breathing.”

He stared at me with a disbelieving expression before hurriedly turning to check on his subordinates.

“Ngh...! H-How can this be?! Not a single one shows signs of injury! Even the previously wounded!”

“I told you, didn’t I? That I’d take care of them if you just followed me home.”

“It... It’s true, Alpha. This demon lord healed all of us. Granted, he was quite merciless in his drive to incapacitate you and the others...”

I’d spared feeding the seriously wounded to my greatsword while I was in my berserker phase, so thankfully, one of them vouched for me as I scowled down at his leader. They were the first of the werewolves I’d used the potions on—after I’d knocked out everyone who’d been intent on getting a taste of this demon lord’s wrath, of course. Once the ones with non-demon-lord-related injuries had recovered, they’d helped us carry their unconscious comrades to the dungeon.

“You... What is the meaning of—”

Lew’s father never got to finish that sentence.

“Lady Lefi, I bring snack— Huh?”

I couldn’t decide which, but Lew had either the best timing in the world or the absolute freaking worst because she’d chosen that exact moment to walk through the door connecting the meadow to the real throne room.

“L-Lew?!”

“Geh! F-Father?!”

Astonished, Lew nearly dropped the tray she was carrying. But Lefi was a step ahead and plucked it from her hands before it could crash to the ground. *Cheese Louise, Lew. You see your dad for the first time in who knows how long and the first thing out of your mouth is “Geh!”?* I hoped the doofus knew that the only reason he was here was because he was worried about her.

“L-Lew! You were safe this whole time?!”

Lew’s dad rushed toward her, clearly overcome with emotion, and swung her up into his arms. He hugged her with all his might.

“F-Father, stop it! I don’t want my lord and the others to see me like this!”

“Kh... Hrngh... I-I thought you were dead!”

The dude was straight-up sobbing.

“Can you not just kill me off whenever you feel like it?! As you can see, I’m full

of life! Wait a sec! What the heck is this?! Did you bring the whole clan with you?! And why are so many of them unconscious?!”

“Oh, actually, that was me. My bad.”

“Ah, I-I see. Then I guess it makes sen— No! No, it doesn’t! *None* of this makes sense! Starting with why you’re all here in the first place!”

Lew rattled on in agitation, still being squeezed to death by her dad. She was hella confused by the whole thing, and honestly, I could relate because same.

“Forgive me. It seems I gravely misunderstood the situation.”

“No worries, man. Happens to me more often than you’d think.”

I shrugged to go along with my response. I was just glad he was finally thinking with a cool, calm head. Sure, the whole ordeal had been a huge headache for me, but, well, I *had* beat the stuffing out of him and his people, so I’d consider it water under the bridge. On account of him being Lew’s family and all.

Still, the term “demon lord” seemed to be as notorious as ever. It seriously made me wonder what exactly demon lords in this world had done to earn such a bad rap, and apparently one that was known far and wide. *Y’know, on second thought, maybe I* don’t *wanna know.*

◇ ◇ ◇

“I see... Lord Yuki, I humbly beg your pardon. You have done so much for my daughter, yet I...”

Lew’s father sat cross-legged on the floor. He planted both fists down and repentantly bowed his head low.

“Please, don’t worry about it. All in the past as far as I’m concerned.”

“I have no words to repay your generosity of spirit. In my utter foolishness, I attacked you despite you being my child’s savior. I would have no cause to complain should you wish to kill me. All this...because of my idiot daughter!”

“Hweh!”

Lew sat next to her father, a bored expression on her face. At least until he

bonked her on the head with his fist. Then, she made that silly, strangled sound of being in pain.

“Hrk... F-Father, that hurt...”

“Silence, idiot daughter of mine! Have you any idea how many people you have troubled with your idiocy?! Fortunately for us, there are no deaths to lay at your feet! But one misstep could have easily led to that!”

Lew’s dad shouted angrily at her while she gingerly pressed both hands against the top of her head. *Yeah, that definitely had to hurt.*



“I-I won’t deny that I feel bad about all that. A-And I’m thankful for everyone

who worried about me, of course, but...but when you get right down to it, it's your fault, father! No matter how much I told you I hated the idea, you refused to listen! You just kept pushing all that talk about marriage!"

"And I still do not understand why you kicked up such a fuss! Lynaught is a fine man!"

"Marriage, father! Marriage itself is what I have an issue with! I don't *want* to get married! Do you even know how far apart in age we are?! He's at *least* ten years older than me!"

"Which only means that he is capable of providing for you! He is strong and dependable! A young man with a promising future!"

"Do you honestly believe the words coming out of your mouth right now?! Do you even know how *conceited* he actually is?!"

I chuckled ruefully at the father-daughter argument that had suddenly erupted, then interjected before it could get even more out of hand.

"Hey, hey, both of you take it easy. You're making things uncomfortable for everyone, especially the folks behind you."

I jerked my chin toward the other werewolves chilling behind them. They watched their leader and his child with awkward expressions, unable and probably unwilling to interfere.

We were currently in the Japanese-style inn behind the castle, the one I always used for guests. Specifically, the large room that played the role of reception area. Lew and her dad were sitting across from me while the rest of their clan took up the space behind them. Well, technically, only the important members of Clan Groll were waiting quietly in here. Everyone else was in another room.

Maaan, I sure am glad I made this inn. It was the product of one of my early, extremely creative phases, but I'd honestly never expected it would get as much use as it had since its construction. During my brief escape from reality, the verbal battle between parent and child heated up even more.

"And strong, my foot! My lord held back when he fought you all and he *still* trounced you up, down, and sideways!"

“Uh, Miss Lew? How ’bout we *don’t* bring that up again?”

“Grr...”

The alpha’s face twisted as Lew’s remark apparently hit the bull’s-eye.

“I...will not deny that Lord Yuki is a fearsome individual. But he is irrelevant to the discussion at hand!”

“How?!”

“Because I said so! And even if I did not, Lord Yuki is neither your lover nor your betrothed! Therefore, he has no bearing on this! Tell me I am wrong!”

“Argh!”

This time, Lew shrieked in outrage. Her face twitched like her dad’s words had found *her* sore spot. *Uhhh, peeps? Can you maybe* not *use me as ammo for your argument? Thanks much.*

“In any case, you are coming home with us! We cannot trouble Lord Yuki or others any longer, to say nothing of our clanfolk back in the village who still worry over you!”

“No, I won’t go! I want to stay here! I already decided that I’m staying here with everyone!”

“You will stop throwing such a childish tantrum!”

“I’m not throwing a tantrum! This is something *I* decided for *my* life!”

“Haah...”

I sighed in exhaustion because I didn’t see an end to their back-and-forth anytime soon. So I girded my loins and spoke to them more firmly this time.

“All right, I’ma stop you both right there. Lew’s dad, you didn’t travel so dang far just to fight with her, did you?”

“Nh... Indeed, you have the right of it. My apologies for behaving in such a shameful way.”

Realizing how rude he’d been, Lew’s father bowed his head slightly at me and straightened his posture.

“Lew, you need to stop being so angry too. Regardless of why, you’re a hundred percent to blame for all this.”

“Urk... I-I’m sorry, my lord.”

When I saw the despondent expression on her face, I exhaled quietly, then I turned to her dad sitting next to her.

“So, Mr. Lew’s Dad. Let me tell you my stance on all this as an outsider. I’ve known Lew a lot longer than I’ve known the rest of you, so if you ask me whose side I’m on, it’s definitely hers. In short, I have no plans to send Lew back with you.”

“What did you say?”

His gaze sharpened and I met it head-on before continuing.

“I will admit that Lew screwed up by not going home even once, and I had every intention of making her do so before you showed up. But that’s all I’m going to allow. As long as Lew says she wants to stay in this dungeon, I have no desire to give her up.”

“M-My lord...”

Lew looked deeply moved by my words. I watched her from the corner of my eye while I kept talking to her dad.

“I mean, she literally only *just* got good at doing her job as a maid, y’know? If I let her go now, all the hard work I put into teaching her how to do chores right will just go down the drain. And I can’t have that. No, sirree, I cannot.”

“M-My lord?!”

After all, only a year had passed since she’d become an employee of my dungeon corporation. Good business practices dictated that new employees remain at a company for a minimum of three years, even if they hated their jobs. If they didn’t, they risked negatively affecting their chances of getting a better position elsewhere.

“M-My lord, I’ve had it with you! Why do you always have to finish with *me* as the punch line?!”

“Easy! Because out of all the dungeon residents, you have the best reactions!

That makes you worthy of being bullied!”

“Do you really have to sound so passionate when you say that?!”

I chortled maniacally at Lew’s dismayed expression. But I wasn’t done.

“Ha ha! Sorry, I just couldn’t help myself. It was only a joke, so don’t look at me like that. You know I care about you. Oh, but I definitely wasn’t joking about not handing you over to your dad.”

I shifted my gaze from Lew back to her father as I said that last part.

“Well, well... Then you mean to say *you* will not permit *my* daughter to return to her family, where she belongs?”

“Bingo. I’d be sad without her, and so would everyone else in our family. Plus, Lew herself said she wants to stay here, and I have no reason to go against her wishes.”

If she’d said she actually wanted to go home, I would’ve let her, though I would have been extremely melancholic over it. But she hadn’t said that, so it was all good. I had zero reason to compromise.

“Besides, Lew’s already an adult, right? Why not just let her live her life the way she wants?”

“That is the logic of other races. We werewolves live by a different code. It is a parent’s responsibility to look after their children. Moreover, this daughter of mine is unwed. It is also a parent’s right to decide their children’s spouse and future. Adult or not, I cannot and will not tolerate selfishness. Therefore, I *will* take my daughter home with me.”

Christ. I finally understood why Lew had run away from home. This man was so hard-headed that it was no wonder she’d gotten super frustrated with him. I found myself feeling kinda irritated by *his* selfish argument, so I didn’t bother trying to hide the scornful expression on my face when I spat out my response.

“You forgetting something important, daddy dearest? I’m a demon lord. Might not mean much coming from me, but fuck your code. Fuck *any* race’s code, for that matter.”

This time, it was *his* face that twitched in displeasure.

“...Lord Yuki. I am indebted to you for saving my daughter’s life as well as ours. No matter how much we may owe you, however, your proclamation is unacceptable. Please, I ask for your understanding on this matter.”

“I don’t need your debt. The only reason I saved you guys is because you’re Lew’s people. If you weren’t, I would’ve turned a blind eye. You reap what you sow and all that jazz. You don’t have to accept what I have to say either. To be clear, I wasn’t making a suggestion or anything. I was just stating facts—telling you what I’ve already decided.”

Lew’s dad said nothing as he glared at me. I stared right back without flinching. Tensions were high as we scowled wordlessly at each other. Then, finally, he let out a deep breath and spoke. His expression now was resolute, like he’d come to some conclusion.

“You...have made your intentions quite clear. I know very well that you will not compromise either. Then I shall convey to you *my* will.”

He paused for a moment, then spoke once more without hesitation.

“Meet me outside, Demon Lord Yuki. I challenge you to a duel.”

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“Father, you don’t have a chance of winning, so I suggest you call this off. Especially after my lord trounced you while he was holding back.”

“Bah, nothing is certain. One must try or one will never know.”

“Except in this case you’ve already been defeated once...”

“Alpha. I, too, feel that you should withdraw from the duel. He saved our lives and took care of Lady Lew as well. I understand your feelings, my lord, but knowing that Lady Lew is safe is more than enough for us. Not to mention how happy she is with her life he—”

“Like I care! You will remain silent, Bizgar!”

Lew’s father folded his arms, his stubborn attitude clearly conveying that he didn’t intend to listen to either of them. Lew and a werewolf man in the prime of his life sighed exasperatedly in unison.

“Bizgar... Thank you for supporting me. And I’m really sorry I have such a

blockhead for a father.”

“Think nothing of it, my lady. After all, this is also part of my job as an adviser. I am truly relieved to see you safe and sound, my lady.”

The two of them approached me while chatting with each other.

“Um, I really am so sorry about this, my lord. But I appreciate you indulging my father anyway.”

“Well, if that’s what it takes to convince him, so be it. This shouldn’t take long.”

I smiled wryly at Lew’s extremely apologetic expression. Yeah, you guessed it. Her old man had refused to rescind his challenge, so duel it was. We’d left the inn and headed back toward the meadow area, where I’d used DP to build a simple arena. We were standing in said arena right now, with me about to face off against the Groll clan.

To be totally honest, it’d been pretty entertaining to see the shock on their faces as they’d watched the arena suddenly take shape on the ground. Maybe I hadn’t had an obligation to agree to the duel, but for a race like theirs that insisted on settling things the hard way—via brute force—the best thing to do was give them what they wanted and show them my power. And too bad for them, I had a decent amount of pent-up frustration I wanted to unleash. *Time to open up a can of whoop-ass.* He sure deserved it at this point.

By the way, my household’s members were also present. They’d trooped out of the castle and real throne room to enjoy the show. That, by the way, was exactly how they were acting: like this was some kind of exciting performance. Leila had spread out a picnic blanket and they were all chowing down on snacks she’d made. *Maaan, I wanna chillax with them too.*

“Lord Yuki, I sincerely apologize for this. Despite the alpha’s words, all of us in Clan Groll would like to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for saving our lady as well as our lives.”

So saying, Bizgar bowed his head at me as he stood next to Lew. I appreciated his attempt to counsel his boss against the duel.

“Hey, sooo, just out of curiosity, can I ask you how old you are?”

“Hmm? You’d like to know my age? Well, I’ll be sixty-three this year. Why do you ask?”

Wait, what? For real?! But he barely looks forty! Now that I was looking over the rest of the clan again after finding out this little tidbit, they all looked strangely young to me. There were a few others who seemed to be around Bizgar’s age, and seriously, *he* looked like he was in the prime of his life. Those guys were probably past sixty too, then.

“Uhhh, then what about Lew’s dad?”

“I can tell you that, my lord. I think he’ll be forty-five this year? Something like that.”

“Dude, do all werewolves look super young?”

That’s nuts. The dude could pass for being in his late twenties, maaaybe early thirties.

“It’s not just werewolves, but all therianthropes. Because our life spans are just a bit longer than those of humans, we age more slowly than them.”

Aha. Just like elves in fantasy stories. I suddenly wanted to shout, “Holy shit! I forgot how amazing this other world is!” That was how the revelation had hit me.

When she saw the wondrous expression on my face, Lew seemed to hesitate to say what was on her mind. She ended up deciding to get it out, though, since she’d apparently been brooding over the thought.

“Um, my lord? I know I’m barking up the wrong tree right now, but despite his stubbornness, that man *is* still my father. And everyone else is basically my family. So, um, I know this is a duel and all, but please don’t kill anyone...”

“No worries on that front. I definitely wasn’t planning on it since they’re important to you. I’ll go easy on ’em, so you can relax. But I sure as hell don’t plan on handing you over either. You just sit over there with the rest of our peeps and spectate without a care in the world.”

She blushed a little in response, but gave me a small nod before dashing off to join the rest of our dungeon family.

“Yukiki! Good luck!”

“Good luck!”

“You...can’t lose.”

“Heard, ladies! Loud and clear!”

“Yuki, I shall split my sides laughing should you disgrace yourself in this battle.”

“Mr. Yuki! Please don’t do anything *too* stupid!”

“Hey, here’s an idea. Maybe you two could talk me up instead of putting me down, yeah? Just a thought.”

Unlike the little-girl gang, Lefi and Nell were obviously cheerfully indifferent to how the duel would turn out. Naturally, I couldn’t help snarking at them since their attitudes kinda chapped my ass. The only one who said nothing was Leila. She just smiled and watched our byplay like she always did. Business as usual for that one.

“Hmph. You do not seem terribly concerned, demon lord.”

Lew’s dad narrowed his eyes at me. He must not’ve been a fan of my silly conversations with my dungeon’s residents.

“Well, yeah, ’cause I already kicked your asses once.”

“Grr... Remember this, then. Time decides a match. You may have won once, but do not presume you will do so again!”

Nah, fam, I’m pretty sure I got this in the bag. I mean, they’d lost to monsters in this forest that were weaker than the average ones. Granted, there were plenty of monsters I myself still couldn’t beat, but I was long past the level of losing against weaklings like those.

“Sooo...who’s fighting me? You?”

“I would very much like to, but no. Lynaught!”

“Yes, sir!”

At the summon, a man almost twice as big as everyone else stepped forth from the pack of werewolves. He walked forward past the line of his kin and

stared me down hard, gripping his spear. *Wait, I know that name.* Lynaught was the man Lew's dad wanted her to marry, aka the reason she'd run away from her home.

And another thing...that didn't really matter but that I needed to point out anyway: Lew's animal ears were cute, but IMO they were gross on men. It made my stomach churn to see them sprouting from the heads of all these experienced warriors. In fact, who the heck *did* find dog ears on dudes attractive, let alone old dudes? I couldn't help thinking about dumb stuff like that given that I was a self-proclaimed animal-ear lover.

While this incredibly rude train of thought rolled through my mind, the man who'd presented himself spoke in an excessively booming voice.

"Demon Lord Yuki! I'm deeply thankful to you for saving my comrades' lives as well as my own as we lay on the verge of death!"

"Oh, sure. You're welcome."

Clearly, he hadn't been part of the troop that'd had a go at me when I'd found them. He must've been one of the folks wounded by the monster encounters.

"Nevertheless! That has no bearing on the issue of my lady! I know you've seduced her with your wily ways!"

"Seduced her with my wily ways," did I? Well, considering that she was technically his fiancée, it made sense that he'd see things from that perspective. Still, though, I couldn't ignore how much he reminded me of a stereotypical meathead jock. He was just so in your face with his overblown but basic way of speaking. I knew it was rude, but I definitely understood why Lew didn't want to marry him. That said, her dad seemed to like him, so it was possible he had other good points. Then, I considered how generally meritocratic this world was and realized that those who were the loudest—both figuratively and literally—were seen as dependable, which meant they would be well-liked.

"Regardless of my debt to you, I'll show you no mercy because you're the man who seduced my future wife! Therefore, I challenge you to a duel, Demon Lord Yuki!"

"Yeah, I accept."

“My lady, I have a request! I ask only that you feast your eyes on this brave man destined to be your future husband!”

“Oho, pray tell us how it feels to be in such demand, Lew.”

“You’re sooo popular, LewLew!”

“Do you really think it makes me happy to have *that* fawning over me?! You want me to marry you, you dolt?! In your dreams! And stop calling me your wife or whatever! It’s creeping me out!”

“I know you’re only saying such hurtful things to hide the embarrassment your maidenly heart feels, my lady! Rest assured, I know the truth of your feelings! Because only a true man can comprehend the depth of your emotions! Demon lord, can you hear it?! The sound of my lady’s heart as it yearns for me to best you in this duel?!”

“Nah, sorry. I can’t hear shit.”

“Ha! Of course you can’t! You even less suitable to be my lady’s husband than I first thought!”

What the hell, man? Like, what the actual *hell? I’ve never seen someone think so positively. I’m really starting to worry about this guy. I mean, is he all there in the head? Sheesh.*

“Uhhh, okay... Okay, yeah. I’m pretty sure I’ve got the gist of what you’re trying to say, so let’s get this show on the road already. You wanna throw down, right?”

I deliberately provoked him both to psych him out and psych myself up. I’d been getting pretty irritated by his delusional monologue and needed to get my head back in the game. Once I did, I opened the rift in space and pulled out the wooden greatsword I’d used to knock out the werewolves when we’d first met. I held it super casually in one hand.

Of course, his spear was the real deal. But that didn’t mean I had to reciprocate by using En. If I did that, there was a very good chance I’d end up killing him. Ergo, the practice sword. *I could probably make En work by keeping her sheathed, but...* It was a moot point since she was sitting and watching this farce with everyone else in my family. *I’ll just let her enjoy it.*

“‘Throw down,’ you say. Well, you’re quite confident, aren’t you? But you dare to disrespect me with a weapon like that?!”

“Damn right I do. It’d be really freaking bad if I killed one of Lew’s people. You’d better be grateful to her that I’m not going all out.”

“Grr! It’s high time you showed me whether or not your arrogance is merely pretense!”

With that angry roar, Mr. Jock tightened his grip on his spear, swung its pointy end in my direction, and charged thunderously toward me.

Not even a minute later.

“Grr... My rival...is mighty indeed...”

Those were the last words Mr. Jock said before he melodramatically crashed to the ground and lay there unmoving. *Does homie seriously think he’s about to start his journey to the next life? Good grief.*

I hadn’t killed him, of course. I was no liar. When I double-checked his stats, I saw that he still had around a third of his HP left. I knew he’d just passed out, but jeez, his performance... If he could pull off a ridiculous act like that, he was gonna be just fine. *And stop calling me your rival. I hate it.*

“Tch! How can this be?! He was unable to land even a single blow!”

Lew’s father raised his voice in agitation. He’d been spectating from outside the ring like everyone else, and he sounded genuinely baffled by how quickly the match had ended. Again, not even a minute had passed. *Dude, come on...* I didn’t wanna say “I told you so,” but y’know, I *did* tell him. He had no reason to be shocked.

As a reminder, living things in this world were fundamentally stronger than the ones in my previous one were. Even though I was pretty confident in the power I’d built up during my time here so far, I knew there were plenty of other beings stronger than me. Heck, there were folks who had lower stats than me but could still overpower me with their combat skill alone. On the one hand, I wasn’t *complete* dogshit at fighting anymore, but on the other, my style remained the same. Bulldoze my opponents through either brute force, magic,

or both. I really wasn't capable of anything except that specific method.

Even someone like me had managed to adapt to this world to some extent. So there was no reason for me to lose so easily to ordinary warriors here.

"Ngh... It seems I have no choice but to duel you myself! Demon Lord Yuki! Fight me!"

When Lew's dad made that declaration, for some reason, the werewolves started booing him. I guess I understood where they were coming from, though. Their boss had been the one to challenge me to a duel and his handpicked representative had lost way too easily, so yeah, I wouldn't be particularly pleased in this situation either. Especially when my leader couldn't take a loss gracefully and insisted on issuing another challenge.

"Enough! Be silent! As if I could return home with my tail tucked between my legs! Demon Lord Yuki! Will you answer my challenge or not?!"

"Uhhh... Sure, but this had better be the last time or I swear to god, man."

"Hah! Let us see how much longer your conceit lasts!"

I knew it.

"Guhhh... Nh... Shite...!"

His legs buckled and he collapsed to his knees, leaning on his fanglike sword. It was the only way he could manage to hold himself up, his breath coming in harsh gasps. This was Lew's dad in his all ignoble glory.

He was definitely stronger than Mr. Jock earlier. He moved swiftly and attacked skillfully. But that was it. After my match with a certain talented old butler a while back, nothing he could do was anywhere near enough to catch me by surprise.

"Do you get it now? Can you just give up already? If you still think you can take me, let me just tell you that I won't lose even if you all gang up on me. That's the difference between our abilities."

"Give...up?! As if...I could do...such a thing!"

Lew's father spat those words like he was spitting blood.

“My daughter disappears without a trace! When I next find her, she happens to be with a man whose name I do not even know! A demon lord, no less! And to add insult to injury, she works as his maid or what have you! Do you truly think knowing all this makes me happy?! Outrageous!”

Oh. Ohhh. I get it now. This old man was risking his life for his daughter’s sake, huh? And no matter how beat up he got or how much his men booed him, he intended to persevere. Even as I watched, he tried to stand up again. *Ah, crap. Now what?* I pondered that quietly for a few moments. Then, I acted.

“Yo, old man.”

“Silence! Not another word out of you, demon lord!”

Through clenched teeth, he shouted angrily at me. In response, I took a dagger out of Inventory and made a small cut on my thumb.

“Damn! Wow, that hurts. All right, old man, gimme your finger.”

So saying, I extended my bleeding thumb toward Lew’s dad.

“Why...? What do you intend to do?”

“This. What you folks call an ‘oath.’”

Lew had done the same thing a long time ago. I couldn’t remember the circumstances behind it, but when she had, she’d told me, “This is what werewolves do when they make an oath, my lord. They cut their thumbs and press them together, mingling their blood.” I *did* remember that she hadn’t actually cut hers back then, and she’d also mentioned that it was important to do it the right way if one was serious about their oath.

“I hereby make this pledge. I’ll protect your daughter even if it costs me my life. From any and every threat.”

“...Do you truly mean that?”

“Yeah, I do. She’s as important to me as she is to you. I’d even go so far as to say she’s irreplaceable. I can’t even imagine life without her anymore.”

That was the truth. Lew was precious to me—someone special who I could no longer do without. Not having her goofy ass around every day? Wasn’t gonna fly. Just the *thought* of losing her scared me.

“So, I swear to you that I’ll keep your daughter safe no matter what. I’ll stake my life on making sure every single day of her life is a peaceful one.”

Scowling at me with his narrowed eyes, Lew’s dad kept quiet while listening to my promise. Silence settled over the area for some time, but I maintained steady eye contact with him, my arm still held out, thumb bleeding.

“...Hmph.”

He huffed quietly and sliced his thumb with his sword.

“I will not allow you to go back on your word. Prove to me once more that your intentions are true.”

“I’ll say it however many times you want. I’ll protect Lew. No matter what.”

“I accept your oath.”

His body battered and bruised but his aura undaunted, Lew’s father extended his arm toward me. Our bleeding thumbs pressed together.

“Repeat after me. ‘On the blood of my forefathers and foremothers that flows within me, here and now, I pledge my mind and my heart. Should I break this oath, let my existence be expunged from this bloodline.’”

“On the blood of my forefathers and foremothers that flows within me, here and now, I pledge my mind and my heart. Should I break this oath, let my existence be expunged from this bloodline.”

“I accept your intentions and resolve. With your power and this oath, I entrust my daughter to you. Should you ever make her cry, I, along with my ancestors whose blood runs through me, shall curse you for eternity.”

“That’s terrifying. I’ll try my damnedest to stay on her good side.”

“Hmph.”

Lew’s dad snorted at my cheekiness. After that, like it was a done deal for him, he continued speaking.

“Very well. I shall acknowledge you as my daughter’s groom.”

Say whaaaaat?

“I will return in one year to make sure you have lived up to your vow. In the

meantime, you had best not forget the words you yourself uttered."

Wait. Wait just a second here. There's a lot I wanna say, but for starters, hasn't this sort of thing been happening a lot lately?

All right, calm down, me. Calm down, take a deep breath, and figure out how the hell things turned out like this. Where, exactly, did I screw up? Once I know that, I can get a proper handle on the situation.

First things first, what was it I'd said? I'd wanted to reassure Lew's dad as well as express what I thought were my natural duties as her employer. To do that, I'd told him that "I can't even imagine life without her anymore" and "I'll stake my life on making sure every single day of her life is a peaceful one." Huh. Hmm...

Son of a goddamn bitch! I basically just proposed to her, didn't I?! It sure freaking sounded like it now that I thought about my words with a cool head.

"Oho, I know that look! It occurs when one is faced with something unexpected and attempts to ascertain how it happened, only to realize that they themself were the cause all along!"

"Hmm... You know, Lefi, I do believe I agree with you."

"Master Demon Lord excels at controlling his expressions when faced with tense situations. Unfortunately, the same can't be said when he's not on his guard. On those occasions, he's quite easy to read, isn't he?"

"H-Hold on. Wait just a dang minute!"

Now that I realized what a colossally fatal mistake I'd just made, I jerked my hand away from Lew's dad's, jumped out of the ring, and raced over to the members of my family, who were chatting away ever so casually.

"G-Guys, what do I do? Help me. I'm facing down a totally unexpected barrel here!"

"Frankly, from the perspective of an outsider who has been watching this scene play out since the very start, I think it was quite expected."

"I concur. That was a proposal, no two ways about it."

Lefi and Nell stared at me in exasperation.

"N-No. No, no, no. I was just thinking about things as an employer wanting to secure his employee's safety. I didn't have any ulterior motives."

“Regardless of your intention, it is far too late now. The other party would not have known what you were thinking, nor does it matter any longer since the pledge has already been made. If you wish to tell him that this was all a misunderstanding on your part, however, feel free. But be prepared to face the young alpha’s wrath once more if you do. And this time, Yuki, you will suffer.”

Damn... It wasn’t hard to picture that particular future. Trying to clear things up now would destroy the reconciling we’d worked so hard to get done.

“You know, Mr. Yuki, I’m not sure how to describe it, but you never look before you leap, do you?”

“Indeed. He is missing something essential in that skull of his.”

“Tee hee. But that’s what you like about him, is it not?”

“S-Silence, Leila. As if you are not the same.”

“I think we can all agree with Leila on her assessment.”

P-Please, ladies, cut me some slack here. I really didn’t need them to start on such an embarrassing topic right now.

“Yukiki, what’s wrong with making LewLew a wife too?”

“A wife!”

Iluna tilted her head at me, puzzled, while Shii cheerfully parroted the most important part of what her twin had said despite not really understanding what we were talking about. *Miss Iluna, I hate to break it to you, but you don’t just make someone your wife because of the way a conversation unfolds.*

Then, I girded my loins and timidly turned toward Lew. She’d been dead silent this whole time.

“...”

Cheeks scarlet, she squirmed restlessly, sneaking glances at me like she was expecting something.

“L-Lew...”

“Eep. Y-Yesh, my lord?”

“Um, you’re not mad?”

“A-About what?”

“Uh, well, you know...the fact that your dad and I just kinda shook on things without even asking you what you wanted.”

I scratched my cheek in chagrin. Lew, meanwhile, shook her head vigorously.

“No, I... When I heard how much you care about me, my lord, it, um, actually made me r-really happy. S-So I wanted to tell you that I-I feel the same way...”

Her face even redder now, she looked down the entire time she mumbled that.

Wait, for...for real? And why did her confession please me? Was this the period in my life when women were just destined to fall all over me? Ha ha. Ha ha ha. Cue my eyes rolling into the back of my head as I faint from the shock.

Okay, but in all seriousness, it wasn’t like I disliked Lew. She was a beautiful young woman whom I found interesting. Plus, it was easy to joke around with her. I felt relaxed being with her. That said, there was no denying that I was about to reach my mental and emotional capacity for women. No, scratch that. I’d *already* hit it thanks to the whole Nell situation. A third wife would definitely break my acceptable boundary.

“Begging your pardon, Lady Lefi, but would you kindly enlighten me on your feelings regarding this develop—”

“So long as you continue to prove yourself a man we can all rely on, I have no particular qualms. Moreover, I know Lew well, so I have no reason to object to your choice.”

Lefi nonchalantly gave me her seal of approval.

“Th-Then, Lady Nell...?”

“Hmm. Well, Lew’s been with you much longer than I have, Mr. Yuki. As someone who was allowed to stay here because of everyone’s kindness, I think it would be discourteous of me to disapprove. Besides, as long as you, Lefi, and Lew are all fine with it, I don’t see any problems. Do you?”

Shiiit. Thumbs-up from her too? I looked at Leila as my last resort, aaand...nope, no help there. She just smiled her usual enigmatically cheerful

smile, radiating an attitude of “not my circus, not my monkeys.”

Went without saying where the little-girl gang fell on the issue. They were all innocent angels who didn’t care what happened as long as it meant everyone could stay together. Not to mention that they didn’t understand the finer points or implications, so they just watched us all in blissful ignorance.

You know what? Screw it. I give up. Whatever. Second, third, however many wives, it’s all the same to me. Bring it on, I say!

“Lew!”

“Y-Yesh, my lord!”

Tired of wracking my brain, I abandoned thought entirely and barked out her name.

“You can stay here forever too! Just chill with the rest of us! Without a care in the world!”

“Y-Yes, my lord! I’ll stay here forever!”

“Good! Then it’s settled! You’re fine with being my wife, right?!”

“Yes, my lord! I wanna be your wife!”

“I accept! Now, c’mere!”

So saying, I grabbed her arm and dragged her over to me.

“Eep!”

She flew into my arms, unable to fight the momentum of my pull. And just like that, I swung her up into a bridal carry.

“Ah! M-My lord!”

“Shut up. Not a word.”

Her face now flaming scarlet, Lew stared up at me. I refused to look at her for fear of this whole thing embarrassing me too. Even so, with her still in my arms, I strode determinedly back into the ring and stood in front of her father, who’d been waiting patiently the entire time.

“I understand and accept everything you said, so I’ll take responsibility for

Lew from here on out.”

“Very well. Lew.”

Lew’s dad didn’t take his intense gaze off me as he spoke to his daughter.

“Y-Yes, father?”

“Should you ever come to hate this man, you are welcome to come home anytime. But you understand, don’t you? That this is the path you have chosen for yourself. I will not accept your return if it is for frivolous reasons.”

“I-I know. B-But, father, you should know that my resolve is the real thing.”

Though her cheeks were still a little pink, Lew had a serious look on her face as she replied to her dad.

“I decided a long time ago that I want to stay here with my lord and everyone else. I definitely won’t have a change of heart, which means I won’t have a reason to go home.”

“...”

Lew’s pops silently closed his eyes. After a few minutes, he opened them abruptly and nodded solemnly, acknowledging her words.

“Understood. I shall explain your decision to Lynaught and the others in the village. I already told this man, Lew, but I will return to this place in one year to make sure you are being well taken care of. In the meantime, I expect you to learn to behave in a manner befitting a wife.”

Her face brightened instantly at receiving her father’s blessing.

“Yes, sir! Thank you, father!”

“Haah, good grief. What a mess this has become. All of these shocking events one after another have left me more tired than I thought possible.”

“Then why don’t you rest at my inn? You’re all welcome to stay as long as you’d like since you’re my new wife’s relatives.”

“Hmm... I accept your hospitality, then. As I am giving my daughter away, I would be keen on sharing drinks with the man who is now her husband. What say you?”

“Of course. More than happy to accommodate my new father however he wants.”

All sorts of expressions crossed his face at my easygoing response, but he finally settled on a rueful smile.

And that was how the number of wives I had increased. Again. *I still think it’s insane that I can even say something like that.*

◇ ◇ ◇

The next day.

“W-Would this wolf—no, this *majestic* wolf—happen to be...a-an esteemed fenrir?!”

“Majestic wolf,” huh?

“Oh, yeah, him. He’s a member...well, a member and a pet of the family. He’s pretty much the main reason Lew decided to work as my maid.”

Lew’s pops stood there frozen, jaw dropped in amazement as he stared at Rir, who stood patiently next to me while I stroked his silvery-white fur. Then, after standing stock-still for a bit, the alpha jerked out of his trance with a start. Eyes still fixed on Rir, he spoke to me.

“I... An esteemed fenrir lives here too?”

“Yup. I wasn’t sure how you and the others would react, so I kept quiet about him. But, well, considering you guys are basically in my inner circle now, I figured I shouldn’t keep secrets.”

I’d asked Rir and Rir alone to stay away from the dungeon so they wouldn’t discover him. Circumstances being what they were now, though, I felt awkward hiding things from Lew’s old man and the rest of her family, which was why I’d summoned him here.

Our other pets were currently hunting monsters in my dungeon’s territory. I’d sent them to clear the way for the newest members of my family since my new father-in-law had decided that he and the clan should head back to their village as soon as possible and I didn’t want them to be in danger on their journey. And just in case, I also planned to tag along and see them safely out of the forest.

Speaking of the other werewolves, when they saw Rir, they all took up one prayer pose or another. Some had their hands clasped in front of their chests while others straight-up dropped to their knees dogeza-style. It was quite the hectic spectacle.

Wow. Fenrirs really are *equivalent to gods in their eyes, huh?* The others' reactions were so extreme that Lew's first look at him had been comparatively tame.

You might be wondering about Lew's former fiancé. After he'd regained consciousness, he'd told me, "Grr... If you ever make my lady cry, you'll have *me* to answer to." He'd snarled those words with manly tears in his eyes. And then, the rest of the werewolf clan had done their best to cheer him up.

The exchange had made me realize that he'd been serious about Lew in his own way. Naturally, I'd felt kinda guilty, like I'd done something wrong. But hey, I'd won the duel. I'd considered his threat as his way of admitting defeat graciously. *Sorry, Lynaught, my dude. Guess you'll just have to find a new girlfriend.*

"I-I see... A part of your family, Lord Yuki... M-May I ask his name?"

"It's Fluffrir, and his nickname's Rir. Rir, buddy, this is Lew's father. Say hi."

"Grr."

He accompanied his rumble of greeting with a small nod.

"S-Such politesse! Thank you kindly, my lord, for this as well as for looking after my daughter."

"Father, you should probably say that last part to my lord instead of Lord Rir."

Lew tried real hard to hold back a smirk when she saw the state her father was in because of Rir. Dude was stiffer than a board from nervousness.

"S-Silence, pup! As if any of us could maintain a modicum of serenity in the presence of such a revered being!"

"That's true. 'Specially considering how awe-inspiring Lord Rir himself is!"

She folded her arms proudly.

“Lew, I don’t have a problem with your attitude, but have you forgotten what an annoying pain in the neck you were to Rir when you first moved in?”

“I ask that you keep such information a secret from now on, okay, my lord?”

Okay, m’lady.

“In any case! Lew! Now that I know you will be serving Lord Rir in addition to being the best wife you can be to Lord Yuki, your role in your new family has become even more important. You had better not blunder, or so help me, child...”

“I-I’m well aware of my duties, father! S-Stop worrying, will you? Lord Rir and I are good friends too. Like family, I’d even say! Right, Lord Rir?!”

Lew turned toward Rir with an expectant smile. My beloved pet responded by...

“...”

...saying nothing and turning his head away.

“...Lord Rir? Why won’t you look at me?”

“...”

“L-Lord Rir, please, say something. Anything. Or if you don’t want to say anything, just acknowledge me. That’s fine too.”

“...”

“Lord Rir?!”

When Lew squeaked in panic, Rir finally turned his head to look at her, his mouth relaxing.

“L-Lord Rir, were you teasing me?!”

“Grr.”

“Oh my goodness, don’t say yes to that!”

“Ha ha ha!”

I burst out laughing watching this conversation between the slender girl and the giant wolf.

“Mm, so you really *are* good friends. I see. My daughter, friends with a fenrir...”

“Well, they’ve been living together for a year now. Only natural that they’d get all buddy-buddy, dontcha think?”

Truth be told, Rir wasn’t usually this chill with Lew. I figured that, in his own unique way, he was doing his best to be considerate in front of her father. Sometimes, I really did think it was a waste for him to be, well, a wolf. With his looks, intelligence, and charm, he would’ve made for a real...*wolf* of a man. *I’m here all week, ladies and gents.*

“Whew, you almost gave me a heart attack. You’re becoming too much like my lord, Lord Rir.”

“Is he, now? Ya don’t say. Wanna elaborate on how, exactly?”

“Um, not really? No hidden meaning to what I said, my lord. None at all. I just, you know, meant that both you and Lord Rir are really kind.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s good, then.”

Grinning, I leaped onto Rir’s back.

“C’mon, Lew.”

I stretched out my hand to her.

“Th-Then...pardon me, Lord Rir.”

She hesitantly took my hand, her cheeks a bit pink from shyness. I pulled her up with a strong tug and plopped her down in front of me. Her thick, luxuriant tail waved back and forth, tickling my stomach, and her silky, curly hair and ears standing straight at attention took up my field of view.

“Oh, hey, so... Since I’m basically your husband now, that means your ears belong to me, right?”

“No. My ears are mine, my lo— Eek! S-Stop! Th-That tickles!”

Lew whipped around the second my hands touched her ears.

“Mmm, nice... I do prefer Lefi’s wings, but these are real nice too. Although maybe Rir’s ears feel better in comparison? Hmm, let me think about this...

Okay, I've got my rating. Your ears feel even better than that one time I touched your cheek, so I'm expecting a lot out of you from here on out. Eighty-five points!"

"Oh my gosh, when are you gonna stop being so rude?!"

Rir was doing a magnificent job of completely ignoring Lew's outraged screeches, though he had some trouble ignoring our tussling on his back. As such, he gave a low, slightly annoyed growl at the continued jostling. I pretended not to notice and kept running my fingers over Lew's ears.



Ahhh... I can’t get enough of this firmness.

“Urk! Y-You—eep—s-sexually harassing boss! See if I don’t raise a stink over this with Lady Lefi!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! I have no idea what you’re talking about! This is just one way of showing affection! Besides, there’s nothing wrong with it now that we’re getting to know each other as a married couple! If anything, you should be thanking me for holding back on the ear touching for this long!”

“N-Now that you mention it, you’re rig— Gah, you almost tricked me into believing you! But I know better! You rubbed and pinched my cheeks to death that one time, so you totally *didn’t* hold yourself back!”

“Sorry, but you didn’t complain back then, and it’s too late to start now! The statute of limitations expired a long time ago! Winner winner, chicken dinner!”

“Ahem!”

That extra-loud cough made us both flinch and realize that this wasn’t the time or place to get into one of our little comedy routines. I quickly let go of Lew’s ears and Lew herself faced forward again. She looked down at Rir’s back, her cheeks red with embarrassment.

When I glanced over at Lew’s dad, who’d been the one to interrupt us fooling around, I found him glaring daggers at me. I could see the angry veins throbbing in his temples. *Well, I’d probably look just like that if I were forced to watch my daughter flirt with a dude. I’m sorry for my rudeness.*

“It’s good for a husband and wife to be intimate with each other, but they must not behave in such an unseemly way in front of others.”

“Y-You’re right, father! M-My lord, we have to see everyone off before the day gets away from us!”

“Y-Yeah. Ahem, sorry for the wait. Anyway, we’ll follow you guys until you’re out of the forest.”

“Thank you.”

“As far as your next visit goes, it’ll be too dangerous for you to just waltz in, so wait for me at the forest’s edge. I’ll come pick you guys up.”

Until then, I’d work hard to expand my dungeon’s territory even farther into

the Demonic Forest. And I'd decided on another goal to reach during my yearlong grace period. The werewolf clan had come from the southern part of the Forest, so I'd make sure to have the weakest monsters in that area under my command by the time Papa Alpha came back.

"Much obliged. I look forward to it. All right, everyone, we depart now! Though Lord Yuki and his esteemed fenrir will be accompanying us, don't forget that we yet remain within the confines of the Demonic Forest. Do not drop your guard for even a second!"

"Aye!"

The werewolves roared in feverish determination. I had a feeling that their fighting spirit might end up going to waste since my pets had already secured a path for us, but whatevs. After we'd walked through the forest for a while, Lew's dad realized exactly that and started muttering.

"To think the journey here was so treacherous with all those monsters, yet not a single one has appeared as we take our leave. I should have believed you when you said not to worry."

"It helps that we have Rir with us since he outranks basically everything here. Plus, the rest of my subordinates are superior specimens too," I replied, still riding on Rir with Lew.

"Once more, I'm forced to acknowledge just how far out of the ordinary a demon lord truly is."

Lew's pops chuckled wryly. Then, his eyes lit up like he'd suddenly remembered something. So he kept talking.

"Oh, Lord Yuki, do you know of the human country near here? It seems to be in turmoil."

"Huh? Really?"

He must be referring to the one whose king I met and where Nell's from. What was it called again? Oh, yeah, the Kingdom of Alisia.

"Yes. Some sort of political strife has erupted in the heart of the nation, it seems. It may even spill over into here. I find it hard to imagine the humans

besting either you or this forest, but I suggest you remain cautious all the same."

They're at it again, huh? Eh, it didn't matter to me since I had no plans to start shit with them again. As long as they didn't involve me, of course.

Then again, it wouldn't hurt to beef up my traps. Just in case. Our secret agreement was in place and I really didn't think humans would invade again so soon after their last failed attempt, but it wasn't gonna hurt to be prepared anyway. There was Nell to think about too. The country's issues weren't my problem, but they had a chance of becoming hers considering her affiliation to the kingdom.

Once I drop the werewolves off, I'll devote myself to renovating the dungeon.

I should've asked what was causing the political strife when I'd had the chance. If I had, my reaction would've been a lot different.

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Later that night, after the werewolves were long gone.

"My lord..."

"Sup?"

The rest of our dungeon residents had tactfully left me and Lew alone at the inn, though not without letting me know how entertained they were by all this. She was lying in her futon, which was next to mine, and had been asking me question after question for a while now.

"Um, the thing is... Everything happened so fast, and I know how overbearing my father can be, so...are you sure you're all right with all this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it hasn't been all that long since you married Lady Lefi or Nell, and now you have me to deal with too. And it's not like you had a big dramatic moment with me like you did with them. My father just bulldozed you into this..."

She hesitated, fearful, before continuing.

"I'm totally fine with just staying here as a maid, my lord. If you don't actually

have any interest in keeping me as your wife, you can be honest, y'know..."

"Heh."

I chuckled softly at her words.

"Gah! H-How could you laugh when I'm being so serious, my lord?! You're so mean!"

"Ha ha ha! Sorry, sorry. It's because you pretty much said the same thing Nell did."

"Really? She said something like that?"

She sounded surprised, and I nodded.

"Yup. She was worried about how quickly the stuff with us had moved too, and that maybe I didn't actually want a new wife. Let me tell you what I told her."

Turning on my side, I peered into her brown eyes, laced with fear and uncertainty. Then I spoke to her earnestly in an attempt to reassure her. I didn't look away once.

"I was definitely surprised by how out of the blue it all was, but we've been together for so long now that you're just as important to me as the others. If you can, I really do want you to stay here forever. So, no, I'm not against any of this."

"..."

"I mean, how could I be? The fact that I can spend my days joking around and having fun with everyone—you included—is incredibly important to me. And I couldn't be happier knowing that you want to be my wife too. There's no way I'd be bothered about any of this."

Lew stared at me, the anxiety in her eyes replaced by a warmth I could feel clearly.

"Now it's your turn to tell me how *you* feel. You're not upset about the suddenness of our situation or anything?"

"Absolutely not! Like I said, I was more than happy just being here with

everyone. And, well... Um, I'm crazy about you, my lord, so..."

Lew's face was flushed red with embarrassment as she told me her true feelings. I grinned, deciding to tease her.

"Damn, Lew, you're redder than a tomato."

"U-Urk! Th-This is so unfair! How come you're the only one who's so calm, my lord?!"

Weeell, it might *have something to do with the fact that I'm kinda used to this stuff by now.*

"Darn you, my lord. That does it. I'll make you hug me as punishment."

She put her money where her mouth was and wiggled into my futon, snuggling close to me. Her thick, fluffy tail tickled my skin, and the heat and softness of her body felt nice. The dog-eared girl's sweet, feminine scent floated around me.

"Aha! Your heart sped up just now, didn't it, my lord?! You can't fool a werewolf's ears! And to think you looked so cool and collected!"

"Sh-Shut up! That's the pot calling the kettle black if I've ever heard it, goddammit! You think I don't know how hard *your* heart is pounding?"

"Well, this is my first time doing this kind of thing, so of course my heart's running away from me. I'm not fussed."

"Get outta town."

We both looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same time.

"Okay, so, when you wake up tomorrow morning, wake me up too. If we sleep in too late, I get the feeling Lefi and the others are gonna tromp over here grinning like the assholes they are, wondering what's taking us so long. Since you're used to getting up early because of your work, make sure I get up with you so we can beat 'em to the punch and show 'em what's what."

"Heh heh heh. I don't mind if they make fun of us for waking up late, though."

My fingertips suddenly came into contact with her velvety smooth hand. When they did, the dog-eared girl immediately tangled her fingers in mine,

locking our hands together tightly. I squeezed back, then wrapped my other arm around her and pulled her close to my chest.

Side Story 1: The Life of a Parent

"Do not make targets of yourselves by straying from the pack! Believe in us—in your comrades! These are not battles to be fought alone!"

I shouted instructions to my fellow clan members while slashing at the monsters relentlessly attacking us, tearing through them one after another. Rohga, my fang-shaped sword, was a magic blade that had been passed down our clan for generations. Only the alpha was allowed ownership of this treasured weapon.

Normally, I only used Rohga in true emergency situations such as wars. As a result, I had naturally trained myself to wield it to its full potential, but this forest—the Demonic Forest, which the scoundrel in the human town had told me of—was far harsher than I had imagined. As the place where the legendary Supreme Dragon dwelled, it was a secluded region even we were aware of despite our home being so far away.

Though we had known of the perils since long before entering its boundaries, the reality exceeded anything we could have anticipated. The monstrous threats living here made it *excruciatingly* clear that we lacked strength. In other lands, monsters powerful enough to command their own territories rarely appeared, but that was not the case here. We had been misfortunate enough to have faced a veritable battalion of such fearsome creatures thus far. And to make matters worse, there was no end to them in sight.

Less than a half day had passed since we stepped into the Forest, yet already a third of my fellows were injured. A few were so grievously wounded they could no longer walk or move on their own. *Grr... Never could I have dreamed that such dreadful beasts exist!*

If things continued as they'd been, I could clearly envision a near future where annihilation awaited us. Although for some reason I couldn't fathom, the flood of monsters had begun to slow a short while earlier and was now a mere trickle. I wondered, then, if I should take this opportunity to order a temporary retreat.

As a father, I could not repress my driving urge to save my daughter even a

second sooner. Nothing was more important to me. But neither could I risk the lives of my comrades who yet breathed for a daughter who might have already been dead. Even knowing the dangers they would confront and the possibility of death itself, my comrades still chose to follow me. I was this pack's leader, and as such, my first thought was to ensure the pack's survival.

Prioritizing my desire as a father in this situation wouldn't yield the outcome I sought anyway. Considering the distraught state we were currently in, the best thing I could do for us all was to have us retreat and regroup. I opened my mouth to announce my decision, but just then, I heard a rustling noise coming from some distance away.

Werewolves possessed the best hearing among the therianthropes. We could identify an enemy's location by sound alone, before they even appeared in front of us. My fellow warriors and I immediately pointed our weapons in the direction of the rustling as we prepared to battle a new monster.

"Yo. I'm over here."

Instead, we met a young man dressed far too lightly to be suitable for this forest. His unusual black hair was paired with heterochromatic eyes, one red and one the same black as his locks. Those distinguished him as a member of the demon species, which did nothing to dispel my extreme suspicion of him.

He wore clothes that one would wear in the comfort and safety of their home; not a single piece of armor shielded his body. Never mind cloaking himself with magic, I couldn't sense even an upsurge in his use of magic.

The pièce de résistance, however, was his lack of a weapon in this perilous forest. In fact, his hands were completely empty. To walk unarmed in the depths of this unknown territory, where monsters charged without interruption, was akin to suicide. It was the height of insanity.

Or perhaps this was meant to indicate how capable he truly was. His appearance only made me more skeptical of him, but strangely enough, I didn't feel any malicious intent from him. Not even the shouts of warning from my subordinates, of the same wary mind as me, elicited signs of him wanting to do us harm.

All therianthropes had acute senses, us werewolves included. A person's

unique odor, perspiration, expressions, the tension in their muscles—we could detect the most minute changes in an individual's aura, allowing us to determine whether they were friend or foe.

I discussed the situation with my subordinates and we came to the conclusion that the young man had approached us because he'd been unable to watch in silence as we suffered. And yet, I still hesitated to trust him. His claim of a safe place in this Demonic Forest was difficult for me to believe. It could only have meant that he lived here, and I found that all the more inconceivable because I myself had only recently come to understand how terrifying these woods were. I might have been convinced had he been an experienced warrior, but the one who stood in front of me was just a young pup.

I knew it was incredibly foolish to judge someone on their appearance alone. I didn't even know what sort of demon he was. Nevertheless, neither of these truths gave me reason to trust him.

What is the best option here? Doubt the young man and retreat while incurring more injuries along the way? Or believe the young man who exudes no killing intent and minimize our casualties? If he truly did live here, it was possible that he could also provide important information about the demon lord I was hunting.

I remained silent for a while, contemplating my next move. Once I'd reached a decision, I stepped toward the young man, ignoring my people's objections.

"Tell me...will we regret putting our faith in you?"

"From my perspective, the only thing I can say is 'trust me.' I don't plan on doing anything bad, so take that as you will."

The young man shrugged nonchalantly, and I couldn't help a small rueful smile from forming on my lips. From his point of view, that would certainly be the only way to express his intentions. Moreover, I still couldn't feel a hint of ill will from him. It was possible he was extremely skilled at lying, but thinking like that wouldn't help me or my people.

"...Understood. We'll trust you. Lower your weapons."

When I agreed to the young man's proposition, one of my men protested.

“B-But, boss! We can keep going! We can keep fighting! You can’t ask us to stop here, of all places!”

I’m blessed to have such faithful followers.

“I’m grateful for your devotion, truly. But we have suffered more damage than I had anticipated. It’s important for us to regroup now and put ourselves in a better position for the future.”

“Understood!”

Upon hearing my words, the clan immediately set about making preparations to move. The young man watched us, then suddenly spoke as if he realized something.

“Ohhh, you must be the werewolves’ leader.”

“I am. My name is Belgrus Groll and I lead the Groll family. I’m indebted to you for your aid on this occasion.”

I bowed my head slightly at him and the young man replied nonchalantly.

“So you’re Lew’s father, right?”

“Ngh! You know of my daughter?!”

This young man was powerful enough to walk around this forest unequipped and undefended. A forest situated squarely within the Supreme Dragon’s territory. And he knew the name of my daughter, who’d been abducted by a demon lord. There was only one answer I could deduce.

“Th-That means you are the d-demon lord?!”

“Huh? Yeah, I am—”

The young man—no, the demon lord—had become slightly confused. But he was the abominable enemy who had kidnapped my daughter.

“Y-You dastardly monster! You deceived me! I’ll take your life here even if it means sacrificing mine!”

All rational thought flew from my mind as a violent rage consumed me. I could do naught at that moment but charge at my detested adversary, wholly ignorant of the affectionate way he’d said my daughter’s name.

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What, precisely, did I come here to do?

"I understand and accept everything you said, so I'll take responsibility for Lew from here on out."

The young man sat across from me. If my eyes weren't deceiving me, the unyielding intent emanating from his gaze revealed the truth in his heart. His words conveyed his sincerity as well. Then, I shifted my attention to my daughter, held in his arms. She peeked restlessly at him as color suffused her cheeks. Her interest in him was obvious.

Good grief... How did things come to this? I could tell just by looking at them that they cared deeply for one another. Honestly, anyone would be able to tell.

"Is Lew suffering terribly at the hands of the demon lord?" "Is she already dead?" Such horrific thoughts had plagued me her entire absence. But strangely enough, reality sometimes wildly surpassed one's imagination, and it did so with ease. For example, I certainly would never have guessed that the reason she refused to return home with me was that she simply didn't *want* to.

I had always known that a part of her chafed at being a member of our insular community, which meant that she had a natural curiosity about the world outside. But it wasn't safe enough for an unmarried young woman to wander about as casually as she pleased. Due to that, I had insisted that she remain in our village for her own sake. Now, however, I was beginning to realize that I had erred in her upbringing by being overly restrictive of her.

On the topic of the unexpected, the demon lord in front of me was just that. While I would be the first to admit that I had no direct experience with demon lords, I had never once considered that a decent one could actually exist. He was surrounded by women—one of whom was my daughter—like demon lords were said to be, but unlike the stories about them, this one was intelligent, and reasonable to boot. The girls and women in his family evidently trusted him too, so it was easy to discern that they didn't stay with him under duress.

He is a man first and a demon lord second. Perhaps I can entrust my daughter to him, then. He had been strong enough to defeat my men even when they'd attacked as a group, yet I couldn't sense a trace of arrogance in him. I had a

feeling that if I left my daughter in his hands, he would treat her as an equal, living his life alongside hers.

“Understood. I shall explain your decision to Lynaught and the others in the village. I already told this man, Lew, but I will return to this place in one year to make sure you are being well taken care of. In the meantime, I expect you to learn to behave in a manner befitting a wife.”

My daughter’s face brightened instantly, a smile blossoming on her lips. I had never seen her wear this particular expression, which could be aptly likened to a flower in full bloom, before. *Am I truly making the right choice?* The thought crossed my mind alongside an intense loneliness brought on by the sight of a smile she’d never shown me. A complicated mix of emotions swirled inside my chest, and I unconsciously began to smile wryly.

Currently, we were in a large manse built in a style I had never seen before, but one that was nevertheless elegant. Night had fallen some time ago. Beyond the open doors of the structure’s external corridor, the demon lord’s castle towered dramatically above everything nearby, stretching toward the starry sky. The spectacle was both chilling and wondrous.

“Lord Yuki. I would ask you something.”

Now that he was my son-in-law, I had accepted the demon lord’s hospitality. The two of us stared out at the view that spread before us just past the manse. In the background, the sounds of my men drinking and reveling could be heard.

“What’s up?”

“Tell me what you like about my daughter.”

“Well, shoot. Kinda hard for me to answer a question like that out of left field.”

A smile flitted across his face, one fitting for a youth, before he answered.

“Hmm, let’s see... I guess the best thing about Lew is that she makes it easy to be with her.”

“Indeed?”

“Yeah. I can joke around with her. We do silly stuff together and act like dumb kids when we’re together. It’s freaking hysterical. If you’re gonna be with someone for a long time, don’t you think it’s better to be comfortable with them like that instead of having to walk on eggshells all the time?”

My gaze strayed toward my daughter as I listened to him speak. She cheerfully talked to our clan members, whom she hadn’t seen in quite some time, while serving them various food and drink. I got the feeling it pleased her tremendously to show us how much she had grown in the time we’d been apart.

The best way to describe my daughter was, in a word, hoydenish. Most werewolf men preferred quieter, more docile women to take to wife, but to each their own was my belief. And this demon lord named Yuki was cut from a decidedly different cloth than the average person, which seemed to account for his unique sensibilities. I was glad my daughter had found the right partner for herself.

“Tell me about her life here, then.”

“Life, huh...? Okay, so, you see that carefree maid over there? The one with the sheep horns? That’s Leila. I initially hired her and Lew as maids, so they basically help with chores around here. Lew’s still kind of a mess, but she’s gotten a lot better since she first started.”

His words made my ears burn something fierce with embarrassment. Even so, I gave my reply.

“Ah, well... My apologies. I never intended to spoil her, you see, but despite the way she carries herself, she is still my daughter. And the clan alpha’s child though she may be, I failed to teach her those kinds of things.”

“Ha ha, no worries. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Lew brightens up the room just by being her sunny self, you know. You could call her the mood maker of our group.”

“Heh. Hearing that makes me a proud father.”

“You should definitely be proud of her; she instantly makes everything around her better. Okay, now it’s my turn. Tell me something about her I don’t know. A

memory you have of her.”

The young man tipped the bottle of sake he was holding and refilled my cup. I thanked him before lifting it to my lips, slaking my thirst on the liquid. Then, I responded.

“A memory of her, hm?”

“Yeah. See, I don’t really know anything about her past. She doesn’t seem thrilled to talk about it whenever I try bringing up the topic, but I wanna know what she was like when she lived in your village.”

“Let me think... Well, she was certainly a peculiar child. She always dreamed of the outside world...”

After that, Lew realized which story I was relating. Her face flaming red, she rushed over to stop me halfway through.

Chapter 2: How Quickly the Days Pass By

Once everyone had finished eating dinner and taking their baths, the only thing left for them to do was go to sleep. Lefi, Nell, and Lew were currently in the inn Yuki had built in the meadow area. They had all changed into their nightclothes and were now exchanging glances.

“Hmm. Despite Lew becoming Yuki’s newest wife, I find a particular lack of novelty in the situation.”

“I know what you mean, Lady Lefi. Today feels exactly the same as any other day. It’s like nothing really special happened.”

Nell snickered in response to their exchange.

“I think that just proves that Yuki loves us all equally. It’s quite nice, actually.”

“Hmph. Seducing women seems to be the only thing he is truly capable of.”

“That’s the truth. My lord is very good at dealing with women.”

“I know exactly what you mean. He’s unexpectedly observant about the smallest things. He says the right thing at the right time too. And the moment you’ve dropped your guard, he’ll do something totally audacious.”

“Which is all the more perplexing considering what an imbecile he normally is.”

“Ummm... W-Well, that immature side of my lord is one of his more charming points. I think.”

“Not to mention the occasions he’ll cause trouble for himself or us.”

“Because he is a nitwit at his core.”

The trio spent a while chatting cheerfully about their shared husband before Lefi turned to face the other two and spoke.

“Right. As the one who became his wife first, I would like to make clear that we are all equal. None of us is superior to another, nor are they inferior. Our standing as his wives makes us compatriots *and* family. I believe that we should

continue working together and supporting each other henceforth. What say you?”

“All I can say is thank you, Lefi. Truly, I only have gratitude for your generous attitude. And should the topic ever come up about who is Mr. Yuki’s lawful wife, it should definitely be you. I don’t mind at all if Lew and I are considered his concubines.”

“I totally agree with Nell. Although, uh, I kind of ended up being forced on my lord, so I’m sorry you two have to deal with a dolt like me too...”

Lew trailed off with a timid smile.

“Nonsense. I will not deny that the opportunity presented itself quite suddenly, but that fool did not turn away. In fact, he embraced the notion with open arms. Nell and I have also given you our blessing, so no one has any cause for complaint. Moreover, you are very important to me as well. If one cannot share in their trusted companions’ happiness, one does not deserve them.”

“Lefi’s right, Lew. We all know you would never do something so heinous, so don’t even think it. If anything, I’m overjoyed that our family is even closer now.”

“Thank you, Lady Lefi, Nell.”

Tears pooled in Lew’s eyes at their words.

“Gah ha! You worry overmuch, Lew.”

“Aww, it’s okay. Don’t cry.”

Lefi gently thumped Lew on her back while cackling, and Nell smilingly rubbed her head. Once she’d determined that the dog-eared girl had calmed down, Lefi spoke again.

“I would like to propose that the three of us hold regular meetings. We shall call ourselves the Council of Wives. Our aim will be to share any and all appropriate information regarding Yuki. What do you think?”

“Oh, I like that! It should help us coordinate our efforts a lot better from here on out.”

“We’ll be a united front, huh?!”

The silver-haired girl nodded in satisfaction, pleased by their agreement, before continuing.

“Then today, we shall officially convene the first-ever meeting of the Council of Wives. Please state your thoughts and opinions honestly; no need to be reserved. Hmm, for our first topic, let us... Shall we discuss his *proclivities*? To start, that moron’s preferred region on a woman’s body. All together now, on the count of three. One, two, three.”

“The thighs!”

Three voices sounded in unison.

“Ah ha ha! Mr. Yuki is so easy to figure out, isn’t he? Whenever I wear shorts, that’s the first place his eyes stray. But he almost immediately looks away, like he feels guilty for doing something bad.”

“Indeed. He is always flagrantly buoyant whenever I force him to carry me on his shoulders. To be frank, the ecstasy on his face is nigh indescribable.”

“Hm, hm, hm. Maybe I’ll make him give me a ride too next time... Oh! I just remembered another part my lord likes. His eyes zone in on our napes when we’re fresh out of the bath.”

“Yes, indeed they do. I can sense him staring fixedly at mine whenever I fix my hair in a poh-knee-tail.”

“Ooh. Maybe I should grow out my hair more, then.”

“A ponytail, huh? But I have curly hair. It would get super crazy if I grew it out...”

Hoping to console the seemingly disappointed Lew, Nell was the next to speak.

“My hair is more wavy than curly, so I understand. Although now that I think about it, you *do* have a much harder time with your hair, huh, Lew?”

“Might it not be better for you to focus on tending to your ears and tail? I know without a doubt he is entranced by the luxuriant abundance of those parts of you. I have learned that he is quite intrigued by the unusual physical features humans lack.”

“Ohhh, I see. Okay! I’ll focus on making my ears and tail as beautiful as possible!”

“Urk! Both of you are being unfair. I don’t have horns or a tail or wings or animal ears because I’m just a normal human. If I ever get the chance to be reborn, I’d like to be a cat person.”

“Interesting you would say that, Nell. I personally find his obsession with cat ears a mite revolting, truth be told. In any case, you are very shapely, so why not concentrate on furthering that?”

“She’s right, Nell! You have an amazing figure! Your boobs are surprisingly big too! I’m suuuper jealous of these! Two! Beauties!”

“Gah, h-hey! Stop! Lew, that tickles!”

Lefi looked slightly troubled as Lew and Nell wrestled playfully.

“What, erm... What should I do, then?”

“Hmm... You’re a bit tricky, Lefi. Honestly, I think you’re perfect already, so I don’t really have any advice for you.”

“I can’t think of anything either. It’s like you’re already complete, Lady Lefi.”

“Hmm... I-I see... Well, when you put it like that, I cannot take any offense.”

Her response was a bit bashful. Then, suddenly, Nell came up with an idea.

“What if you worked on how good you are at doing chores? Everyone already knows you’ve been working hard lately to help out around the dungeon, but I think it would be a feather in your cap if you got even *better* at them.”

“Ah, because of that thing Yuki always speaks of? What was it again? ‘Gap moe’?”

“That’s right! I’m sure you’ll shock him speechless when you show him how quickly and efficiently you can do the chores!”

“Geh... I feel like that might apply to me too.”

“Lew. Heed me well. This will be our special training project specifically for you and me. As the clumsiest members of this household, we have no choice but to improve at chore doing.”

“Yes, my lady! I’ll do my best!”

“Right, then, you two. To summarize today’s meeting points, we shall do our utmost to seduce that fool and make sure his eyes don’t stray toward other women!”

“Aye, aye!”

All three raised their fists high into the air.

The next day.

“Whoa. Not often you wear your hair in a ponytail.”

“Indeed. I find myself feeling a bit conflicted about it.”

Lefi flicked her ponytail dramatically and suddenly, for some reason, started folding the towels she was holding.

“What do you think?”

“Huh? About what?”

“Do you feel something special?”

“Uhhh. S-Sure, I guess.”

I couldn’t deny that the ponytail did things to me, but like, why was she asking?

“I see. Good.”

My answer seemed to please her, and she walked away sassily with the neatly folded towels. Halfway through her journey, though, I noticed that the towels had become a big-ass mess again.

“What the heck just happened...?”

Utterly baffled by her mysterious behavior, I just stood there and watched her leave. I had a ton of questions I wanted to ask, but then Nell appeared.

“Mr. Yuki. Hi.”

“Oh, hey. What’s up?”

“Would you like to use my lap as a pillow?”

“What?! I-I mean, if you’re gonna offer, I won’t say no...”

“Tee hee hee. Then come here, Mr. Yuki.”

Nell sat down seiza-style and patted her thighs invitingly. I was even more confused now, but I still did as she said and laid my head down on her lap.

“What do you think? Does it feel good?”

“Y-Yeah, it does. But like...”

Since she was wearing shorts, I could feel her bare thighs directly under me. She gently ran her fingers through my hair too, so did it feel good? Hell to the yeah it did. But I had no idea what in this freaking *world* was going on. Because I didn’t, something felt a little off about it all. Wrong, even.

Shit, am I about to be gutted like a fish? A vague, inexplicable sense of terror unfurled within me. And then, Lew showed up.

“My lord. Hey, my lord.”

“Wh-What’s up, Lew?”

“Here. My tail for you.”

So saying, she swished her tail near my hand.

“...”

I decided that she was telling me to touch it, so I complied, grabbing her fluffy tail with both hands.

“Ahhh! M-My lord, p-please be gentle, okay?”

“G-Got it...”

She blushed fiercely even though she was the one who’d offered me her tail in the first place. Still, she continued speaking.

“So, what do you think? Does my tail feel good, my lord?”

“Yeah. Really good. But like...”

The texture of her tail was so sublime that I could stroke it forever. But that feeling of wrongness hadn’t gone away. Both girls beamed down at me, which fanned the flames of my fear even more.

Did I maybe do something to piss them off? While accepting their mysteriously warm fawning, Lefi came back. She stared down at me, with my head on Nell's lap, then spoke.

"Now then, Yuki, enlighten us on your emotional state right now. Do you feel as if you might ascend to heaven?"

"I have no idea what's going on, so honestly, I'm kinda weirded out right now..."

"Weirded out?!"

The trio's voices harmonized beautifully.



Yuki’s three brides sequestered themselves in the inn once more.

“I am curious as to where we erred...”

“Me too... I really thought I’d hit the mark with my lord’s tastes...”

“Maybe it was our timing? It might’ve been too abrupt, especially with all three of us going one after the other.”

All three young women frowned, deep in thought. If Yuki had been here with them, he would most likely have said, “Miss Nell, that’s the correct answer.”

“Hmm... Ladies, I have come to a decision. Let us invite the others here and discuss the situation with them. Doing so will allow us to hear more opinions that could be useful to us. Furthermore, in a few years, that oaf will likely have more wives.”

“You know, it’s surprisingly easy to imagine just such a future. I think you’re right, Lefi. Leila especially might be able to lead us in the right direction.”

“I definitely think we should pull Leila in here if she agrees. But wait a sec. Shii’s been with my lord as long as you have, right, Lady Lefi? She doesn’t miss anything about any of us, so maybe she can tell us something about him that we don’t know?”

“You make a fair point. Then it is settled. The next time our council assembles, we shall invite everyone aside from Yuki.”

“I have no objections!”

“Samesies!”

And so, these women’s research into Yuki was destined to continue indefinitely.

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On a certain day.

“This...is bad.”

I muttered that to myself when I saw how much DP I had. My massive stash of DP, the one I’d worked so hard to build up, was about to run out.

Okay, so that was a bit of an exaggeration. I still had some left, of course, and I’d have more tomorrow thanks to passive generation, but the amount I had

now was a twentieth of my peak. At the rate I was going, I'd fully bottom out in a month.

Damn. I spent too much. Lately, I hadn't been all that aggressive when it came to expanding my dungeon territory. I hadn't done much hunting either; I'd just been leaving my pets to do the job for me at regular intervals. Despite both of these factors, I'd used up DP without a care in the world, and here I was now. I'd screwed up juuust a little bit.

It was my fault. For one thing, the boatloads of DP I'd always gotten from Lefi simply existing had vanished when I'd married her. Us being an item meant the dungeon considered her family instead of an enemy. And I couldn't blame the increase in the number of dungeon residents either. The long and short of it was that I hadn't thought of a single way to make up for the hit to my income I'd taken from losing my golden-goose dragon.

Honestly, I'd just straight-up forgotten about DP since there'd been no need for me to worry about it for a while. Case in point, I'd been setting up new traps and stuff without even looking at how much they'd cost. But now, for the first time in a hot minute, I was forced to come up with a proper DP policy instead of just doing bits of fundraising that never really amounted to much.

"So, Mrs. Lefi, might I count on your assistance in this venture?"

I was kneeling on the ground in front of Lefi. The two of us were in the real throne room, aka our usual hangout.

"No. This is all too sudden, so I cannot make heads nor tails of your words."

"You're absolutely right, my lady. I have a small—trivial, really—dilemma on my hands that I thought I could resolve with the aid of the mighty Supreme Dragon. Won't you please allow me to elaborate?"

"Yuki, whenever you use such revoltingly polite language, I know you are trying to hide something from me."

Shit. Busted.

"No, no, no. I would *never*, my lady. To think I would ever deceive *you*. Though I regret to inform you that if you do not grant me an audience, I fear the

possibility is high I may not be able to provide you with the confections you so dearly love...”

“What?!”

Lefi stood up and rushed toward me.

“Damn it, woman, keep it down.”

“Ngh...”

She plopped herself down in front of me, sitting cross-legged. Then, she snared me in her sharp eyes. I could feel the waves of determination radiating from her. *Not that I care, but the whole world can see your underwear when you sit like that with a dress on, dummy.*

“Now, then. You will explain.”

“Okay, real talk, we don’t have much DP left. Assuming our expenses don’t change, we’ll run out in less than a month.”

“‘Dee Pee.’ That is the thing you use to make items appear, yes?”

“Yup. I’ve been in the black this whole time, so I wasn’t worried about it. But you know how we have more people living with us now? Well, I didn’t cut back on my DP usage to match the increase in our population, and now I’m here.”

“Hmm, I see... Which reminds me. After I became your spouse, you lost your Dee Pee income from me, did you not?”

“Uhhh...yeah, but it’s fine. I made the choice to bond with you. And I knew it’d happen sooner or later anyway. I was just an idiot for not taking it into account and planning ahead, is all.”

Besides, as if I would ever be monstrously stupid enough to not marry Lefi just because I didn’t wanna lose DP. Not to mention that I’d been sure I could make things work even without the fat stacks she brought in now that I had a solid dungeon setup going, especially in terms of territorial and pet expansion. Clearly, I’d been too naive.

“I need to come up with a plan to fix the situation, but I don’t exactly wanna worry the others. I’d prefer to make as much DP as possible *without* them finding out. Y’know, just pretend everything’s fine while I earn it all back.”

My long-term monetary policy relied on enlarging the dungeon's territory to increase the passive generation rate and conducting more proactive hunts with my pets instead of leaving them to it on their own. But at this very moment, I needed a short-term way to make a shit ton of DP. Like, *real* short-term. That was why I wanted Lefi's help.

"Mm, I see now why you seek my aid."

"Yeah. When push comes to shove, at times like these, you're the only one I can rely on since we've been together forever."

"W-Well, well. So, I am the only one, am I? Hmm, well..."

The silver-haired girl mumbled to herself. Her cheeks were a little pink, but she was clearly pleased by my words. *I still can't get over what an easy mark she is.* That side of her only made her more lovable, though. I sure was glad to have such a reliable and predictable wife.

"Ahem... Fine. I understand. As your ever-dependable spouse, I shall lend you my power. What, precisely, am I to do?"

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“Urk... So blindingly bright.”

My darling wife grimaced in annoyance the moment we stepped out of the cave. She held up her hand to block the sunlight, glaring spitefully at the source of it.

“Well, shoot. When was the last time you actually set foot outside, Lefi?”

“Hmm, let me see... I cannot rightly recall. On the occasions I *have* left our living room in the dungeon, it was only as far as the meadow area surrounding the castle.”

“Ah, right. Whenever Iluna and the others pester you to play with them. But y’know, that’s made you really good at taking care of kids.”

“Heh heh. I agree. Just as to be expected of myself. If I put my mind to it, playing the role of companion to small children is a simple enough task!”

Lefi grinned.

“Ha ha! You more than live up to your title of Supreme Dragon, my lady. I greatly appreciate your constant aid.”

“If you understand, then I would not be opposed to receiving more of your esteem. What would be appropriate as a boon...? Oh, yes, I think carrying me on your shoulders would clearly demonstrate your grasp of my might.”

“Yes, yes. As you wish.”

She deliberately puffed out her chest, acting all high and mighty. I circled behind her, bent down to thrust my head between her slim, white legs, and quickly stood up.

“Hmm... Yes, this is indeed nice. I do so enjoy having such a towering view.”

“Except your view is even higher when you fly?”

“I will not deny that sailing through the skies is its own pleasure. However, riding on your shoulders means a connection with you, and through you, the earth as well.”

“The earth, huh?”

Lefi kept talking. I could tell from her tone of voice that she was in an incredibly good mood.

“Where our bodies touch and the faint tremors I can sense from the earth when you tread upon it. Both of these sensations soothe my heart, creating a sense of safety for me. But I cannot experience such a feeling when I stand alone, bereft, atop the earth.”

I thought for a second about how I should respond, and almost immediately decided to tease her.

“Well, whenever you feel sad or lonely, I’ll give you a ride on my shoulders. It’s the very least I can do for my dearly beloved wife, y’know? Heck, I’ll even hug you if that’ll take care of your sadness faster.”

“Hmph. You will regret mocking me, fool.”

The silver-haired girl harrumphed, sounding just a wee bit embarrassed. I couldn’t see her face, but I was fairly certain her cheeks were tinged red.

From behind us, Rir, who’d been with us the whole time, grumbled under his breath like he was exasperated with us. Lefi and I pretended not to hear him, though, and I just kept walking with her on my shoulders.

“So, I’ve always wondered, why are the monsters around here so dang strong? I only figured it out after my trips outside of here, and something just feels weird about their power.”

“Hmm... I do believe the greatest factor is the high concentration of mana. They have adapted to their environment by being able to accumulate copious amounts of magic within their bodies. Naturally, those bodies undergo changes as a result.”

“Mana, you say...”

“Yes. Even the flora here absorb the mana and flourish accordingly, and the monsters that eat them develop further as a result of having incredibly nutrient-rich food. Then, the carnivorous monsters eat those herbivores, which affects *their* growth. And so, the cycle continues steadily, feeding on itself.”

Makes sense. In short, the addition of mana into the food chain had caused

the power of the monsters here to gradually increase.

“That brings up another question, then. How come the mana is so dense here in the first place?”

“Mm... An interesting question indeed. I have never actually thought about it... No, wait, it is coming back to me. In the past, when I first declared to my people my intention to settle in these lands, the ancient dragon elders told me a story.”

“Oh?”

I couldn’t help but wonder exactly how long ago “in the past” was. The way we saw time was super different, after all.

“I wanna hear this story.”

“Well, it was one told to them by their parents, whose own had related to *them* the tale. Evidently, a god died in these lands long, long ago. The magical energy within this being then scattered far and wide, creating this forest.”

Whoa. A land created by the death of a god. That’s some fantasy shit if I’ve ever heard it.

“Wait, but I thought gods didn’t exist in this world. I mean, you told me you’d never seen one.”

“It is not as if I know everything about everything, Yuki. There is still much I do not know of this world, including that which I possess knowledge of yet have never laid eyes upon. Be that as it may, I personally believe that the deceased god may have actually been a monster—a powerful, long-lived one revered as a deity.”

“Whaaat? A monster as a god? That’s definitely food for thought.”

Boggled my mind to imagine a monster, normally treated as vermin, moving so far up in life that it became a god.

“Names change from era to era and person to person. I was born into this world as Lefisios, then feared as the Supreme Dragon. Now, I am one you refer to as ‘Lefi.’ Therefore, I do not think it odd at all that a monster would have once been called a god.”

So saying, she peered down at me from her position on my shoulders, a grin on her face.

“What say you? Fascinating, is it not? Just by living and dying, those of us blessed with long lives leave our mark on this world and bear witness to its events. Thus, we make the fabric of the concept you humanoid species call ‘history’—otherwise known as legends.”

Living proof. In other words, legend. One hell of a tale. *And way beyond fascinating, for sure.*

“Then, millennia from now, *you* might be revered as a goddess too. Considering you’re the current age’s legend and all.”

“Heh heh. Which would make you the goddess’s husband when the time comes. You should be pleased that you are to be promoted from a mere demon lord.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that. Means I can make history in this world by your side—leave something of my own behind. I’ll have to work hard in the meantime to go from just a mere demon lord to being the most powerful, terrifying demon lord. That way, I won’t fail to live up to my name.”

“By all means. I shall wait to become a goddess until you have accomplished your goal.”

Lefi and I smiled at each other.

The trees were dense as deep in the forest as we were. Sunlight filtered through tiny gaps in the canopy overhead.

“Rir, you know where Lefi is, right?”

“Grr.”

“Good. Remember, one hit, then we run for our freakin’ lives.”

Rir and I were currently crouched behind the massive roots of a giant tree. It was so wide that not even five full-grown adults with their arms spread would be enough to wrap around it. We kept watch on the area in front of us.

By activating my Stealth ability, I’d erased most of my presence. Meanwhile,

Rir had used his Body Modification ability to shrink himself down to the size of a regular wolf. And in front of our hiding spot was...a bear whose lower half resembled a scorpion, its mouth stained red as it noisily devoured a dead something-or-other.

“It’s go time,” I whispered to Rir. Then, I activated the magic within my body and summoned several water dragons, which I launched without warning at the monster. They raced through the air at an incredibly high speed.

“Guuu...?”

Despite the considerable distance separating us from the thing, the bear-scorpion sensed a change in the atmosphere and raised its head. It did so just in time for my dragons to hit it right in the snout. Unfortunately for me, the monster’s stats outclassed mine by a good amount, meaning my dragons basically bounced off it without causing any damage whatsoever. Buuut...the magic I’d used had just been me doing some prep work.

A beat later, a violent light filled my vision and a huge boom reverberated throughout the area. It was Rir’s lightning magic.

“Giguuu!”

The bear-scorpion bellowed in pain as the bolt of lightning hit its wet body. And then, it slowly, almost casually, turned its glittering, menacing glare in our direction.

“Our fish is hooked! Let’s haul ass, Rir!”

“Grr!”

Immediately, my pet expanded, returning to his original size. As soon as he did, I leaped onto his back and he started sprinting through the forest.

“Graaarrr!!!”

A thunderous roar echoed behind us. I twisted my neck to look, and a single glance told me just how pissed off the bear-scorpion was. Its scorpion half skittered and swayed as it charged after us as fast as it could, mowing down trees left and right in its angry pursuit. The way it moved kinda made me wanna barf, though.

“Whoooa! Now *that’s* scary! Brings back memories of the other beast pieces of shit we’ve fought, doesn’t it, Rir?!”

“Grr!”

His annoyed growl basically said, “You have a point, but I need you to be serious right now!” I didn’t take it personally. I wasn’t all that worried either, though. The monster had high attack power, but it was fairly slow. Based on the research I’d done, I also knew that it was a meathead-type that didn’t use magic.

See, I’d deliberately targeted and reeled in a monster of exactly this sort. With Rir’s speed, we could shake it off, no sweat—as long as we didn’t drop our guard, at least. Okay, well, Rir had been pretty insistent that *I* shouldn’t drop my guard. The only real problem was bringing it down, but that wouldn’t be an issue this time around.

Rir and I kept a reasonable distance between us and the bear-scorpion. Not close enough for it to swipe at us, but not far enough for us to lose it entirely. And every so often, I would use magic to provoke it so that it would keep up the chase. We ran through the forest like that for a few minutes, at which point we finally reached a somewhat open area. A girl was waiting for us there, the breeze fluttering through her beautiful silver hair.

“Now, Lefi!”

“Yes.”

I gave her the signal when Rir raced past her. She spread her arms wide, then brought them together straight in front of her, her hands clapping loudly. Instantly, the bear-scorpion’s head exploded with a wet sound. Its headless body lost its balance and collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, causing the monster to roll and tumble before crashing to a halt.

“Damn. You really took this thing out in one shot.”

Once we heard the squishing noise, Rir braked elegantly using his whole body. He then turned around and trotted back to Lefi. I mumbled in awe as I stared down from on top of him.

The bear-scorpion had an incredibly tough hide. Neither magic nor steel could

pierce it. Rir and I had encountered one before and all we could do was escape with our lives intact. Lefi, though...

“Eh, this is but a trifle to me.”

Lefi just shrugged. She honestly looked bored. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that these things were weak enough for her to beat with one hand tied behind her back.

Based on what my Demon Eyes had seen, Lefi had created two hand-like objects made of high-density magic that were connected to her *actual* hands. When she’d clapped them together, the magic ones had done the same thing, but right on the enemy’s head. That’d, as you’d expect, cracked its skull open and sprayed brains everywhere, like a whole pomegranate being crushed. It’d been nothing if not horrifically grotesque.

Her power really is immeasurable, huh? If I tried to pull the same shit, first of all, a third of my MP would disappear in just one attempt. Secondly, and most importantly, I wouldn’t be able to maintain enough magical density to crush the enemy. The technique had only worked because her magical power was completely overwhelming. Not to mention that she could fire off those shots one after another.

“I believe you will be able to do this easily enough yourself in a few centuries.”

“Oh, yeah?”

When she said “a few centuries,” my first thought was, “Oh, so I can do it too, then?” Clearly, the woman was a bad influence on me since I no longer thought of time measured in centuries as a big deal.

By the way, my “take Lefi along and make DP” strategy wasn’t all that out there; it still relied on hunting monsters as its base. We attacked certain ones within the dungeon’s territory and made some cold, hard DP off the kills themselves as well as converting the corpses. My usual bread and butter.

Everything was pretty much the same as how I usually did it, the only exception being our opponents this time around. Right now, we were in the western part of the Demonic Forest—the one teeming with the strongest

monsters.

Since the level gap between the monsters I normally hunted and these guys was astronomical, the amount of DP I was raking in was too. Lots more zeros. My temporary measure was producing results that were way, *way* off the charts.

My previous endeavors into the western part of the Forest had been, in a word, unsuccessful. Despite having been as prepared as physically possible to face off against the powerful monsters, despite having given it my all fighting them, I'd damn near met my maker three times. That was that for me, so now, I was extra careful not to come near this area, and my pets were under strict orders to stay away too.

Things were different this time around, though. We had Lefi with us. An ally who could most definitely call herself the strongest being in the Demonic Forest.

My pets and I were using a pretty basic tactic. Me and Rir were a team, and the other four were split up into pairs as well. We'd lure the monsters we targeted within the dungeon's territory, and once they were right where we wanted them, we passed the baton to Lefi, who lay in wait. When it was her turn, she demonstrated the ample power of the Supreme Dragon by finishing off the enemy.

Monsters had two reactions when faced with Lefi's true dragon form. They either ran off immediately, frightened by the tremendous power exuding from her, or they put their guard way up, making it take a little longer to kill them. But for our hunt, Lefi was staying in her human girl form. Plus, because I'd asked her to, she was keeping her aura suppressed. Thanks to that, most monsters couldn't tell how much of a threat she actually posed, so they died like lambs led to the slaughter.

The strategy was working beautifully, if I did say so myself. Not a single monster we'd baited thus far had run away because none of them had picked up on her power even when they'd gotten close to her. *Praise be to the Supreme Dragon.* I would've been boned six ways from Sunday without her.

It actually made me wonder whether I was even needed in all this. But, like, I

was technically the leader of this whole operation. Also, no one but me could command our pets. So, yeah, I was totally required. *I'll take what I can get.*

As an aside, my heavyweight of a weapon, En, wasn't with us because my role this time was to start shit and run away, not fight. That didn't mean I was totally unarmed, though. No, I'd equipped myself with the rebar I'd used for a bit back in my early days here. It was easy to use and perfect for smashing stuff, na mean?

That said, it wasn't regular rebar anymore. I'd made this one out of adamantite, one of this world's rare magical metals. On top of that, I'd had Leila analyze Rir's flexible collar to figure out how it worked, and after she gave me her findings of it having a Flexible sorcerous circuit installed, I'd put the same type of circuit into my new weapon. That little upgrade gave it the power to extend it however far I wanted to, making it kinda like a magic staff.

That's not *all, folks!* I'd also implemented two other circuits into my new and improved rebar: Magical Efficacy Increase: Maximum and Magical Conductivity: High. Leila'd told me about the latter. Both of these made it a whole lot easier to activate magic. In short, I was using a high-tech rebar capable of anything. Granted, it couldn't hold a candle to En in terms of lethality, but its ease of use was nothing to sneeze at.

Wait a second. I just realized, can I still call it rebar when it's actually made out of adamantite? Hmm... Well, "adamantite" is a mouthful, so I'm sticking to "rebar."

"Ah, yes, I have been meaning to tell you. The other pets came not long before you two, and I am pleasantly surprised by their growth. They are quite clever compared to when I last saw them."

"Heh heh heh. I know, right? My pets are just like their master—outstanding in every way."

"Rir is indeed an excellent master."

Yeah, okay, you got me there. She spoke only the truth. As far as the pets' education was concerned, all I did was play with them and fool around, meaning I just got in their way. *Tee hee, silly me.*

“Whew... What a good day. We made *hella* cash.”

I gave a deep, full-body stretch, then flopped backward onto Rir, who was lying down behind me. His fluffy, silky-smooth fur enveloped me. I could feel the warmth of his body too. With my body reclining against my pet, I wiggled my way down him until my butt hit the ground, and there I sat.

“Oho, I have found myself a nice chair.”

“Ngh.”

Lefi’d been watching us, and the minute I settled in, she plunked herself onto my lap and leaned against me.

“I, too, find myself rather tired. I believe all my efforts today warrant a reward. Perhaps whatever sweets I desire when we return?”

“Geh heh heh. As ye wish, guv’nor. Might yer patronage prevail henceforth as well?”

“I find your fawning manner of speech revolting, so you will cease at once.”

I grinned down at Lefi, who stared ominously up at me. Then, I kept talking.

“You know what I wanna do when we get back? Take a nice, long, hot bath. Just submerge myself in the water. And after I finish, sip on some sake and pass out in my futon, pleasantly tipsy.”

“Oho, that is a fine idea. Now that you have announced your plans to me, you will be certain to prepare enough sake for me as well, yes?”

“Ha ha! My lady, if you would be so kind as to join me for a nightcap, then I shall ready as many spirits as your little heart desires!”

After all, it was thanks to Lefi that I even had money to blow on unnecessary expenses like this again. Gobs of it too. What we’d earned today would easily last us at least two months. And now that she’d planted the idea in my head, I wanted to throw a big ol’ party with everyone soon. With juice for the little girl gang, of course!

“Most excellent. Let us hie back to the dungeon, Yuki. Confections, food, a bath, and sake await me.”

“Dang, you sure have a lot waiting for you, huh?”

She hopped up from my lap and I stood up too, moving away from Rir.

“All righty, time to go home, then. And a massive thanks to all of you. I’ll see you guys again soon, so when I do, let’s all go on a walk or something. Sound good?”

My pets responded affirmatively in their unique animal cries. I patted each of the cuties vigorously and affectionately, showing my appreciation for their efforts. Then, Lefi and I headed home.

“Honeys, we’re hooome!”

“We have returned.”

I opened the door in the cave, and Lefi and I stepped into the real throne room together, only to find...

“Welcome home, darling!”

...Lew and Nell calling out to me in an incredibly flirty tone. Like, sentence-ends-with-a-little-heart-symbol flirty. They were both posing super weirdly and followed up their greeting by blowing a kiss at me.

“Ahhh, I’m starving. Leila, what’s for dinner?”

“I made doria tonight, sir.”

“Ooh, doria. Nice. I bet it’s gonna be delicious.”

“M-My lord, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t ignore us!”

Just as I was about to head into the kitchen, where Leila was, Lew rushed toward me, blocking my path. She grabbed my shoulders to stop me completely.

“Don’t you have any thoughts on what we just did?! A reaction?! Anything?! To your lovely, gorgeous wives posing so enchantingly for the sake of their husband?!”

“Uhhh... I just couldn’t bear to watch any longer.”

“Because we affected you that much, right?! Is that why?!”

More like it was just too painful to look at. The secondhand embarrassment would've done me in. A sidelong glance at Nell showed me that she'd lost the battle with her own embarrassment. She was crouched on the ground, red all the way to her ears, face buried in her hands.

Based on her reaction, I had a feeling that Lew'd coerced her into the display. I wasn't surprised, considering her expression when she'd blown me the kiss earlier. It'd been a look that said she'd broken through the limits of her own shyness.

"First things first, where the heck did you even learn that?"

"From watching you play with Iluna and the others, my lord. Whenever they say that to you, you always grin like a maniac, so I figured it'd make you happy if we did it too."

"...There's a lot to unpack here, but let me start off with this: you're making it sound like I'm forcing the kiddos to say some disturbing shit because I'm a turbo-freak who likes little girls in a bad way, so don't ever say something like that again."

"Whaaat...?"

"Ay yo, why the hell do you look so genuinely shocked by what I just said?"

I just play house with them, dammit. It's just *playing house.* I'd only taught them to say stuff like that because they'd wanted to learn the right way to play house.

Okay, fine, I wouldn't deny it made me smile when the little girls greeted me with words like, "Welcome home, darling!" But any other dumbass would be happy hearing that and not give it a second thought too. Hence, I for sure didn't have any abnormal fetishes. No way, no how, not in any reality.

Then, Nell, still crouching and beet-red, looked up at me.

"Ughhh... Darn you, Lew! I knew this would happen! The two of us doing that only makes things weird and uncomfortable! I *told* you it wouldn't work with us because of Mr. Yuki's unique penchant for little ones!"

"No, no, no. You're wrong, Nell. My lord's just hiding his embarrassment, is

all. I guarantee you that he's actually grinning like a fool inside. I *know* he is. He just can't hide it all that well when Iluna and the other little girls do the same thing. I'm sure of it."

"Please, for the love of all that is good in this world, will you ladies kindly stop talking about me like it's a fact that I have a 'unique penchant'?"

Too bad for me, Lefi neatly inserted herself into their conversation like my words hadn't filtered into her head even a little bit.

"Lew... You have lost your mind."

"Can you blame me? I mean, my lord is my lord in more ways than one now. Not to mention that you both acknowledged me as his wife too at the Council meeting. It made me incredibly happy, so I decided I would do whatever I could to please my lord in my own way!"

"What council?"

"Nothing you need to know about, my lord!"

Lew replied with a shy smile, squirming restlessly. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I did find her cute.

One thing I'd say about Lew was that her behavior hadn't changed even after we'd gotten married. As always, she continued to put on her uniform and do her job as one of the family's maids, helping Leila with the chores.

The only thing different now was that our relationship had gone from "maid and master" to "wife and husband." That had to have been the biggest change, and maybe it was responsible for some of the things she'd been doing lately. Her attempts to make me happy seemed to be a result of her adhering to her personal vision of an ideal life, because as it turned out, she had a really girly side to her and had always dreamed of being a bride. So, with the dream a reality now, she'd apparently decided to try out all sorts of ideas she'd come up with.

To be clear, I appreciated what she was doing for me. She was definitely cute, no doubt about it. But, well, having learned more about her recently, I couldn't deny that she was a little unhinged too. It made her a nightmare for Nell, who had a hard time telling people no. *I'll tease her about this later, when she's*

forgotten all about it.

“Hey, Lady Lefi, do it with us! Bewitch my lord!”

“Guh. N-No, um...I will refrain.”

“Nooo! Don’t be like that, Lady Lefi! Come on! Join us!”

“Y’know, I think I kinda wanna see this now.”

“Y-You as well, Yuki?!”

I mean, why wouldn’t I? The second I tried imagining Lefi in a killer seductive pose, I realized it’d be totally worth seeing in real life. And when she *did* do it, I wanted to point at her, shout “That ain’t right! Don’t quit your day job!” and burst out laughing.

“See?! My lord said so himself! Here’s your chance to challenge yourself! I know he’ll be delighted if you do it!”

“B-But...”

Lew’s encouragement only made Lefi even more reluctant. In a last-ditch effort to get someone to rescue her, she faced Nell, who was still squatting.

“N-Nell! What say you?! As a victim of Lew’s coercion, surely you find that such an act ultimately serves no purpose, yes? Do you not think it a meaningless exercise?”

“I... I’m basically dying of embarrassment here. I doubt I’ll be able to ever live it down. So I think it’s only fair that you suffer the weight of this shame, Lefi.”

“You would take out your anger on me?!”

The silver-haired girl’s jaw dropped in astonishment as Nell not only snubbed her, but betrayed her as well.

“Come ooon, Lefi. Do iiit.”

“Let’s do it, Lady Lefi.”

Lew and I pestered her incessantly, grabbing at her dress and shaking it every which way. After a while, she suddenly spoke recklessly, clearly fed up with our badgering.

“Grr... F-Fine! I understand! I merely have to do it, so do it I will! I have had enough of you two bedeviling me!”

Aggravated, Lefi shook us off and stepped away. She took a deep breath—or at least that was what it looked like to me—then abruptly spun around to face me again and...

“W-Welcome home...d-darling!”

...blew a kiss at me, striking a seductive pose to tie it all together.



“Wowzers.”

That word burst out of me inadvertently.

“Wh-What was that?! It does not become me after all! I-I was a f-fool to let you imbeciles convince me otherwise!”

“No...uhhh...”

I couldn’t handle looking at Lefi, who sulked as she blushed fiercely. So instead, I did the super mature thing and stared off into the distance.

Holy schnikes. God’s honest truth, she’d been insanely cute like that. I’d taken an arrow straight through the heart watching her, especially when she’d said “darling” with her shy, upturned gaze. And then, my aforementioned heart almost blasted right out of my chest at the kiss she blew.

This little jerk who normally marched to the beat of her own drum had suddenly transformed into an extremely feminine seductress, her cheeks beautifully pink. That gulf in her personality really, and I mean *really*, did things to me. I didn’t think anything could beat it. *Long live gap moe.*

“N-No surprise to see Lady Lefi being the first of us to snare my lord’s heart like this. Just more proof of her power. I definitely underestimated her...”

“A-Ah ha ha... Th-That was certainly a formidable display. Despite being a woman myself, I must admit that even I’m feeling something.”

Lew and Nell seemed to be on the same wavelength as me, though their reactions were nowhere near the same. While Lew trembled in fear of Lefi’s talents, Nell stared at her with slightly scary eyes, her cheeks flushed from something other than bashfulness this time. Lew was Lew, so whatever. But Nell... *Hey, uh, N-Nell? A-Are you actually playing for* both *teams?*

Just then, Leila popped in from the kitchen to see how we were doing, thankfully breaking the overpowering spell Lefi had cast on the three of us.

“Everyone, dinner’s almost readyyy. Lew, I believe I requested your assistance, hm?”

“Eep! Y-Yes, you did. I’ll be right there! See you all in a bit!”

Lew was the first to return to her senses. She rushed into the kitchen to do Leila’s bidding and disappeared.

“So, um...dinner. Right. I’ll head to the castle and bring the children back, then. Mr. Yuki, I’ll leave you to handle Lefi’s pouting. I’m sure you can cheer her up, yeah?”

“Y-Yup. You got it.”

That was when I realized I’d been in a daze this whole time, slack-jawed and practically drooling. In short, an expression no one should ever let other people see. I snapped out of it and quickly made myself look presentable again. While I did that, Nell turned the handle of the connecting door like a pro, heading off to call Iluna and the others in for dinner.

Damn, she’s been corrupted by life in the dungeon too, huh? I can’t decide if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. I sincerely wished that she and she alone would stay just the way she was—a cool hero—and not end up being influenced by the idiots around her.

And then there were two. Lefi, her face turned away as she pouted and ignored my very existence, and me, ya boy. I silently approached her from behind and gently placed my hands on her shoulders.

“Lefi?”

“...What?”

“Will you put on a maid uniform and do that again?”

“I will not even *consider* it!!!”

It was the strongest rejection she’d dealt me since we’d first met. *Fatality.*

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“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived an old man and an old woman. Every day, when the old man woke up in the morning, he would say to her, ‘I love you, wife,’ before heading off into the mountains to cut grass. The old woman would giggle and reply, ‘I love you too,’ then go to the river to do laundry.”

“Ooh! They’re so lovey-dovey! The lovey-dovey grandpa and grandma!”

“They are happy! The happy grandpa and grandma!”

“Yes... A nice couple.”

The little girls expressed their opinions one by one. Even the wraith sisters, who floated cheerfully above their heads, seemed deeply fascinated by Yuki’s folktale.

“That day, too, the old man went to the mountains to cut grass, and the old woman went to the river to do some laundry.”

At that point, Iluna raised her hand.

“Yukiki! I have a question!”

“What is it, Miss Iluna?”

“What does it mean to ‘cut grass in the mountains’?! What kind of job is it?!”

“Naturally, it means— Wait, cutting grass in the mountain? Did I really say that? I sure did, huh? Welp. What, exactly, does this old man cut in the mountains for, though? He’s doing it every day, right? But how is he making money off it? Ah, crap. I feel like I just stumbled into one heck of a puzzle...”

Yuki muttered to himself for a few minutes, trying to untangle the dilemma he’d created for himself. Then, with a strident “Ahem!” he cleared his throat and continued.

“Uhhh, cutting grass is exactly what it sounds like. Basically, the old man would cut grass in the mountains to clean up the environment and make it look pretty.”

“Oh, I see! Then the grandpa’s job was to clean, right?!”

“Correct, Miss Iluna. Excellent observation.”

Nell had been listening to his folktale from nearby. She turned to Lefi, who sat next to her, and questioned her.

“Is it me, or did Mr. Yuki just completely pull the wool over their eyes?”

“He does that frequently. Sometimes, the girls hone in on the most unexpected kernels in his stories. In response, he comes up with, shall we say, *interesting* solutions such as that to placate them *and* prevent them from asking further, more complex questions.”

“Aha. Now I understand.”

“You two over there. Please keep quiet while the story unfolds.”

Yuki coughed imperiously again, composed himself, and picked up the tale where he’d left off.

“That day, too, the old man cut grass in the mountains and the old woman did a load of laundry at the river. But then, something unusual occurred. The woman encountered a giant peach floating and tumbling down the river.”

“Master, pick me!”

This time, Shii raised her hand.

“What is it, Miss Shii?”

“I just wanted to raise my hand! I don’t really have a question!”

“I see. Well, Miss Shii, henceforth, please only raise your hand when you have a question.”

“Sorry!”

Yuki wasn’t particularly perturbed at being interrupted again because it happened quite a lot. He merely resumed telling the story to his captive audience.

“The old woman exclaimed, ‘Oh my! This peach looks sweet and delicious. Upsy-daisy!’ She demonstrated superhuman strength by lifting the giant peach and placing it in the tub containing the laundry. Then, she carried it home.”

“Is that old woman Lady Lefi, my lord?”

“I will deal with you later, Lew. Mark my words.”

“Ah ha ha...”

Nell laughed awkwardly at Lew and Lefi’s exchange.

“The old man returned home some time after his wife. He saw the giant peach and— Oho! Much obliged, Miss Rui.”

Rui, the middle wraith triplet, used her illusion magic to create a peach. Yuki pointed at it and continued speaking.

“Yes, he saw the giant peach that was exactly this size. He saw it and was stunned in amazement. His surprise was so great he almost threw out his back, which would have been quite the problem considering that he had a bad back. ‘Dear wife, am I ever flabbergasted! What an enormous, scrumptious-looking peach this is!’ He was overjoyed by her discovery. The old woman beamed in delight at her husband’s reaction. Their happiness overflowed.”

“Sooo much happiness!”

“I love it!”

“It suddenly feels like the old man has become youthful, like an energetic young man, hm?”

“I can’t help but think the old man and old woman are modeled after my lord and Lady Lefi.”

“I agree with you. It makes me a tiny bit jealous whenever Mr. Yuki uses Lefi in his stories like this.”

“S-Silence, all of you.”

Slightly embarrassed, Lefi shushed Lew and Nell. Yuki heard the trio’s conversation, of course, but he could easily imagine him being the butt of their jokes in the very near future if he interjected. As such, he made the wise decision to ignore them.

“Yes, indeed, they were happy. Yet their happiness didn’t end there. When they decided it was time to eat the peach, the old woman once more exhibited her superhuman strength. With a ‘Hi-yah!’ she split the giant peach clean into two with a knifehand strike. Much to their surprise, the couple found a baby inside. ‘Goo goo! Ga ga!’”

“Master...”

En spoke softly, timidly raising her hand.

“What is it, Miss En?”

“The knifehand strike... It didn’t hurt the baby?”

“Nope. Not even a little. The old lady was an expert, you see. Halfway through her swing, she sensed the presence of a living organism, and skillfully avoided

the baby when she split the peach in half.”

“Good... I’m glad she’s an expert.”

“Can *I* say something at this point?”

“He will pretend not to hear you, Nell, so I suggest you save yourself the trouble.”

“She’s right. You need to wait for the right moment to deliver your punch line. That’s what I learned from my lord.”

“O-Oh, I see. I guess I’ll wait, then.”

“And so, they named the newborn baby Peach Boy. They raised him lovingly, and when he was all grown up, Peach Boy, the old man, and the old woman spent every day joyfully. They would be together for eternity. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.”

“The story’s over! An ending with lots of happiness!”

“I know what that’s called! A happy ending!”

“Yes... It was a good story.”

“Wait, it’s over? Well, that folktale progressed quite quickly.”

“Because it’s not the real ending. I’ve listened to my lord tell this tale several times before and that’s not how it ends. There should be more.”

“Lew is correct. I believe he ended the tale there as it would grow dark were he to continue telling it. He sometimes takes strong measures like this when necessary.”

Then, Iluna spoke, a worried look on her face.

“But, Yukiki...that ending means the bad ogres haven’t been defeated yet.”

“Ya know what? You’re totally right. The gang of evil ogres *hasn’t* been defeated yet. At this rate, the death and destruction will be tremendous. I ask you this, then: who will defeat them?”

“Me!”

“Me too!”

“Yes... I’ll fight as well.”

The three little girls jumped up and waved their hands energetically. They were joined by the wraith sisters, who were bouncing in the air. Though they couldn’t talk, they declared their intentions enthusiastically by squeezing their tiny fists and flexing their wee biceps.

“Heh. Well done answering the call to action, you courageous warriors. But are you all truly capable of besting the group of evil ogres? Because who stands at the top of the evil ogre organization but yours truly?! Yes, it is I, Ogre King Yuki! And his subordinates Ogre Lefi and Ogre Lew! With our powers combined, we are invincible against all enemies! Hey. You two. Act like ogres.”

“Gwaaah ha ha ha! I am Ogre King Yuki’s right hand, Supreme Ogre Lefisios! I aim to overthrow the one above me if ever given the chance to do so!”

“Heeeh heh heh heh. I am Ogre King Yuki’s left hand, Supreme Ogre Lew! I am to laze around if ever given the chance to do so!”

“Wow, you two seem quite used to this...”

Nell smiled ruefully as she watched Lefi and Lew go along with Yuki’s command. They had taken up daunting stances and were cackling evilly like ogres would.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk! Unfortunately for you, we have Hero of Justice Nellie on our side! And justice will win in the end!”

“Huh? Oh, uh, m-me?”

“Nellie! Do a pose!”

“R-Right, got it. I-I am the Hero of Justice! I will not yield to evil!”

Completely at sea, Nell did her best to play her part, her cheeks slightly red. She jabbed her finger aggressively at the evil ogre cabal.

“Hmm. You’re obviously not used to this sort of game, but it’s cute how you’re trying so hard. I’d say that earns you a passing grade.”

“What?! No fair! That’s so not fair, Nell!”

“Lew is correct! Have you any idea of the bitterness and despair the two of us

have experienced, forced by this imbecile to take part in these charades countless times over?!”

“Um, well...why complain to *me*, though? It’s not like *I* can do anything about it. Besides, despite your complaints, you both seemed quite invested...”

Thus, the Great Peach Boy War erupted. To no one’s surprise, it ended rather quickly—just like many of their other battles—when Leila called out, “Time to eat, everyone!”

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“Yummm! That was delicious, Yukiki! Thank you!”

“No worries. Glad you liked it.”

I ruffled Iluna’s hair as she beamed up at me. Blood dripped from the corners of her mouth.

“You know, I was absolutely stunned the first time I saw her do that. But I guess I knew that she, like everyone else here, is a nonhuman, didn’t I?”

Nell smiled wryly after watching the process of Iluna drinking my blood from beginning to end.

“It can be hard to remember, considering that Iluna looks the most like a human out of all of us. Hey, what about me? Gun to your head, would you say I look more human than anything?”

“Your features are definitely unusual, but there *are* humans with hair and eyes like yours, so I’d say so, yes. As long as you don’t reveal your wings, you can pass for a human.”

She chuckled softly before directing her attention toward the rest of my family. The expression on her face was both pensive and emotional. There was Leila, who was reading a book I’d bought for her as a souvenir from the demon world; Lefi and Lew, who were in the middle of a fierce game of Othello; and En, who was sitting next to the combatants and observing their match closely, deeply intrigued by it. *Or maybe she’s just waiting till it’s her turn at the board.*

“Another thing I find very curious. Aside from the wraith sisters, no one here is of the same race, are they?”

“Huh... I never noticed that, but you’re right.”

“Heh, glad to be of help. Still, it’s extremely unusual for individuals of such disparate races to be gathered in one place. In fact, I’d say it’s quite rare, if not unheard of. And humans are especially exclusionary; they have very little tolerance for other species.”

“Which is really too bad. If they were all as chill as you, humans would have a much better time.”

“Goodness, what an awful way to describe me!”

“Relax. It’s a compliment.”

I snickered and shrugged my shoulders at Nell as she puffed her cheeks out in annoyance. While she and I chatted, I felt someone tug on the hem of my shirt.

“Master. Hey, Master.”

I looked down to find that Shii was the culprit. She was well-versed in speech by now, with only occasional fumbles or pauses when she couldn’t think of a word.

“Oh, hey, Shii. What’s up?”

“I wanna try your bwood too!”

“Bwood”? Oh, blood*. Wait, what? Blood? Did she say “blood”?*

“Whoa, jeez, *that* came outta nowhere. I don’t think it’ll taste good, though, kiddo.”

“Nooo! Iluna said it’s yummy! So your bwood *must* be yummy, Master.”

Shii used her chin to point at Iluna, and the little vampire girl nodded cheerfully.

“Yup! Your blood is the best! It’s even more delicious than the juice with the bubbles!”

“The juice with the bubbles” she was referring to was soda. I bought it for the kids sometimes because it made them insanely happy. And hearing Iluna say that my blood tasted even better felt kinda weird. It wasn’t a *bad* weird, though. Then again, should I really have been all that pleased about it since my

blood was being compared to *soda*?

"I-I guess it's all right. Iluna, you mind switching places with Shii?"

"Okay!"

Iluna hopped off my lap and Shii climbed on.

"Thank you, Master. So, I can drink?"

She buried her face in my neck, putting her mouth on the wounds Iluna's fangs had left behind, which were still oozing blood. Her touch felt refreshingly cool and pleasant. As I watched, my red blood started coursing through her pale blue, semitransparent body.

I... I didn't really know how to describe the sight. All I could say was that it was...sensual. After a year of having Iluna suck my blood, I thought I was used to the experience. But actually *seeing* my blood become a part of Shii made me feel some type of way. Honestly, it was bad for my heart.

Finally, satisfied after drinking for a while, Shii lifted her head from my neck.

"Yummm! That was tasty! As good as three-star restaunt!"

"Too bad you've never been to a three-star restaurant."

The hell? Where in the world did these kids learn all this weird shit? Who on Satan's red earth taught them this crap? Oh, wait, that was me. I did this.

"You're not pulling my leg, though, right? You can tell me the truth. No need to hold back on my account."

"Nooo! I'm defitely telling the truth! The bubbly juice is delicious, but...but your bwood is yummy too, Master!"

"Riiight?!"

Iluna nodded her head vigorously, looking glad that Shii felt the same way she did. *Well, as long as they're happy, that's all that matters.*

"Um, Mr. Yuki? W-Would you mind if I-I sampled your blood as well?"

"Wh-What? Y-You wanna *what*? *You* too?"

Absolutely freaking flabbergasted, I blurted those words at Nell, who for

whatever reason seemed to have been influenced by Shii's boldness. She fidgeted restlessly as she started talking again, like maybe she understood how completeley absurd her request was.

"W-Well, you see...I-I can't help but be curious, is all. Especially when both Iluna and Shii speak so highly of it. It just makes me wonder if your blood is really that delicious."

"But it's blood. *Blood*, Nell. Normal blood."

"Or maybe it isn't. Have you ever considered the notion? You *are* a demon lord, Mr. Yuki."

I really didn't think me being a demon lord was relevant here. Although my magical energy *could* have had something to do with it. Monster meat was supposedly delicious because of how rich monsters were in mana, and I had a buttload of magic compared to your average Joe, so it was entirely possible that the stuff was all up in my blood too.

"Which is why you can think of this as...an investigation! Yes, that's it! And in order to further my investigation, I wish to drink your blood, Mr. Yuki!"

"An investigation, huh...? Yeah, all right, fine."

I agreed with a bemused smile, and Shii beamed at Nell.

"Okay! Now it's your turn, Nellie!"

"Thank you, Shii."

The pale blue little girl hopped off my lap and Nell took her place, straddling me before pressing her face against my nape. Our position naturally forced her into hugging me or falling off, so she wrapped her arms around my back. Her silky hair tickled my cheek.

Her body felt way different than the two little girls' had. Though she was slender, her frame was most definitely a woman's. The heat of her skin warmed mine where we touched. And then, her dainty tongue slid down my neck. I shuddered at the indescribable pleasure racing down my spine. *Shit. Th-This is way worse than when Iluna and Shii were drinking my blood.*

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I was feeling a *lot* of things right now. All sorts of

emotions surged within me, joined by an intense, burning desire to push her down and have my way with her.

No. I couldn't. I mean, for one thing, we weren't technically in an official romantic relationship yet. Then again, we already knew that our end goal was marriage, so was it actually okay to do the deed?

No. No, no, no. I can't. What the hell am I doing, losing my mind like this? Calm down, asshole. The little girls are still here. No way I can do that *in front of them. They'll be traumatized.*

There I was, waging a violent internal struggle, when I decided to speak up before I lost the battle to my carnal desire.

"N-Nell, y-you're almost d-done, right? That should be m-more than enough to finish your investigation."

"Mmm... But lying here in your arms like this, cocooned by your scent... It feels amazing, Mr. Yuki."

Goddammit, girl, now's a bad *time to say something like that. She's a natural at this, isn't she? A natural sneaky little vixen.* Hell, the only reason she could even say such a thing was because she was blissfully unaware of the tempest raging within me.

"D-Damn you, woman... If I wasn't the most gentlemanly of gentlemen, you would've been ravished by now."

I deliberately tried to make light of the situation with my playful response, but Nell didn't.

"Well...as long as it's you, Mr. Yuki...I wouldn't mind?"

She whispered those words ever so sweetly into my ear.

I... What? Huh? Wait, what*?* Her maddeningly honeyed voice. Her eyes clouded with emotion. Was she serious? Was she dead fucking serious? I could unleash the emotions whirling inside me?

At some point, Nell had stopped lapping at my blood. Now, she was peering directly into my face. My eyes met her glittering ones. Her cheeks were red and her breathing was choppy. We stared at each other for what felt like forever

before she slowly closed her eyes and leaned toward me, her pale pink lips drawing near. I unconsciously started leaning toward her too, completely at her mercy.

“Aaahem!!!”

A particularly strident cough abruptly forced us to our senses. Both of us were immediately and unpleasantly jolted back to reality. We simultaneously jerked around to find the source of the voice.

“I...will not say you cannot do such things.”

There, we found Lefi, arms folded, scowling reproachfully at us. And behind her were Lew and En, copying her pose.

“Especially in light of the fact that I was the one who encouraged your relationship in the first place. Not to mention that you will soon enough be mates regardless, so there will come a day when you can engage in such *activities*. It is only natural for a married couple.”

Nell and I said nothing, and Lefi stared down at us before she continued speaking.

“*However*. I have strong reservations about conducting oneself so unashamedly in broad daylight. What say you? Do you not concur that you should at the very least choose another, more private location?”

“W-We concur...” we replied in unison.

“Excellent. Then do be careful henceforth.”

With that parting remark, Lefi took Lew and En back to the Othello board.

“Hey, Nell?”

“Y-Yes?”

“How did my blood taste?”

“Oh, r-right, s-sorry. Well, I don’t know. I forgot myself in your scent— No, not that! I, um, since I’m human, I really don’t know what makes blood delicious, so I can’t comment.”

“Welp... All I can say is that you sure have become one of us.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

That there’s something different about you. Something’s slightly off, just like with the rest of us.

But I didn’t say that out loud. Instead, I huffed out a laugh and sidestepped the question entirely as Nell stared at me in confusion, her cheeks still red.

“Aaaaarrrrrggghgghhhh!!!”

Alone now, Nell writhed dramatically on top of the carpet.

“I-I-I— Wh-What did I— A-A-And the th-things I said...!”

The intense act in which she and this labyrinth’s master, Demon Lord Yuki, had starred played over and over again in her mind. His hot breaths stroking her skin. The runaway pounding of her heart as they gazed into each other’s eyes. Every moment, every sensation was indelibly carved into her body. Even now, she felt it all keenly because the heat in her body had yet to abate. Arousal burned restlessly within her.

“I have no doubt whatsoever that the blame lies with Mr. Yuki’s blood! There’s absolutely no way his blood is normal!”

She otherwise would have never acted so outrageously in front of the others. It was pure curiosity that had driven her to taste his blood, but once she had done so, a strangely pleasant feeling had enveloped her, steadily drowning her in ecstasy. And by the time she had come to her senses, it was much too late.

It had almost felt like being drunk. Yes, that was it. His blood had cast her into a state of light intoxication, blurring the boundaries of her reason, exposing her baser instincts.

“Aaarrrggghhh! How humiliating!”

Lefi’s rebuke some time ago had returned her to the real world. Now that she was calm and composed again, she absolutely couldn’t bring herself to look anyone in the eye in the near future. She was, of course, ashamed of her wild behavior while in full view of everyone, but the worst part of it was knowing what her instincts craved from him and having given voice to the thought. She

was so embarrassed that she wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

I bet my face is so flushed right now that anyone could tell what I'm thinking. Luckily for her, none of the other residents were with her right now, in a room Yuki had allotted just for her in this place he had designed for everyone but that saw very little use. She was, thankfully, being left all alone, so she could castigate herself endlessly for her shameful behavior.

"But...Mr. Yuki's scent was wonderful," Nell murmured to herself, still lying on the carpet.

During training, she had crossed swords with men many times. What had happened earlier, however, was the first time in her life she had truly experienced the creature known as a man, and up close to boot. Naturally, up until then, she had never locked eyes with a man in such a manner nor been embraced so tightly.

Nell's father had passed away before she was born, leaving her mother to raise her all alone. Because she wasn't used to these specimens known as men, the earlier event had been a powerfully intense experience for her.

"...Oh."

She spotted red staining her clothes.

"This...is Mr. Yuki's blood. How did it get on me?"

It must have spilled while she'd been licking at it. Upon closer inspection, she realized that it was quite sticky, which meant she would have to scrub hard when she washed her clothes to get it out.

Nell stared at the stain for some time. Then, abruptly, she lifted the fabric to her nose.

"It smells like him..."

The smell of his blood. Her nose twitched as she deeply inhaled his lingering scent.

"Heh heh heh... Truly, it's a wonderful aroma."

A small part of her was fully aware of her unsettling behavior, but she was alone here. No one would witness it. *So there's nothing to worry about*, she

thought. Her face relaxed. And two sharp knocks sounded on her door before it was unceremoniously thrown open.

“Uhhh, Miss Nell? Um, dinner’s about to be read—”

Who would enter her room but the very same young man currently on her mind.

“...Pardon the intrusion. Don’t let me interrupt you. Please take care.”

“‘Interrupt’?! ‘Take care’?!”

He slowly, cautiously started closing the door, but Nell flew toward it in a panic. Jerking it open again, she rushed to explain herself.

“W-Wait, please! This— This is a misunderstanding! Whatever you’re thinking right now, Mr. Yuki, it’s wrong! You definitely have the wrong idea!”

“Hey, don’t worry about me, really. I mean...even if you have a, uh, a fetish for smelling your clothes, I’m cool with it. I accept everything about you.”

“But you don’t need to accept something like that! Because it’s a misunderstanding! I was just sniffing what remained of your scen— Ahhh! What in the world am I even saying?!”

The moment she shrieked in aggravated confusion and let those words slip, the young man’s expression transformed. He began grinning wickedly, his concern replaced with slyness. When she saw his face, Nell finally realized that she’d been had.

“Y-Y-You were teasing me, Mr. Yuki?!”

“More like you were self-destructing and I just decided to go along for the ride.”

Goodness, he’s right! She staggered a few steps backward at his blunt but entirely reasonable rebuttal. Then, she slowly slumped to the floor and buried her head in her hands, hiding her face.

“Ughhh... All I’ve been doing lately is making a fool of myself like this. Death is my only option at this point.”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t worry, I’ll take care of your corpse.”

The young man howled with laughter after his snarky reply. Once his chuckles subsided, he leaned down to the cowering girl, slid his arms around her body, and stood up in one fell swoop, carrying her like a princess.

“Wh-Wh-What are you doing?! This is so sudden!”

“I told you, dinner’s about to be ready. So, I’m taking you with me.”

“I-In that case, I’ll walk!”

“No way. If I leave you alone now, there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that you show up of your own free will. Which is why you should hush and let me carry you.”

He completely ignored her protests, stepping out of her room and into the hallway while still holding her. Cradled in his arms, she enjoyed the warmth of his skin on hers. She breathed in his unique scent, which was arguably the cause of her current, borderline insensate condition. A scent that gave her an overwhelming sense of safety.

“...Darn you.”

A storm of emotions raged within her chest, but all Nell could muster were those two mumbled words. She finally stopped resisting and relaxed her body in his hold. Docile now, she let herself be comforted by the swaying rhythm of his gait.

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That day, Shii was in an excellent mood.

“Oh? What’s this? You look really happy for some reason today, Shii.”

“Yup! I’m having lotsa fun, so I’m happy!” Shii replied to Yuki, beaming.

“Oh, yeah? That’s good, then.”

He tilted his head, puzzled by her response. A moment later, he decided that there was no need to investigate the matter more deeply, so he returned to his activity, which involved the creation of something or other. He wasn’t doing anything particularly special, though. It was just another day in the real throne room.

Leila, Lew, and Nell were folding the laundry while Lefi attempted to help them. Her muttered growls indicated her struggles with the task. By this point in time, Lew had become quite accustomed to the chore and thus was proudly showing Lefi the proper way to fold. Leila and Nell watched them with warm, amused eyes. En sat next to Yuki, absentmindedly observing him at work, and Iluna was currently taking a nap in Leila and Lew’s bedroom.

Until a short while ago, Iluna had been playing in the meadow area with En, Shii, and the wraith triplets, Rei, Rui, and Roh. However, Iluna possessed a normal child’s stamina because she was merely a humanoid individual. In contrast, her playmates were a sword, a slime, and wraiths, respectively. As such, around midafternoon, she would often go down for a nap. In anticipation of just such an event, Leila always made sure to prepare a futon in her bedroom ahead of time.

It was another ordinary day, but Shii loved these days very much.

“Hell yeah! I did it!”

Yuki suddenly jumped up with a shout, raising his creation high into the air. He was always extremely excitable whenever he toiled away at one of his creations, most likely because he enjoyed the process itself.

“Master...what is that?”

“I’m glad you ask, En! I call this ‘Magical Paper Sumo’!”

“Wow...”

En clearly had no idea what he meant, but she knew it must have been something amazing if Yuki said so. That was why she clapped, her expression admiring.

“Hmph. I see you have again crafted something foolish.”

“Hah! I’ll make you eat those words! Just watch!”

Her fierce battle to fold the laundry concluded, Lefi stared in exasperation at Yuki. He wasn’t deterred, though, because he placed his creation on the level surface of the floor, looking supremely confident.

“Listen up, people. This is the arena, and you put two paper playing pieces on top of it.”

“What are those apparitions? They are ghastly.”

“Uh, it’s *clearly* Rir. Just look at his tail.”

“Hmm... You’re right, Master. It’s Rir.”

“Forgive me, but I do not see the resemblance whatsoever. Nell, what are your thoughts on the matter?”

“Huh? Oh, well, um... I-I’m not sure I see it either. Honestly, I thought it was a monster from the Demonic Forest...”

At first glance, Shii had wondered if the piece might not be Rir, but she felt no need to comment. She simply watched everyone with a cheerful smile.

“Well, whatever. Not a big deal and not the point. Okay, so, En. Can you put both of your hands right here?”

“Okay...”

Following his instructions, the sword girl placed her hands on the sides of the platform the pieces were on.

“Now, pour your magic into it. Like this, from the side of the stage to the top.”

En nodded silently, then began to manipulate her magic. While everyone watched, the piece on her side of the platform began to move without anyone actually touching it.

“Ah...! It moved!”

The game piece moved haltingly, but it moved nonetheless. The sight pleased En, who began playing in earnest.

“So, Yuki. What, ultimately, is this contraption?”

“What, it isn’t obvious? You just pour your magic into the board from the sides and make the pieces move.”

“And that is its only purpose?”

“Yeah.”

“...”

Yuki was unperturbed by Lefi’s silence. He placed both hands on the sides of the platform facing him and worked his magic into the arena to move his piece, which stood opposite En’s.

“Maaan, you don’t even *know* how hard I worked on this. I had to figure out how to apply the circuit part of sorcerous circuits to create a mechanism that would bring the magic poured in from the side up to the top. Then, I had to make the paper sensitive to magic. There’s a bit of a trick to getting it to react to magic, but once you figure it out, you can move your piece however you want. Pretty cool, right? Way better than just normal paper sumo because it makes your piece a lot more mobile, meaning it’s a ton more competitive!”

“You know, Yuki, I sometimes wonder if you are truly intelligent or spectacularly dim.”

“Hah. Does my genius make you quiver in awe? As you can see, my talent goes way beyond just making weapons. All right, En, I challenge you! We use our magic to move our pieces. Whoever pushes the opponent’s piece off the stage wins!”

“I...won’t lose.”

“Let’s do this, Rir! Show her your true power!”

“My Rir...is stronger.”

“Mwa ha ha! What nonsense! I’m this game’s creator, which means I know

how it works better than anyone else! In short, in a battle of Rir against Rir, mine will— Whaaat?! You dodged my Rir just as I was about to push yours off?!”

“Don’t...underestimate me.”

“Well, I’m not done yet! The battle has only just begun! Because this Magical Paper Sumo’s selling point is the pieces’ tricky movements! Watch as my Rir does— Bwaaah?! I-It’s flying?!”

“Tsk, tsk, Master... Not good enough.”

A little over a minute later, one of the game pieces fell off the platform.

“H-How could I lose to someone who’s never played before?!”

“V...is for victory.”

En was the winner. She triumphantly held her fingers up in a V shape at Yuki, who had taken up a dramatic pose on all fours. Nell spoke from near them, finding herself somewhat curious about the game after having watched them play.

“Wooow. Quite a fascinating game despite its simplicity. May I have a turn too?”

“Yeah, sure. This loser will keep his trap shut and graciously exit the field.”

“Better luck...next time, Master.”

“Ha. You and En are cut from the same cloth when it comes to matches like these, Mr. Yuki.” Nell smiled ruefully, then switched places with Yuki to start her match against En. “W-Wait, what? N-No! Not that way! Stop it!”

Much to her chagrin, she couldn’t control her piece very well. It faced in an entirely wrong direction and began jumping in place.

“You stink...”

“Gah...I lost. This is even more difficult than I anticipated since my piece won’t move the way I want it to. But it’s actually a lot of fun.”

“Riiight?”

“Hmm... Is it truly so difficult?” Lefi commented skeptically.

“Why don’t you try it out for yourself? En aside, there’s no way you’ll win against me, Lefi.”

“Is that right? Fine, then. I am not one to ignore such grandiose words. Prepare to taste humiliation at my hands.”

This time, Yuki and Lefi switched places with Nell and En, taking up their positions at the board.

“Attack, Rir! Stomp her piece into dust!”

“Hmph! Nonsense! Rir, we shall beat this louse at his own game— Whaaat?! H-Halt! Wh-Why is it turning in the opposite direction?!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! You’re full of openings, ya ding-dong!”

The piece Yuki controlled moved like it was alive and charged headfirst at Lefi’s piece, pushing it off the platform. Victory belonged to him.

“Whale, whale, whale. Pretty poor showing for someone who underestimated me, eh?”

Yuki taunted Lefi, smirking broadly. He was clearly enjoying himself at her expense. For as much as he looked like he was having fun whenever he was creating something, Shii knew how much more cheerful his expression was when he provoked or ridiculed the silver-haired girl. Out of everyone in this dungeon, they were the closest to one another, and that made her a little bit envious.

Shii loved her master because he was kind and always made things fun for everyone with a smile on his face. Yet she had realized some time ago that he seemed to enjoy himself the most on those occasions he was with Lefi. She had no doubt that the silver-haired girl was more important to him than anyone else here.

“Grr... I-I have not yet adjusted to controlling it! P-Performing such a delicate, intricate use of magic is still foreign to me! Yes, precisely! For I am the Supreme Dragon! And as such, I have a substantial impediment that you and the others do not!”

“You moron. This is what you get for only using huge amounts of *literal* fire

power all the time. No duh you're gonna suck at something like this that requires really precise control. You may be strong—the strongest alive, even—but have you finally figured out that normal folks like us have our own way of fighting?"

"I'd just like to note one thing, Mr. Yuki, which is that the amount of magic *you* possess is a long way from a normal person's. Also, no normal person would be able to unleash magic on the scale you do, and so nonchalantly too."

"Okay, but I'm totally normal compared to Lefi."

While Yuki and Nell argued back and forth, Lefi fiercely practiced moving her piece. It was obvious the ordeal had left her vexed.

"E-Even I can manage a trifle like this if I try... Ack!"

The moment the "Ack!" escaped her lips, the head of her piece exploded off its body.

"The hell?! Nooo! Rir's head! Goddammit, woman, cut it out! If you're not careful with your magic, you'll break the whole damn thing!"

"I-I am being *most* careful, thank you very much. I merely...overexerted myself."

"You're telling me 'overexerted' was enough to blow Rir's head off?!"

"H-Hmph! This piece is just too fragile! You always laud yourself as a 'kree-ey-tive demon lord' or what have you, so prove your boast true and create things that can withstand my power! As it is, I find it laughable you can be proud of something so inferior!"

"Wooow! Absolutely freaking shameless coming from the one who broke it in the first place! But fine! You wanna talk shit?! Let's go! I'll make a piece *just* for you! Get your ass over here!"

"Dwah?! Wh-Why must I be included in this?!"

"'Cause you're the one who riled me up in the first place! That means you're gonna be part of the experiment!"

"B-Blast it! What have I done...?"

So saying, Yuki hauled Lefi by the scruff of her neck to his worktable, where he once more immersed himself in his own little world. Nell snorted with laughter watching them, then suddenly noticed Shii, who'd been there the whole time as well.

"Shii, would you like to play in my place instead of just watching?"

"Yes... Want to play, Shii?"

Shii beamed at them both, happy to be included. But she shook her head.

"Nooope! I'll watch!"

"Oh? Are you sure, Shii?"

"Yup! I like watching!"

Yes, Shii did indeed enjoy spectating. She absolutely loved to watch everyone have fun like this. Watching them have fun made her a lot happier than doing something fun herself. She couldn't explain why, but that was how she felt.

"All right, then. Well...En, let's battle again!"

"I...will take the one without a head. You stink, Nell, so I'll give you an advantage."

"Ooh, I've certainly been put in my place! Heh! All the more reason for me to not lose this time!"

Whether she intended to provide the little girls with companionship or whether she had simply been drawn in by the game, Nell once more sat down by the game board Yuki and Lefi had abandoned.

Some time later, when Iluna awoke from her nap and joined in on the fun, the atmosphere in the real throne room became even more lively. Shii spent the whole time observing everyone, still beaming in delight.

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He truly is such an eccentric master.

"Maaan, Rir, your fluff is as fluffy as ever, huh? Fantastic. You grooming yourself or something before we show up? You're such a cutie, gosh darn it!"

That thought came to Rir while he had his lord's face buried in his body and

fingers running through his fur.

Rir understood his role quite well. After all, it had been instilled in his mind the moment he'd been born into this world. He considered himself a weapon—a weapon designed to bite enemies to death and whose duty it was to guard his master's domain against intruders.

That was the purpose of his existence. Whether by his life or his death, he would serve his lord to the fullest. His values were such that he did not mind this at all, and yet...

"You're such a cutie!"

His lord's younger sister had begun following the young man's example, copying him in both word and deed. She cheerfully rubbed her head against Rir's body while cooing to him. Though she was humanoid, he knew that she was still just a pup. Nevertheless, he thought of her as his other master since she was the reason he had even come into being.

"Grr...?"

"Huh? You wanna know why I summoned you? Well, we just wanted to play with you, is all."

"..."

His master spoke without hesitation or shame. Rir's expression unconsciously expressed his amazement. He had wondered what sort of business his lord had summoned him for, and now, he had his answer.

On occasion, Rir felt that his master misunderstood the reason for his existence. He knew he was loved and cherished, so it wasn't as if he disliked the situation he found himself in, but there was no denying how often Yuki's actions left him befuddled.

"It's Rir!"

"Yes...it is."

While his lord and little lady continued petting him, three more individuals stepped out of the castle in front of him. One was a slime pup smiling happily at him. Another was an expressionless pup whom he knew to be the human form

of his master's razor-sharp sword. And the third was someone whose body harbored a colossal amount of power, though she was significantly smaller than him and his master. A full-grown dragon whose unquestionable might meant that she stood at the top of this forest's hierarchy, albeit disguised as a human.

His lord had gathered creatures of various ilk around him. Included in that were Rir's underlings—ones that Rir had never wished for but that he watched over regardless. Then, there were the other "weapons" his master had summoned to protect his domain. He looked after them as well, so he well understood the pains that came with taking care of others. And yet, he had never seen his master struggle to take care of his own charges.

Rir couldn't decide if that meant Yuki was extremely capable or extremely unconcerned about his responsibilities. *I strongly suspect the latter...* Immediately, he felt guilty for having such a disrespectful thought, so he decided to hide it in a corner of his mind.

"Oh, hey, you guys are here too. Wait, Lefi, why are *you* here?"

"Well, they took my hands, and I was unable to refuse..."

"Ah, makes sense."

His master laughed, then addressed his next words to the pups.

"All right, ladies, what game do we wanna play?"

"I wanna ride Rir!"

"Ride!"

"Yes...riding him is fun."

"Welp, you heard 'em, right, Rir? I'm counting on you, buddy."

Good grief. Despite the exasperated thought, he obediently lowered his body to the ground and allowed the little ones to climb onto his back.

"Thanks, Rir. I seriously don't know what I'd do without you."

His lord clasped his sleepy younger sister's hand in one of his own while he vigorously patted Rir with the other. Rir was never quite certain how he felt

whenever Yuki thanked him for performing such tasks, but ultimately, he always decided to think of it as a good thing because he had fulfilled his master's request.

"Rir, see you 'gain!"

"Bye-bye..."

The three pups waved in farewell to him, and his lord was about to return to the castle with them when he abruptly stopped, realizing that a member of their group remained with Rir.

"Hey, Lefi, you're not heading back with us?"

"Correct. I have business with Rir, so I leave the children in your hands."

"Oh, yeah? Okay, then."

Though his master looked puzzled, he chose not to press her and instead left.

"..."

Once they were out of sight, the girl inspected their surroundings to confirm they were alone, then suddenly buried her face in his trunk, and quite exuberantly at that.

"G-Grr?"

"Heh heh. This coat truly is marvelous. I fully understand why the children and Yuki are so enamored with it."

She was completely unruffled by Rir's confusion as she continued rubbing her face in and gliding her fingers through his fur. Some time later, after getting her fill, she finally raised her head.

"Right, then. Rir, if you breathe a word of this to anyone...well, I need not elaborate on the consequences, yes?"

He huffed in wry amusement at the hint of menace in her voice and nodded. Though she had lived many, many years longer than him, her words and deeds were very similar to those of the little ones that resided in this place. She was his master's mate as well, but considering their personalities, he decided that they were the perfect pair.

“Excellent. So long as you understand. I bid you farewell, then, Rir. I am quite aware of the difficulties you face in having such a strange man as your master, but do what you can to support the fool.”

She grinned at Rir while slightly discourteous thoughts ran through his mind. Then, she, like the others before her, headed for the castle. *So many peculiar individuals make their home here.*

Red began to stain the sky red as the setting sun illuminated his lord’s castle. Staring up at it, the wolf, now alone, fell into a pensive reverie. *Perhaps I, too, am a part of this decidedly strange pack.* An odd pet who followed them without question, constantly led around by his nose by one person or another. A faint smile crossed his mouth at the thought.

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“Ecological Observations on Demon Lord Yuki”

Author: Leila

My name is Leila. I am a member of the ovine race and a pupil of Eldgalia. Currently, following a series of coincidences, I find myself working as a housekeeper for a demon lord, the master of a labyrinth. A fortunate circumstance such as this is rare even in the long and storied history of my people. Though I’m nowhere near finished with my study, I have nevertheless decided to record my observations thus far on the ecology of a demon lord.

1: The Life and Habits of a Demon Lord

First of all, the name of the demon lord who employed me is Yuki. He’s a young man with black hair and heterochromatic black and red eyes. Only a year has passed since his birth, so he’s still a young demon lord.

Despite this fact, he possesses a stupendous amount of information. His wealth of knowledge rivals even those of the many scholars I’ve had the privilege to meet. Moreover, depending on the subject, he knows a great many mysterious techniques I have never heard of.

Therefore, I have come to an important conclusion. While he is technically only a year old, this demon lord has the appearance of a young man. He has never

attended school or any other place of learning as far as I'm aware, but be that as it may, he professes a profound knowledge of many things. All of this indicates to me that a demon lord's growth is fundamentally very different from that of ordinary beings.

My findings fall in line with the previously proposed theory that states the following: "In order for a labyrinth to survive the struggle for existence, it will produce a fully formed adult organism as its caretaker." In so doing, instead of acquiring information naturally via normal development, demon lords are implanted with knowledge from birth. I posit that labyrinths have evolved in such a fashion over a long period of time because they are a species that is constantly under attack by many organisms, humanoids and monsters alike.

However, one puzzle still remains. How does a labyrinth have such knowledge in the first place? The answer still eludes me. Unlike a demon lord, a labyrinth is incapable of communication, so I posed this question to Demon Lord Yuki. His only response was, "No clue."

Furthermore, though I described Demon Lord Yuki as possessing a great well of knowledge, he surprisingly lacks much of the information that the general population would have. Based on my interactions with him thus far, I've come to the realization that there's a tremendous gap between what he knows and what is considered general knowledge in our world. But I have yet to determine if that is due to the labyrinth's selection of necessary versus unnecessary information before his birth or if the labyrinth itself lacked the information and therefore couldn't pass it on to him. As a result of the many unanswered questions that still surround demon lords and labyrinths, I have decided to continue my investigation into the matter.

Now, then, as far as Demon Lord Yuki's personality is concerned, one thing I can confidently say is that he is an extremely intellectual individual. He's also witty and thoughtful with little natural inclination for violence. His libido seems normal as well.

It is widely accepted that a demon lord is a being who is faithful only to their own desires—the embodiment of avarice itself. I have perused records detailing the incidents caused by rapacious demon lords, but frankly speaking, I have witnessed almost no instances of this one engaging in such acts. Which isn't to

say that his behavior is entirely bereft of that characterizing demon lords. No, he most certainly acts with the abandon unique to the race, and dramatically so. In a sense, I wouldn't be remiss to say he lives according to his own desires. The difference, however, is that the way he lives his life is never a nuisance to others, and that in itself is refreshing to observe.

If I weren't aware of his status as the master of a labyrinth, I would think of him as just another ordinary young man. With our specialized analytical abilities, the members of the ovine race might be able to identify him as a demon lord based on the quality of his magical energy. However, the same cannot be said of most other races, who in all likelihood would never discern his true nature based on his behavior alone.

To continue, Demon Lord Yuki's physical and magical capabilities are extremely high. This labyrinth is located within the well-known, secluded region that is the Demonic Forest. The monsters who inhabit it boast immense power the likes of which I had never seen until beginning my life here. Yet he never recoils from taking them on as opponents. In fact, he treats them as food and provisions, both for the labyrinth's growth and his own.

According to Demon Lord Yuki himself, before we met, he had encountered a number of monsters who were much stronger than him. Strong enough that fleeing was his only option. Regardless, the fact remains that he's very much capable of challenging any of the monsters that inhabit the area. This in itself reveals the extent of his true power.

Then, there's the actual matter of the strongest creature within the Demon Forest, the legendary Supreme Dragon. Demon Lord Yuki and the Supreme Dragon currently maintain a deep and powerful bond, which I will further document at a later date.

And so, these are my broad findings thus far on the nature of the young man I know as Demon Lord Yuki. I couldn't have learned any of this without my employment as his housekeeper because it has provided me a unique perspective with which to learn about him. There is no doubt in my mind that he is a particularly special demon lord, and the most eccentric among them all.

Accordingly, I would like to note the following: anyone who chooses to

perceive him as a stereotypical demon lord runs a tremendous risk by operating under such a grave misunderstanding.

2: The Labyrinth's Residents

Several others live in this labyrinth as well, aside from Demon Lord Yuki and myself.

First, the nine subordinates he summoned using the power of the labyrinth. They fall into the following seven categories: fenrir, slime, wraith, giant blood serpent, noir crow, bakeneko, and water sprite, with there being three wraiths. A few of these are monsters I had never laid eyes upon prior to my time here, most notably the fenrir. I still find it hard to believe that a demon lord has such a legendary creature as a follower.

Stranger yet, per Demon Lord Yuki himself, the fenrir was a summon not even of his own design. He mentioned that it happened "by accident," though I have yet to determine how much truth is in his tale. Personally, I think it extremely unlikely that a fenrir can be created unintentionally.

Regarding his subordinates, from the perspective of a standard labyrinth, he has exceedingly few. But it seems this particular demon lord isn't concerned with quantity. No, he prizes quality. He deliberately chose them with a particular emphasis on their ability to survive life in the Demonic Forest. And the reality is that a fenrir safeguarding his dungeon is far, far *more effective than having a hundred or even a thousand subordinates of average disposition.*

The follower I find especially fascinating is the slime. Her name is Shii and she initially started her life as an ordinary slime, though she expressed a degree of cleverness from the beginning. At present, she is no longer a round slime. She has taken on the form of a young child, a girl, and has since learned to use human speech. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she has evolved from a normal slime into a humanoid one. I suspect that she changed herself into her current form because her master is an anthropoid as well. Needless to say, she is of great interest to me as a research subject.

On the topic of engrossing creatures, there are yet more who fall into this category. One such being is the weapon Demon Lord Yuki utilizes. Named

“Zaien,” the sword is of a variety he calls a katana and has an extremely long red blade. His weapon is so heavy that if it weren’t for his existence as a demon lord, he wouldn’t be able to lift it.

If only these facets were all I could say of the sword’s unusual existence. What’s even more astounding about it is that it, too, took on the form of a very young girl. It isn’t that the sword itself changed into a human, but the ego brought to life in the sword which wanted to take on a human form. The entity is remarkably self-aware and fully comprehends that its original form is that of a sword. In short, a sword with a will of its own dwells here.

I knew about the existence of so-called Intelligent Weapons, but meeting her was my first time seeing the real thing. Furthermore, this one can turn into a human. I have no doubt that, among the ovine race, I’m the only one to have ever encountered such an entity. She presents another terribly compelling subject for me. I would very much like to solve the mystery of her existence.

As for individuals who aren’t his subordinates, there are five in total living in this labyrinth, including me. All four of the others are female as well, and each is intriguing in their own right.

One is a child of the endangered bloodsucker species. The second, a runaway, is the daughter of a werewolf alpha. A human of the hero class is the third. And fourth, standing at the apex of the Demonic Forest’s pecking order, is a being whose name everyone in this world knows: the legendary Supreme Dragon.

I realize how unbelievable it sounds, but it’s the truth. The Supreme Dragon is indeed spending her days with this labyrinth’s demon lord. My observations on her would make this document incredibly lengthy, so I shall write a separate report on her alone some other time.

I find it riveting to consider how, exactly, such a multitude of races ended up gathering together in one place. What’s even more interesting about the situation is that the three aforementioned individuals—the werewolf alpha’s daughter, Lewin Groll; the human hero, Nell; and the Supreme Dragon, Lefisios—are all Demon Lord Yuki’s spouses. It might be very much like a typical demon lord to have three mates, but polygamy in itself isn’t so unusual. For example, it’s normal for a powerful merchant to have multiple spouses. In addition,

Demon Lord Yuki didn't force any of them to wed him. Each of the women became his mate of their own accord because they love him. As such, his relationships with all of them are quite strong and healthy.

Based on my observations of these women, I have determined that what it is about Demon Lord Yuki that attracts them is his mysterious aura. His is different not only from ordinary demon lords, but from ordinary people as well.

My accounting of Demon Lord Yuki is nowhere near complete, but I hope what I've described so far is enough to convey to you the extent of his extraordinarily unusual existence. So long as he does not consider me a nuisance, I intend to stay here forever.

As one of the ovine race, the curiosity residing within me cannot be contained for even a moment. With that said, I now strongly believe that it would be much better sated by me living the rest of my life here as a servant rather than wandering the world. In fact, I have no doubt of this truth. That is how deeply I've been enchanted by this labyrinth and by the life and habits of this demon lord. Actually, no. No, that's not correct. I won't lie to myself anymore.

I have been bewitched by Demon Lord Yuki himself. I have been done in by the unique world he has created. So long as he permits it, I will remain here. Therefore, I don't know when this record will be read by others. Be that as it may, I shall continue to chronicle my thoughts on this place, its residents, and its master evermore.

"Heh... My, how sentimental I've become, hm?"

Leila, alone in the bedroom she shared with Lew, chuckled softly to herself as she sat at the table writing her thoughts. She knew this work would never pass muster as a real academic report. At some point during the writing process, her personal feelings had started slipping in, resulting in emotional sentences that surprised even her.

"Well, I had no intention of ever showing this to anyone anyway..."

In terms of her scholarly pursuits as well as her own emotions, the days she spent in this labyrinth were truly precious. She would someday consolidate her

conclusions in a proper report because her nature as an academic would not let her do otherwise, but she had no plans to ever leave this place. Ultimately, that meant she could write whatever she wanted since she was beholden to no one.

I believe I shall sleep now. She would be getting another early start tomorrow, after all. And she wasn't much of a morning person, which was all the more reason for her to not stay up late.

Leila opened a drawer in the table and shut her report away. Then, she slid into her bed, next to the one occupied by the dog-eared girl breathing softly as she slept, and lay down.

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Inside the castle Yuki had created.

The wraith triplets used this place as their playground—or, more accurately, had claimed it as their territory. They were currently clustered together discussing the challenge they faced: coming up with pranks that were both safe and startling to any intended targets.

The little wraith girls loved mischief-making, but they also loved everyone in the dungeon. It would be terrible if someone were hurt the moment the trio surprised them with a prank, so they needed to think deeply about how to safely pull off their tricks. Their master, Yuki, always told them he didn't mind pranks unless they resulted in injury. The instant someone got hurt, he said, it stopped being a prank. The sisters agreed completely with him, which was why they did their best to be mindful of his warnings.

Whenever they took care to be thoughtful about safety, however, they felt that the impact of the prank was lessened, thereby lowering its level a notch. As a result, they had to find ways to make up for the lost impact and scare the dungeon's residents silly without putting anyone in danger. This eternal challenge gave the mischievous girls many opportunities to show off their abilities.

Today, as always, the trio were excitedly discussing how to complete the challenge once more. But the three were in each other's company around the clock, so each knew what the others would advocate. Thus, today, as always, their conversation essentially revolved around the same talking points as usual.

Rei, the oldest sister, was the planner of the group. Naturally, she insisted that a detailed, elaborate strategy would result in a successful prank.

Rui, the middle sister, agreed that planning was important. But she believed that the flashiness of a prank was even more important, making that the hallmark of success.

Roh, the youngest sister, was a huge fan of acting on impulse. She thought that overplanning would lead to a lack of flexibility.

Despite their surprisingly earnest and thoughtful arguments, the triplets again found themselves unable to reach an agreement. Once more, their discussion would come to a close without them reaching a proper conclusion, just like it always did. But something a little different occurred that day, changing the usual ending.

An idea suddenly came to Rei, which she put forth for her younger sisters' consideration. What if, she proposed, they consulted a third-party expert? It wouldn't hurt for them to occasionally listen to others' opinions.

"Okay! You can count on me!"

Shii was the expert the wraith triplets had chosen to ask for help. She was quite observant of the dungeon's residents, meaning she was familiar with each person's quirks and habits. Knowing this, they had brought her here as someone who would be beneficial in resolving their present dilemma.

Their friend had borrowed the false mustache from Yuki beforehand and put it on. With her arms folded, Shii spoke, doing her best imitation of a scholar.

"Now, then, you lot. Who do you want to sprise?"

The wraith sisters answered in unison and without hesitation: Leila. So far, the success rate of pranks pulled on her was zero percent. They had indeed failed—and failed miserably—every attempt they'd made to shock her. If they could successfully startle her, it meant they had gotten so good that they would have an easier time playing pranks on everyone else in the dungeon too.

In terms of success rates, from highest to lowest, the order went:

Nell

Lew

Iluna

Yuki

Lefi

Shii

En

Leila

Clearly, Shii, En, and Leila were the hardest to trick, with Leila currently being impossible. She was indisputably the most powerful opponent they had ever faced. Leaving her aside for the moment, though, the other two were also remarkably tough. Even when En fell for their pranks, her only responses would be along the lines of “Wooow...” or “Amazing...” without ever actually looking shocked. The same went for Shii. She would exclaim things like “Wow! What a sprise!” but her smile would never waver.

As a result, the wraith sisters thought of these three as fuel for their growth and considered them formidable adversaries to overcome. The triplets were unexpectedly ambitious in their desire to improve themselves.

“Aha. Miss Leila, hm? Difficult. *Very* difficult. Yes, quite a problem, ’cause she doesn’t has any weaknesses...”

Arms still crossed, Shii ruminated, making thoughtful noises for a bit before she continued.

“Oh, but whenever she’s suuuper curry-rus about something, I think she drops her guard? That’s it! If she sees something intee-resting, you can catch her by sprise!”

The wraith triples hummed in acknowledgment, convinced by her argument. Whenever Leila’s eyes were ablaze, such as when she interrogated their master aggressively about something, her attention was focused completely on the object of her interest. So, for example, if Rui used her illusion magic to make something that would pique her curiosity, they might be able to create a chink in her impenetrable armor.

“Yew-reeka! I just thought of a good idea! Listen!”

They listened intently to Shii’s suggestion, nodding emphatically and sprinkling their own thoughts into the conversation. “No, this might work better than that,” “If we do that, then we should do it like this,” and so on.

Though Shii was normally a very obedient child, she would transform into a naughty one only at times like these. And in this particular case, she had devoted her whole self to the goal of tricking Leila. Pranks were serious

business to these little girls.

“Yay! It’s perfect! This should work! I think even Miss Leila will be shocked!”

Adding Shii’s expertise into the mix created a novel, refreshing experience for the wraith triplets. The four girls wrapped up their discussion by synthesizing their individual ideas into a large-scale prank operation. Now that they finished constructing the perfect plan, the only thing left to do was put it into action. The moment they decided to do just that...

“Shii! ReiRei, RuiRui, RohRoh! It’s snack tiiime!”

...Iluna, the golden-haired girl, appeared.

“Snaaacks!”

The word “snack” immediately produced a reaction in the four little girls.

As a note, snacks for the wraith triplets were special ones made entirely of magic since they lacked corporeal forms. At first, Yuki had used his elemental magic to make snacks for the wraiths who couldn’t physically eat anything. After watching him do so, Leila had taken it upon herself to conduct research into the matter, and she’d succeeded in creating special snacks for them without the use of elemental magic.

In the beginning, Leila had only been able to produce hard candies, but her persistent experiments had paid off and led to a dramatic increase in her magical snack repertoire. As long as she knew the recipe, she could now make a custom magical version of any snack, sweet, or confection.

“Snacks, girls! Snaaacks! Let’s go!”

With their grand plan instantly vanishing from their minds, the wraith triplets and Shii raced to the real throne room, overjoyed by the prospect of snacks.

But the girls remained blissfully unaware of the truth. Why had snack time arrived with such eerily good timing? Well, the answer was Leila. She had schemed to ensure that snack time coincided with their prank mission so that it never got off the ground.

Leila took care to observe the dungeon’s residents in minute detail every day, which meant she knew the whole of everyone’s behavioral patterns. Naturally,

that included the periods of time when the wraith triplets were hard at work planning their mischief.

The battle between the wraith sisters and their greatest rival, Leila, was destined to continue...

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Clothed from head to toe in camouflage gear, I took a walkie-talkie out from my chest pocket and pushed the button on it.

“This is Yuki Häyhä. I repeat, this is Yuki Häyhä. I just reached Point Alpha. Still no contact with the enemy. Over.”

Immediately, other voices started coming in from the walkie-talkie’s speaker.

“This is Shii Häyhä! No enemies here!”

“This is...En Häyhä. Reporting the same.”

“Roger that, Little-Girl Häyhäs. Let me know if anything changes. Nell Häyhä, status report?”

This time, there was a slightly windy noise in the background of the voice that responded.

“This is N-Nell Häyhä! I don’t see anything unusual. Um, by the way, Mr. Yuki, what exactly is this ‘Häyhä’ business?”

“It’s the name of the most powerful sniper—no, the most powerful *warrior*, feared as The White Death. Despite being a lone man, he put the fear of God into the enemy’s forces, leaving behind countless legends in the process.”

“Oh, wow. He sounds like an amazing soldie— Mr. Yuki, I found one! Rir! Ummm, what is it again...? Right! Point Gamma! Enemy sighted at Point Gamma!”

“Roger that, Nell Häyhä. Continue your reconnaissance. Little-Girl Häyhäs, you heard her, right? Time for combat. Let’s dye ’em in every color there is.”

“Okay! ReiRei said she’ll beat them silly too!”

“Affirmative... Heading to the location now.”

I cut off comms and spoke to Byaku, my pet with pristine, snow-white fur, who stood next to me.

“It’s go time, Byaku.”

“Mrrrow.”

Heh heh heh. They don't know that we've already pinpointed their location. We'll spring a surprise attack on them and bada bing bada boom, it's game over!

Not that it mattered or was relevant to anything, but whenever En used her walkie-talkie, she sounded like a real pro. It was insanely cool to me.

We were currently having a paintball match, using guns and paintballs I'd made with the Weapon Enhancement skill. The rules were simple: Anybody hit with a headshot automatically died, and whichever team wiped out the opposing team won. Any limbs that got hit were out of commission until the game ended. And anyone who got shot in the heart or ended up so covered with paint that there was nowhere left to shoot was also automatically dead.

Paintballs were nonlethal, of course, but I'd decided to maximize safety anyway by having everyone except Shii and the wraith sisters wear long sleeves and goggles. Those four were exceptions because of their unique bodies.

We were divided into two teams—me, Nell, Shii, En, and Rei versus Lefi, Lew, Iluna, Rui, and Roh. Leila had opted out of the game, instead choosing to remain on standby as a sort of medic at the designated spot for those who'd died. There, she would provide first aid in the form of snacks and sweets.

As far as the wraith triplets went, they were possessing 1:2 scale dolls for the duration of the game because the paintballs would just whiz through their normal bodies. Each team was also allotted special helpers in the form of our family pets. We had Yata the ginormous crow and Byaku the bakeneko on our side, while Lefi had Rir and Seimi the water sprite.

Since they were only helpers, they couldn't participate in actual combat. They could support their respective teams via their physical abilities in other ways, though. Which meant the pets were one strategy each team could utilize to reach victory. Orochi the red snake had seemed a little sad about not being picked by either side. *It's 'cause you're just too damn big.*

The battlefield was a section of the meadow area where I'd built two areas specifically for this survival game: a forest and an abandoned construction site. I'd deliberately made the grounds huge enough so that neither team could find

the enemy easily. Despite this, there was a reason why we spotted them first, and that was our helper, Yata. I'd had Nell ride on his back and scout the field from above.

Information was the basis of modern warfare. And as the team who controlled the sky, we had no blind spots. Lefi and I were forbidden from using our wings, which effectively made it impossible for me to eliminate her team. We'd initially discussed the idea of a limited use of flight where every five minutes in the air meant we had to stay on the ground for ten, but even that would've created too huge of an advantage, so we'd decided to nix it entirely for us combatants.

Bwa ha ha ha! Yet my tactical genius in choosing Yata for our team has already given us a massive edge in intel!

By the way, I'd created three different types of paintball guns for this game. One was an ordinary assault rifle type. It had a nice balance of range and rapid-fire capability, making it the perfect model for all-around use. The second was a submachine gun type. It lacked range but had an extremely high rate of fire, which made it ideal for those who specialized in close-range combat. And finally, a sniper rifle type. What it lacked in firing rate it more than made up for with its incredibly long range, so it was well-suited for experts skilled in one-shot kills.

The one I'd chosen for myself was the assault rifle type. Honestly, I'd really wanted to go for the sniper rifle, but, y'know, all I could see myself doing with it was, well, missing all my shots. Certainly a wise decision on my part even though I'd taken on the alias Yuki Häyhä.

So there I was, holding my beloved gun at the ready for any contact with the enemy, making my way toward Point Gamma—a section of the forest area—when...

"What the...? There's no one here?"

Sure, Rir was there. Except the expression on his face said, "What in the world am I being forced to endure?" And besides him, no one else was around. I'd figured they would've used him the same way we were using Byaku, which was as supply personnel loaded down with the magazines, but that wasn't the case

at all. Rir sat all by his lonesome in the middle of the woods. For some reason, that in and of itself felt off.

“Master! I’m here!”

“Master...where’s the enemy?”

Just then, a few members of my team showed up from a different direction. Shii and Rei excitedly raised their hands while En kept a wary watch on our surroundings, her gaze sharp.

“No clue. Rir’s the only one here right now.”

Right as I reached for the walkie-talkie clipped to my chest so I could ask Nell what the heck was going on down here, I heard a voice.

“Now, girls! Water balloon attack!”

“Dwah?!”

It was Iluna’s voice, and it was immediately followed by countless paintball water balloons—powerful weapons capable of spraying paint in a wide area if you could get them to burst properly—hurtling toward us. On the topic of said paint, Lefi had used her magic on it to transform it into an extra sticky kind. In other words, if you got hit, the color wouldn’t fade for a *while*. We’d worked out this particular formula because normal paint probably would’ve just bounced off Shii’s fluid body. This way, it would stick to her too, letting her enjoy the game like everyone else.

“H-Hide! All of you, hide!”

We rushed to conceal ourselves in the shade of trees and blades of grass, but unfortunately for Rei, she couldn’t find anything nearby to hide behind and ended up taking a critical hit from a water balloon. The upper half of her doll got splattered with paint.

“Ah, shit! They got Rei!”

Rei looked incredibly disappointed, her face saying, “Whaaat? It’s over already?” Our numbers had just gone down by one.

“Don’t stop, girls! Keep launching those balloons!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! Ducks! You are all sitting ducks! It will not be long before we seize victory!”

“You can count on me, Commander Iluna! I hope the enemy’s ready for a beating!”

Not long after, maybe because their stock of water balloons had finally run out, they started pelting us relentlessly with paintballs. Once again, it was Iluna orchestrating the attack. *Shit. So Rir was a decoy.* Lured by Rir as a landmark, we’d fallen into their trap when we’d headed toward him, where they’d lay in wait to ambush us.

If it’d been a normal ambush, we wouldn’t have been getting our asses handed to us so badly. The real problem was Rui and Roh. Our enemy skillfully made use of the two little doll girls’ ability to maneuver through the air by having them weave all over the place and fire at us. Their freedom of movement also restricted our range of action considerably. As a result, us having been returning fire for a bit now wasn’t doing much to slow them down. Their teamwork was superb; not a single inefficient move by any of them.

I’d honestly thought this fight would be a piece of cake for us since their leader was technically Lefi, my good-for-not-much wife, but clearly, she’d fully entrusted their battle tactics to Iluna. *Makes sense. The kid’s wicked smart.*

That left four of us on my team. With Nell riding Yata in the sky, though, it was actually just the three of us on the ground against all five of them. They had us majorly outnumbered, which was a solid war strategy.

“Grr... All right, folks, we need to get the hell outta here and regroup! Come on, Byaku!”

Byaku immediately obeyed my instruction and stepped forward, acting as our shield so we could begin our retreat.

“Mayday! Mayday! Can you hear me, Nell Häyhä?! We’re currently under heavy fire! Urgently requesting assistance!”

“R-Roger that! Moving to your location posthaste! Yata, get down there as fast as you can!”

A few seconds after her voice came through my walkie-talkie, something

abruptly rushed down from up above, landing magnificently in front of us—Nell, holding a submachine gun in each hand. The moment she touched down, she started firing both of them. *Pra-pra-pra-pra.* Countless paintballs sprayed from her guns.

"Nooo! RuiRui's all pink now!"

Over on the enemy faction's side, Iluna let out a yell when she realized that Rui'd been hit by Nell's attack.

"Now's our chance to escape! Go!"

Her expression valiant, Nell raised her voice as she covered our retreat with her suppressive fire. *Whoooaaa. S-So cool.* Ladies and gents and folks of all stripes, we had ourselves a bona fide, real-life hero here!

"R-Right! Okay, everyone, get your asses to Point Beta—"

"Mr. Yuki, watch out!"

"Nell?!"

Our bona fide, real-life hero suddenly rushed toward me and sent me flying.

"Mr. Yuki...it seems this is as far as I go. I'm glad...you're still...alive..."

As she smiled at me, the girl who'd conducted such a ferocious, flashy attack bore the brunt of the paintball attack. She was dead, covered in paint from top to bottom.

"N-Neeell!"

A scream tore its way past my lips. Now, we were down *two* people.

"Ahhh, I'm dead... Gosh, that was surprisingly fun. Rei and—who's dead on the enemy team? Rui? Why don't the three of us head to where Leila's waiting?"

While the dead trio cheerfully chatted and walked away, the rest of us grimly retreated, prepared for the ultimate end. In the background, I could hear bullets whizzing past us. The enemy refused to halt their attack. I wouldn't have been surprised if they claimed another fatality from us soon enough.

"Argh! Is this the end of the line for us?!"

“Master can’t give up!”

“But at this rate... Okay, I know what I have to do. I’ll keep them in check here—”

I’d made up my mind, but before I could finish speaking, En interrupted.

“I’ll...handle this, Master.”

“Do you have a plan, En?!”

“Just...defeating the enemy. Cover me for three seconds.”

“G-Got it! Shii, you heard her! Let’s do this!”

“Okay!”

En readied her sniper rifle and stopped moving completely. We stopped next to her before turning around and letting loose a barrage of paintballs. There was no need for us to hit anyone, though, because this was just a diversionary tactic to keep them in check. In response to our sudden counterattack, the enemy team almost leisurely found things to hide behind. Their assault ceased.

In the meantime, En had basically become one with her gun. She peered intently through the scope...then pulled the trigger. A paintball shot out, slicing through the air with a sharp, whistling sound.

“Ack... I’m hit, my lady...”

“Grr. You as well, Lew? I was so certain we had driven them into a corner... It seems they retain some talent yet.”

“That was definitely EnEn! We can’t drop our guard!”

We heard the results of En’s hit from our adversaries. One paintball and En had shot Lew dead. *Spectacular marksmanship.*

“Wow, En! Wowowow!”

“Seconded! That was some insane skill, En!”

“Yes... At this distance, I won’t miss if they show their faces.”

She replied to our praise matter-of-factly. *Damn, son. We have a real pro on our side.*

“En’s shot just now made the enemy back away! They’re cautious of us now! Little-Girl Häyhäs, time to finish our retreat!”

The violent battle between our two teams continued after that. Both sides constantly switched between offense and defense. Seimi split into multiple parts to monitor us and inform the enemy of our movements, and we retaliated by jumping on Yata and unleashing a hail of paintballs and paint water balloons. Everyone was out for blood. Iluna tried a divide-and-conquer tactic against us, to which En counterattacked with her superlong-range sniping.

We were constantly on the move, going from one battlefield to another, exchanging bullets with each other—until at long last, we arrived at the abandoned construction site. Compared to the wooded area, this area was slightly more open. There, Lefi and I faced off.

“Well, I cannot say I am surprised to see that you are the last one alive.”

“Yeah. I had to stay in it. Especially... Especially in light of all the sacrifices on our side.”

Melancholy tinged our voices. That was because, just like she said, we were the only two still standing.

“A part of me knew this would be the outcome.”

“Same. Same, Lefi. Let’s end it, right here, right now. With this!”

With that, I busted out my trump card: two Gatling guns. I held one in each hand.

“Look upon me and despair! My ultimate weapon, created for the sole purpose of destroying you and you alone! Magical Gatling Guns!”

I’d loaded them both with a stupid amount of paint bullets. Each gun’s massive hopper rested on a shoulder, but my demon lord body made light work of their immense weight. I could get the barrels spinning by pushing my magic through the guns, and their rates of fire were so high that I could choke anyone out with the resulting barrage. Together, they were a paint weapon to end all paint weapons.

“S-Stop! Do not those monstrosities violate the rules?!”

“Ha! Ha! *Ha*! You dumbass! Didn’t I tell everyone before we started that we could use whatever paint guns we wanted?!”

Why would I have ever restricted the assortment of paint guns? That was to say, these bad boys were totally legal. Okay, so, I totally would’ve shelved them if the little girls had still been in the game, but it was only me and Lefi left. I had zero reason to hold back.

“Say hello to my little friends, Lefiii!”

I pumped my magic through the guns and the barrels started whirling. Then, I pulled the triggers, commencing my assault.

“Bwaaahhh?!”

Rat-tat-tat-tat. The vibrations hammered both of my arms as I bombarded Lefi, who instantly vanished into the mist created by the copious amounts of paint splashing everywhere. The storm of paint bullets was more than enough to smash any opponent to smithereens. But I wasn’t gonna count my chickens before they’d hatched.

My enemy was the most powerful one in history. It was very possible that she’d utilized her overwhelming physical abilities to evade every direct hit. I kept my fingers tight on the triggers, never slacking on the pressure as I continued my paintball attack.

“Aaahhhhh— Did you truly believe I would utter such a sound?”

“Whaaat?!”

From beyond the veil of bullets, she abruptly cut off her rising scream. I took my fingers off the triggers and squinted toward where her voice had come from, and what I saw was Lefi holding one arm straight out, freezing countless paint bullets in midair like they’d been stopped by an invisible wall. When she lowered her arm, the bullets dropped dramatically, obeying the laws of gravity. On impact, they created a dramatic paint pond on the ground of the abandoned construction site. The sight reminded me of a certain savior in a digital world.

“I knew you would try something like this, you imbecile! Have you forgotten

how much of my magic is in these things you call paynt bull-lets?! In case you do not understand, allow me to spell it out for you! This means all of the paint bullets in use are under my command!”

Grinning evilly, Lefi stabbed a finger aggressively my way.

“Th-That’s sneaky as hell!”

“What right do *you* have to say that to *me*?! What right?!”

I blurted those words out without thinking, and she snapped back before continuing.

“Hmph. I predicted you would use some underhanded scheme or other, so I merely prepared one of my own! Now, then, it is my turn!”

When Lefi moved both of her arms in a scooping motion, the pool of paint lifted into the air.

“Nooo! I stand on the bodies of my fallen comrades! I will not lose here!”

I tossed the Gatling guns aside and busted out my wings, flying straight up in one shot. By the way, this was most definitely a clear violation of the rules.

“You shall not escape! Drown in the sky, Yukiii!”

While controlling the paint reservoir, she produced her own wings and started chasing me. I zigzagged randomly as I flew, desperate to survive. In a last act of defiance, I pulled a new assault rifle from Inventory and initiated my counterattack. I knew it was hopeless, but I had to try. For my own peace of mind.

As for what the dead folks were doing at the time...

“Ah ha ha ha! Take this! It’s payback time!”

“Eep! It’s so cold!”

“Look! Lookie! A fountain!”

“Wooow... Amazing.”

“Oh my gosh, Shii, how are you even doing that? Did you turn your body into a hose to eject water? How versatile. Oh, Rei, do you think you can levitate

water with your telekinesis? I just can't get this darn paint out."

"Hee hee hee. Everyone, I've prepared towels for you all."

They all showered off the paint sticking to them and apparently had a blast doing it.

In hindsight, instead of pulling weird items out of Inventory one after another, I should've just fought like a normal person and gracefully accepted my death in battle. I loved fooling around with Lefi, of course, buuut neither of us was good at hitting our own brakes, so we'd gone all out with our silliness. Needless to say, we were dead tired from our dumb battle by the time we got home and slept like freaking logs.



◇◇◇

One morning.

“Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha— Wha—”

All I could do was keep repeating “Wha—” like a broken record. I *should* have been looking at my body. And I was pretty sure that *was* what I was looking at. But strangely—so much so that I tilted my head in bewilderment—it was small. Tiny arms, tiny legs, and a tiny torso. I had basically no muscles to speak of. The best way to describe myself was “squishy.” I was pretty much drowning in my pajamas, with the sleeves and hems hanging off my limbs. I must’ve looked ridiculous, ’cause I sure felt like I did.

For who the hell knew what reason, I’d shrunk to the size of an elementary schooler, like maybe a first or second grader.

“What the hell is thiiiiis?!”

That scream surged up from deep inside me. Except that it came out insanely high-pitched, as opposed to my usual tone of voice.

What the hell is going on? What is *this? What in Hades happened?*

“...Haah.”

I took a deep breath and forced my muddled brain to come to some semblance of order. *Calm down. Just calm down. Figure out the situation you’re in.*

Conscious? Check. Full control of my body? Check. I couldn’t feel anything weird anywhere, so this was undoubtedly my real body and not a dream. But I still couldn’t think of a single logical reason as to why something like this would’ve happened.

Okay, then, I just have to think harder. My body resembled a child’s though my mind remained an adult’s. It was very much like a certain famous detective. So, what could have possibly caused this transformation?

Come on. Come on, me, think. Think... Oh. That’s probably it. A ghastly smile bloomed on my face as I recalled the previous night’s events.

“Huh? The heck is this?”

I pulled the item out from Inventory and stared at it, my head cocked curiously.

Mystery Potion: A mysterious potion with unknown effects. Has a strange, puzzling flavor. Quality: S+.

What in the world is this super sus potion? I'd been in the mood to organize the contents of Inventory and had pulled this thing out in the process. When had I even gotten my hands on it? I literally couldn't remember. Like, I had no memory of getting it at all.

Might be best just to throw it away since it could be dangerous. But I had to admit that I was intrigued by how uselessly high its quality was. I felt like it would've been kind of a waste to toss it without analyzing it first.

"My lord, what's that potion? Don't you think the color's kinda odd?"

"No idea. I was just sorting things out in Inventory and it showed up. I don't even know what it does. Wanna try it?"

"Wait, you just said you don't know what it does, right?"

"Right."

"Ummm, begging your pardon, my lord, but could you maybe *not* use me as your food tester?"

Lew scowled at me. I shrugged my shoulders with a laugh and told her that it was a joke before continuing.

"I'm definitely curious about what it does, though... Welp, guess I'll try it myself, then."

"A-Are you sure? I think it might be dangerous to use something unknown..."

"Not gonna lie, I *am* scared, but it should be fine as long as I have this."

So saying, I opened the rift and pulled out a Super Potion.

"Ohhh, yes, the super expensive potion with the super high restorative power."

"If this goes completely sideways, Lefi can use it on me. Sooo, Lefi, if anything

happens, you know what to do."

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Understood."

Lefi had been lazing around as usual. Once I had her agreement, I downed the shady potion in one gulp.

"Son of a goddamn bitch! I did this to myself!"

You heard right, folks. Yesterday, I'd lost to my curiosity and chugged a weird potion. Nothing had actually happened after I did, so with a "Damn, this is a dud," Lew and I had laughed it off, thinking that was the end of it. But clearly, the effect had revealed itself after a day had passed, with said effect being to turn someone's body into a kid's.

Dude, there's gotta be a limit to how mysterious a potion can be. Friggin' stupid. Hmm, but then again, that last bit actually applied to me since I was the moron who'd drunk the suspicious potion.

"Mrgh... What is all this commotion? First thing in the morning, no less."

While I held my head in utter shock, in the futon next to mine, Lefi woke up. She rubbed her eyes sleepily as she lifted herself up, and her gaze met mine. When she got her first glimpse of me, her jaw dropped and she froze. Then, she slowly inspected me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. After giving me a thorough examination, she wrapped her arms around her stomach before collapsing back onto her futon. She started rolling back and forth, laughing hysterically.

"Pfft! Y-Y-You— I— Wh-Whatever could have happened to you? Why are you such a wee lad?"

I could easily tell how her mind had processed this. She'd been dumbfounded, verified it was me through Analysis, accepted that it actually *was* me, and then died laughing, in that order.

"D-Don't call me a wee lad! I'm in big trouble here, goddammit!"

"Kah— Kah ha... You are shorter than I am. Yet I find you adorable in this form."

Lefi started rubbing my head, and I slapped her hand away.

“Cut it out! Wait, what the hell are you doing *now*?!”

I tried to run away from her, but she beat me to the punch by wrapping her arms around me. Then, she dragged me down, forcing me to sit on her lap as she sat cross-legged on top of her futon.

“Your abusive language is quite charming when you are like this. Perhaps you should remain as such forever?”

Lefi seemed to be in a damn good mood as she hugged me tightly, then started patting my head again. Why the heck was she doing this to me?! *Gaaah! I can’t escape!* With my current build, I was no match for her, which meant I couldn’t fight her off even a little bit.

“Hell to the no! I hate this body! And I swear to Satan, will you stop rubbing my head?!”

“Now, now. You must not struggle, else you might hurt yourself.”

“Graaar! Too tight! *Too tight*! You tryna squeeze me to death?!”

“Then I suggest you behave yourself. Tell me, will you be a good boy now? Hmm? Will you?”

“Stop talking to me like you’re humoring a kid!”

This nonsense between us continued until everyone else woke up.

“You’re...Mr. Yuki, aren’t you?”

“Mr. Yuki’s dead.”

“What?”

“Mr. Yuki. Is. Dead.”

“Excuse me, Lefi, but what’s wrong with the Mr. Yuki on your lap?”

“I do not rightly know, but he is adorable, yes? Would you like to hold him as well?”

“Oh, um, well... Just for a bit, then.”

It infuriated me how easily Nell lifted my body from Lefi's tight embrace and placed me on her lap.

"Oh! You know, I have to agree with you about how cute he is."

The hero girl started rubbing my head while crooning to me, "My goodnesh, you're such a good widdle boy." I'd long since given up on resisting, so I just let her have her way with me.

"Heh heh. I might have to stop calling you Mr. Yuki now. How about Little Yuki instead?"

"Do whatever you want..."

"Thank you, Little Yuki! Then let me ashk you this: Little Yuki, how did yew get to be wike thish?"

"Yo. Miss Nell. I don't care what you call me at this point, and I've already thrown in the towel when it comes to fighting you crazies hugging me, but stop talking to me like I'm a baby. It pisses me off."

"Awww! Don't be angwy. Although I musht admit that you'we even cuuuter when you curse, Little Yuki!"

"Yes, indeed, he is."

"No, indeed, he damn well isn't! How the hell can you broads be so relaxed when I'm dealing with a serious emergency here?!"

"Well, based on the tale you told me, you are merely reaping what you sowed. Methinks it a just punishment for someone who acts as haphazardly as you do."

Grr... Sh-She might definitely have a point.

"So, basically, the potion you drank yesterday turned you tiny, my lord?"

"Yeah. Can't think of anything else it could be. Now, I'm a detective whose adult mind is trapped in a child's body."

"A detective?"

"Yeah, a detective like that definitely exists."

"Wooow. I had no idea such interesting people were around."

Lew stared intently into my face. Then, she suddenly grabbed my cheeks and pulled.

“O-Owww! Waddah yu doin!”

“Oh, y’know, I just couldn’t help myself. My, what springy cheeks you have, my lord. Such a nice feeling.”

My protests went in one ear and out the other as she started playing with my cheeks using both of her hands.

“Wait, are they really? Oh my gosh, they really *are* plump and bouncy. So cute!”

“Hmm, let me see... Ah, yes, this is a pleasing sensation indeed.”

“Sh-Shdop it! Grr... Lemme goh!”

After enduring their womanhandling for way too long, I shouted in outrage and flung all their hands off of me. Then, I shoved myself up from Nell’s lap, putting some distance between me and them before raising myself to my full height in an imposing stance.

“That’s enough! Will you jerks cut it out already?! I don’t care how unusual this is, you’ve got no right—”

In the midst of me trying my best to maintain a dignified attitude, someone tapped my shoulder a few times. When I turned my head to check, I found our family’s golden-haired little girl there.

“Sorry, Iluna, but I’m a little busy right no—”

“YuYu!”

Yup, she had bestowed upon me a mysterious new nickname. After which she promptly wrapped her arms tightly around me from behind.

“Uhhh... Hey, Miss Iluna?”

“YuYu! Call me ‘big sister,’ YuYu!”

“Um, no, see—”

“Please! ‘Big Sister Iluna’! Say it!”

“...Big Sister Iluna!”

“Eep! I’m your big sister now, YuYu!”

She shrieked in delight, pleased by my words, and hugged me harder. I unconsciously slumped in her grasp, suddenly feeling more exhausted than I could even begin to explain. *Why won’t anyone listen to me?!*

“Okay, YuYu! Say ‘aah’!”

“...”

“Say ‘aah’...”

“...”

I was currently taking turns being spoon-fed from either side. My head empty of all thought, I opened my mouth for the morsel and chewed.

“What do you think, YuYu? Is it yummy?”

“Is...it yummy?”

“Uh... Yeah. It’s yummy, Big Sister Iluna, Big Sister En.”

Judging from the way they beamed and wiggled in delight, my words had made them super happy. Iluna aside since she was always cheerful, it was actually really refreshing to see En act like this. Everyone always babied these two because they were the youngest in our family, so they must’ve been overjoyed to be the older sisters for a change.

You might be wondering about Shii. Interestingly enough, she was the only one whose attitude toward me hadn’t changed despite my transformation into a kid. Right now, she was just watching us like she didn’t quite understand what was happening, which I suspected had to do with her nature. Though her “eyes” looked like normal eyes, they only mimicked the human organs. Even if she realized that my form had changed, it was extremely likely that the way she saw things was much different from the way we did anyway. To be honest, I’d always been curious about how exactly she perceived the world. Not, like, Leila-level curious, of course, but curious.

“Tee hee. What a charming scene this is.”

The young hero, Nell, sat in a chair across from us. She grinned broadly as she watched Iluna and En feed me like I was a baby.

“You know what would make this even *more* charming, Little Yuki? A smile on your cute widdle face instead of that fwown.”

“Don’t even start with me right now. If you make me do that, I’ll probably throw up blood and pass out.”

“O-Oh, is that so? My, you certainly infused a great deal of power in those words.”

Dammit, woman. If you knew how I felt right now, you’d get a little surly too.

Earlier, when I’d had my head in my hands and was racking my brain over how to revert my body to normal, Lefi had told me the answer like it was obvious. According to her, the magic in the potion was currently encroaching on me. It acted like a virus by using my own magic as an intermediary to invade me, affecting my body. And somehow, this kid body was the result. My current condition was kinda like being knocked out for a bit by a cold, which meant my body would naturally revert to its original state in due time.

My Demon Eyes didn’t show it, but Lefi had said that my magic was already starting to return to normal. She thought I might be free from this tiny body as early as tomorrow. Our family’s walking dictionary of an older sister, Leila, had backed her up too. She’d told me that special drugs such as potions that had a direct effect on a person’s body, which was what this one was, were specifically designed to not last long.

People, do you have *any* idea how relieved I was when they’d explained all that to me? If I’d had to stay in this form for the rest of my life, the despair it caused would’ve crushed me. I finally understood that great detective’s relentless pursuit of the villainous men who’d masterminded his dilemma.

“YuYu! Hey, YuYu! Once you finish breakfast, let’s go outside and play.”

“Yes...let’s.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go with you, big sisters.”

I smiled wryly, resigned to my fate.

“RuiRui, RohRoh, he went that way!”

At Iluna’s words, the middle and youngest wraith sisters raced after me. The dolls they were possessing slid through the air as they tried to catch me.

“Ha! Think again! You’ll never catch me in my great detective form if you don’t try harder!”

“Nooo! YuYu, no flying! That’s so not fair!”

“Bwa ha ha ha! Cry more! The way I am now, I’m faster than fast! No one can stop me! I’m all the way up!”

I cackled majestically while using my wings as I pleased to evade the approaching little girls.

“Boo! Fine, then! We’re gonna use our combined assault on you!”

“Oh, reeeally? I wait with bated breath. But anything you do is bound to fail! Bwa ha ha ha!”

Despite my high-pitched voice, I did my best to chortle like a demon lord would, confident in my skills. And then, it happened.

“All right, everyone! Let’s do this!”

The little girls moved simultaneously at Iluna’s signal, swooping down on me. First came the wraith triplets. They limited my escape path options by pursuing me from different directions, all the while keeping an appropriate distance between each other. Phenomenal teamwork, really. Too bad for them I skillfully broke free of their encircling net by basically letting myself free-fall. Flapping my wings aggressively, I came to a stop a hair’s breadth from the ground before resuming my flight, this time in a zigzag pattern.

My body right now was pretty much the same size as the bigger little girls’, which made me a lot more aerodynamic than usual. There was just one problem, though, which was that the talents of our family’s little girls set them far apart from your average little girls. Since I’d lowered my speed when I got close to the ground, I’d put myself squarely within En’s range. She analyzed my zigzagging and correctly predicted where I would go next. Once she’d

determined that spot, she jumped sharply toward it.

En was a legendary weapon, so there was no denying her talents. Naturally, they carried over into her human form as well, resulting in extremely high physical capabilities. Her skillful movements put adults to shame.

Unfortunately for her, though, she would always be one step behind me. My body was a child's, but my physical abilities were essentially unchanged, including my overpowered demon lord eyesight. I spotted En's sudden charge out of the corner of my eye and reacted immediately, spinning in the air. I parried her with my wings, killing the momentum from her jump while simultaneously carrying her to the ground so she wouldn't get hurt.

It'd all happened in under a second. A "Safety Technique Pertaining to Little Girls" developed by this demon lord to prevent them from sustaining any injuries when playing with them.

"Better luck next time, En! That's not nearly enough to catch your mast—"

"Now, Shii!"

"'Kay!"

Startled, I jerked to look toward where the voice had come from and came face-to-face with an aqua mass that covered my entire field of vision. Shii had changed to her normal slime form.

"What the— Mpf!"

I realized that Iluna had accurately predicted the timing of my usual monologue. The moment I'd dropped my guard to deliver it, Shii had rushed to cover my face in her slime, effectively blinding me. In turn, that stopped my flight in its tracks. En and the wraith triplets refused to let this opportunity slip by them and sprung on me, pushing me down.

Okay, honesty hour. My Danger Detection ability had warned me of Shii flying my way, but that was my little secret. Otherwise, this would be too easy for me, which would make it no fun for any of us.

"Dwaaah?!"

So, just like that, I spun round and round on my way down. Toward the end,

Iluna jumped on to me too, and we all crash-landed together in a crowded jumble.

“Tee hee hee! We got you, YuYu! You’re still waaay too young to win against your big sisters!”

Iluna peered down at me, her face very close to mine. Her beaming smile was one of happiness and smug triumph. *So cute.*

“Ha ha! Yeah, looks like it. I lost. Nice going, big sisters.”

“Hey. Hey, Master. What you wanna play next?”

“Gooood question. We went all out playing tag, so...how about we play in the sand now?”

“Sand! Great idea, YuYu! Let’s do it!”

“Yes...good plan.”

The wraith sisters bounced delightedly in the air around me, silently agreeing with the other girls. With everybody on the same page, it was time for us to head toward the parklike place I’d built in the castle’s courtyard.

“Despite your vehement protests, you’re quite enjoying yourself, aren’t you, my lord?”

I flinched at the unexpected voice before schooling my features and slowly, deliberately turning to face its owner—Lew, who watched over us fondly.

“S-S-Suuup, Lew? Wh-Whatcha doin’ here?”

Intense embarrassment overcame me at the thought of her watching me since I was genuinely having a blast playing with the little girls in this form. I scratched my cheek to cover the feeling while also avoiding her gaze.

“Oh, not much, just hanging up the laundry to dry. I heard voices having fun, so I thought I’d take a peek, y’know?”

Lew grinned pointedly at me before she continued speaking.

“It’s just nice to see childlike innocence accompany your small body. It’s easy to call them your big sisters now, isn’t it?”

“Sh-Shut up! I-It’s not like I *wanted* to do it in the first pla—”

“YuYu... You don’t like calling us your big sisters...?”

“Uh, n-no, I do. That isn’t what I meant. I-It’s just that, um, I’m a little conflicted, and for a lot of reasons...”

Iluna looked kinda sad now, so I hastily fumbled for an explanation that would smooth things over.



“Tsk, tsk. You’re a bad boy for making a girl cry, YuYu.”

“Don’t *you* start calling me that too! Wha— Hey! Stop it!”

Grinning maniacally, Lew lifted me up.

“I would’ve loooved having such a cute little brother too. A little annoying, but cute nonetheless. I can totally understand why Nell and Lady Lefi lost their heads over you.”

“DDammit, Lew, cut it out! Don’t rub your cheek against mine! Iluna and the others are watching!”

“Oh my gosh, you’re embarrassed! How cute are you?! Come on, now, a little bit won’t hurt. There, there. You’re fine.”

She was completely unconcerned with my feelings as she continued rubbing our cheeks together.

“Grr... Just because *you* like it doesn’t mean *I* do! I may look different on the outside, but you should know damn well that it’s still me on the inside!”

I could feel her warmth. And at this super-point-blank range, her tantalizing, wonderful scent enveloped me. An indescribable tingling sensation raced throughout my body at the touch of her velvety cheek against mine. She’d done her fair share of hugging and petting me, sure, but this? Rubbing cheeks? So much more embarrassing to my sensibilities.

“What are you saying? Though we still have a year before our union is official, we *are* technically a couple. You can think of this as just another way we communicate!”

“I-I mean...I guess...you’re...right?”

W-Well, we are *husband and wife, after all.* Which meant physical contact between us wasn’t all that strange, right?

“I am! So it’s absolutely fine for me to dote on you like this, YuYu!”

“LewLew, no fair! We were playing!”

“Yes... No fair, Lew.”

“Heh heh, sooorryyy.”

Smiling cheerfully, she hugged me tight one last time before setting me down.

“Time for me to take my leave. Everyone, make sure you come back inside before it gets dark, okay?”

“Okey dokey!”

Iluna and Shii responded energetically, their right hands raised, while En nodded silently in agreement. Behind them, the wraith triplets copied Iluna and Shii, raising the right arms of the dolls they possessed.

“Oh, dear. YuYu, I don’t hear anything from you.”

“...Fine.”

Lew grinned expectantly at me, and I responded after a long beat, my cheek twitching.

Please, for the love of all that is unholy, come back soon, my original body.

After that, around the time dusk had settled, we were back inside the dungeon. The little-girl gang had exhausted themselves running around playing, so just as we were headed to the door connected to the real throne room, I suddenly experienced a dizzy spell.

“Ugh...”

It was so intense that I pressed my head with one hand and used the other to support myself by leaning against a wall. Fatigue hit me everywhere. The world spun violently and I wanted to hurl.

“Huh? Master, is you okay?”

From beside me, Shii noticed that something was wrong. She stared worriedly at me.

“Y-Yeah, I-I’m fine. Just got dizzy for a second there.”

Though I tried to soothe her, I was panting heavily. I stood there like that for a while. The more time passed, the less intense the dizziness became until it had finally gone away. It was like nothing had happened.

“Jeez. What the heck *was* that?”

The minute I said the words out loud I realized the change in myself. My voice

was no longer high-pitched. It had returned to its normal timbre, one past puberty when a dude's voice changed.

Right there on the spot, I checked the rest of myself. My arms, legs, and every other part of me had returned to its original adult size. The boys' clothes I'd bought with DP were either torn in places or bulging at the seams. I was sure I looked goofy as all hell, but I couldn't have cared less about that right now. It was nothing I couldn't handle.

"Whoo... Woo-hoooo! I'm back, baby!"

I clenched both hands into fists and pumped them in the air while shouting ecstatically. En, who was next to me, flinched in surprise at the sudden loud noise, which made me feel a little guilty.

"Oh, YuYu, you're back to being Yukiki?"

"Mwa ha ha ha! Unfortunately for you, YuYu is no more! The age of YuYu is over! The time of Demon Lord Yuki has come!"

"Awww. Too bad. YuYu was sooo cute."

"Yes... Too bad."

Sorry, you two, but I have absolutely no plans to ever be YuYu again. I'd had *more* than enough of the wretched form. Although I had to admit that I'd started enjoying myself halfway through. Only a little bit, mind you, and only because it had reminded me of the fun of childhood.

"That's great, Master!"

"It sure is! All right, little ladies, time to go home. Dinner and baths are waiting for us."

"I'm sooo hungry!"

Exultant about being back to normal, and with the little-girl gang trailing after me, I twisted the knob on the door connected to the real throne room.

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“Ahhh...”

Exhaling softly, I sunk into the bathtub with an echoing *splash*. The hot water was at the perfect temperature and felt amazing on my body after a whole day spent running around playing with the little-girl gang. Speaking of them, they’d been chilling in the inn’s hot spring with me until a little while ago, but they’d left when two of them had started getting sleepy.

Right about now, Iluna was probably snuggled up in her futon, while Shii would be back in her slime form, off in dreamland on her beloved cushion. En hadn’t looked all that sleepy, so I figured she was hanging out with the dungeon’s other residents. *My money’s on her challenging Leila to a shogi match.* En seemed to enjoy shogi more than any of the other board games. Because of her relatively stoic personality, her opponent of choice was Leila, who was the best board game player in our household. I always thought En looked super cool playing shogi in her Japanese-style clothing. Very apropos. Cute, cool, and practically invincible was my sword girl.

By the way, this was how everyone in my family ranked when it came to shogi:

1. Leila
2. Iluna
3. En
4. Me
5. Nell
6. The wraith triplets
7. Lew
8. Lefi
9. Shii

More often than not, the wraith triplets played as a trio. We considered them a singular unit, which was why I’d ranked them together. This ranking pretty

much played out the same with other board games too, just with some minor fluctuations for third place and below.

Leila aside, Iluna was the one to watch out for. I honestly found her genius astounding. She was ferociously, demonically good at board games, beaming and acting like her usual sunny self the whole time. The savage moves she made while smiling cheerfully were enough to make her opponents pass out from fear. We just weren't gonna talk about how I hadn't actually seen anyone do that yet.

When we'd first started playing board games, I'd kinda gotten the feeling that she was holding back in her matches. "Y'know, kiddo, you're not doing anyone any favors by not playing at your best," I'd told her. She'd apparently taken the advice to heart, because since then, Iluna has been undefeated against everyone except Leila. And of course, she always beat us with that ever-present smile on her face.

My guess was that her intelligence was off the charts, just like our family's extremely learned maid's was. It made her matches against En particularly interesting to watch too. Not to mention that whenever we played outside and it was me versus them, Iluna always ended up being their commander. For example, she'd taken on the role of tactician in the survival game we'd played not too long ago.

In contrast, there was the last-place contender. Surprisingly enough, that was not Lefi but Shii. Except I didn't think she was bad so much as she probably just didn't remember rules. She often said things like "Oopsie! I maked a mistake!" while beaming cheerfully. But it was freaking adorable when she did that, so she was invincible in her own right. *Truly is our dungeon's heartwarming pet.*

So, anyway, there I was, those incoherent thoughts wandering through my mind as I leisurely enjoyed the bathtub all on my own, when the door to the bathroom rattled open. *Huh?* I jerked my head around to see Lefi, Lew, and Nell.

"Wha—"

Each had only a single towel wrapped around her body. Lefi posed aggressively, her arms folded. Lew stood next to her, looking simultaneously

awkward and pleased. And Nell seemed supremely embarrassed, desperately holding on to her towel so it wouldn't fall off.

Their slim limbs and smooth, bare skin left uncovered by their towels made for an incredibly erotic sight. To be honest, I felt like I'd finally gotten used to seeing Lefi naked after all the times she'd paraded around like it was nothing, but seeing the goods hidden like this packed a much stronger punch. *A little mystery really does go a long way, huh?*

The fact that they were only wearing towels made their curves stand out all the more sharply. Hell, just the *sight* of their collarbones made me—

Through sheer force of will, I dragged my frozen gaze from those particular parts of their bodies and somehow managed to get my gaping mouth to form words.

"Y-You guys? Wh-What the heck?"

"Why are you so flabbergasted? Have we not bathed together countless times before?"

"Yeah, I have with *you*! B-But not with those two behind you! Why are *they* here too?!"

"Oh, well, um... Lefi pushed us to, you see."

"A-And there you have it, my lord."

"Do humanoid races not engage in this sort of activity with their mates?"

"W-Well, taking baths like this isn't really a custom where I'm from, so I'm not actually sure."

"Same for me. We werewolves only ever bathed in the river. Although now I can't imagine a life *without* a bathhouse."

"I concur. The mere thought of being unable to cleanse myself in such a sublime way ever again disgusts me."

Deciding that the conversation was over after that, the three of them sat down on the bath stools under the shower heads and started washing themselves. Naaaturally, they took off those towels first.

"...Haaaah."

I looked away from them, instead focusing outside on the meadow and night sky while I took deep, *deep* breaths. *Banish all worldly thoughts from your mind. I am unsullied like a polished mirror and serene like still water. I release myself of all attachments so that I may achieve true enlightenment.*

The other two were very much not the same as Lefi, though. *Just calm down, Yuki.* I felt like it'd all be over if I showed them any sort of reaction at this point. Besides, I had little kids in my home. It wouldn't be good for their upbringing to show them— *Wait a minute.*

Thinking about it clearly, I realized that this situation was different from the time Nell had drunk my blood because everyone here right now was an adult. The occasions when these three and I ended up together without the little girl gang were few and far between in my dungeon. So maybe this wasn't such a big deal? Maybe this was a good opportunity for us to surrender to temptation and...do the things men and women did together?

No, no, no. Have I lost my damn mind? We were just in the bath together right now. Exactly. Totally normal for married couples. Absolutely nothing wrong with it. Technically speaking, though, Lefi was my only *official* wife. Which made "girlfriends" the correct term for Lew and Nell? Weird as it was, I found myself more embarrassed by the word "girlfriend" than "wife."

While I waged a fierce internal mental battle with myself, something soft suddenly pressed against my back.

"Whoa!"

"Pray elaborate on your secretive mutterings, Yuki."

Having finished showering a bit earlier than the other two, Lefi had made her way over to me. She wrapped her arms around me, hugging me from behind, as she rested her chin on my shoulder. She grinned impishly, peering teasingly into my face from the side.

Her sweet scent tickled my nostrils. My cheek burned where hers rubbed against it, and my heart pounded in my chest at the sensation of her chest on my back. I really thought I'd gotten used to touching Lefi, but maybe it was

more on a case-by-case basis.

Our current situation only emphasized my ongoing suspicion of Lefi being something of a devilish vixen. She sure enjoyed toying with me just to get a rise out of me.

“Th-They’re not important.”

“If you say so. Still, I am quite disappointed by the reversion of your boyish transformation. You were such an adorable little thing. This particular frame of yours is not quite as endearing.”

“*So* sorry I can’t be adorable. How ’bout I act like a kitten to change your mind?”

“Gah ha! I will not deny the temptation to behold such a spectacle, but you may refrain on this occasion.”

With a laugh, she let go of me and plunged into the tub. Right onto my lap, for some reason.

“H-Hey!”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that! Why are you sitting on my lap?!”

“Why, whatever is the matter? I always do this.”

“Except this is different from always?!”

Feeling her butt directly on my lap made me...testy. In a lot of ways.

“You two really are so close, aren’t you? I’m a bit envious.”

“Well, it’s no wonder. They’ve known each other the longest out of everyone here.”

Nell and Lew also lowered themselves into the tub while chatting. Unlike Lefi, who was completely naked, they had wrapped themselves back up in their towels. But because they were wet, the towels clung extra tightly to them. That majorly emphasized their boobs, which were level with the water’s surface.

By the way, excluding the little-girl gang, this was the ranking for boob size in our household:

1. Leila

2. Nell

3. Lew

4. Lefi

Leila was unshakably first. Clothes made Nell look deceptively slender, but she had a great body underneath, and her pair made for a nice handful. Lew and Lefi were basically tied since there wasn't much of a difference between their figures. Looking at them now, though, I had to say that Lew's boobs were slightly bigger.

Wheeew... If they knew what I was thinking right now, they'd bury my ass out in the forest.

"H-Hey, ladies? What gives? 'Cause I gotta tell ya, I'm dying of embarrassment here."

As big as I'd made this bathtub, it was definitely cramped with four adults in it. There was also the danger of how their bodies were constantly brushing up against mine since Nell and Lew had sat down on either side of me and Lefi was still on my lap. It was like I was smack in the middle of a minefield; I was completely surrounded.

"I-I mean, you're not the only one, Mr. Yuki. But..."

"But this is the only time we can be alone with you, my lord. That's not to say we hate our usual circumstances, though. Not at all, because life is fun every day."

The two of them exchanged glances, smiling shyly.

"You heard them, Yuki. Without moments like these, we adults do not have the luxury to converse at length. Thus did I encourage these two to accompany me tonight."

"Well, you've got a point."

In the beginning, only Lefi and I lived in this dungeon. Now, though, there were so many more of us. I never would have imagined having this many residents when I first woke up in this world. But as much as I enjoyed the noise

and liveliness, and as much as I loved spending time with the members of my dungeon family, there was no denying the lack of grown-ups-only time.

“What are the others up to, then? Iluna and Shii fell asleep?”

“Yes, they did. En and Leila were playing the game called show-gi when we departed for this place.”

“Knew it... Damn, I really don’t know what I’d do without Leila. I owe her a ton.”

“Indeed. Life here would be a veritable disaster without her. It is thanks to her that we can while away our time like this. Ah, speaking of, have you considered taking Leila to wife? The wee ones aside, she alone has been left out of our group.”

“She’s right, my lord. Why don’t you marry Leila too?”

They spoke about the topic so matter-of-factly that I couldn’t help but give a wry smile.

“Ladies, that’s a terrible reason to marry someone. Do you understand how rude it would be to marry someone just because you feel bad that they’re being excluded?”

“Y-You know, I can understand what you’re both saying, but Mr. Yuki is right. Feelings are what matter here,” Nell reasoned with them. It was good to know that she still had common sense despite my dungeon’s residents having been influencing her quite a bit lately.

“Nell... I’m really glad I met you.”

“Wait, what? Why would you say something like that *now*?”

Puzzled, she questioned me. I only responded with a laugh.

I could feel my wives’ body heat radiating from the places our skin touched and their slight movements as they breathed. It was unbelievable how comforting and relaxing the sensations were.

Looks like us just talking calmed me down a bit. My heart wasn’t racing like a runaway freight train anymore; it was only kinda fast now. *Works for me.*

I felt like a dirty sumbitch for thinking this right now, but the three of them surrounding me so closely really drove home how much they loved me. *I'm on top of the freaking world.* And they were all women I could call my wives. It was really hard to describe, but to at least try, I was...happy. Happiness flooded every pore of my body. Goofing around, snuggling, just being together with them—there was no greater joy.

"..."

Without thinking, I stretched out my arms and wrapped them around Nell and Lew, pulling them in closer. Then, just like she'd done earlier to me, I dropped my chin onto Lefi's shoulder and rested my head on her.

"Ahhh..."

"M-My lord..."

"Oho, what is this now? It would seem your nerves have left you, Yuki, if you are able to be so bold now. Would you like us to fawn on you after all?"

I laughed in response to Lefi's playfulness before speaking.

"Naaah. I was just thinking that I really do love you all."

At my words, they all flushed red, and definitely not because of the hot water.

"Wha— Y-You need to warn us before you say th-things like that, Mr. Yuki."

"Sh-She's right, my lord. Wh-What a surprise."

"Hmm... So you, too, are capable of giving voice to such sentimental nonsense. How unexpected."

Yeah, I guess I am. I sure wouldn't have been saying any of this if I weren't in such an unusual mood. The fact that it was so easy to confide in them about the depth of my feelings for them was just more proof of how soothing the current atmosphere was. Relaxing in a warm bath and snuggling with the women I was crazy about was as good as it could get. Hell, I didn't even need words to convey the pleasure of this moment.

And then, letting the good vibes drown me, a random thought suddenly popped into my head and escaped from my mouth.

“Y’know, I still don’t know where that potion came from.”

On top of that, its effect had worn off before I’d actually figured out how it worked. Though I spoke casually enough, Lefi twitched for just an instant. I didn’t miss it, of course.

“Madam Lefi? Mayhap you have an answer to my conundrum?”

“N-No, I do not believe I do. Y-You must be mistaken.”

“Ma. Dam. Le. Fi?”

“W-Well, um, you see...”

My strong emphasis on her name made her realize the jig was up. Resigned to her fate, she started sweating and gave her explanation.

“I only remembered this after the fact. Do you recall that you purchased several potions some time ago because you wished to conduct research on their effects?”

“Yeah.”

I’d thought that making my own potions would help reduce my DP consumption a little, so I’d decided to investigate the ingredients. My only finding was that the liquid contained a tremendous amount of magic, but one of a slightly different composition than people’s magic. In short, I’d learned diddly-squat.

“At... At that time, I found myself intrigued by the process as well. As such, when you were not looking, I took one of the bottles and poured a great deal of my magic into it, as well as a variety of ingredients. Nothing of note occurred, however, and I quickly found myself bored, after which I returned the bottle to your workplace...”

Lefi turned her face away from mine and laughed weakly, trying desperately to get herself out of the pickle she was in.

“Uhhh, Miss Lefi? Didn’t you *just* tell me today that I ‘reaped what I sowed’? Hmm? *Hmmmm*?”

“D-Did I? W-Well, regardless of who created it—which I do not claim was me—it was *you* who chose to drink it. And you did so entirely of your own volition.

So you did, in fact, reap what you sowed, yes?”

“Huh. Yeah, you’re kinda ri— No, damn it, you’re *not* right! Don’t sidetrack me!”

“Bwaaah?!”

I surged up from the tub in an angry rush, which sent Lefi, who’d been sitting on my lap, tumbling headfirst into the water. She came up sputtering and coughing.

“Wh-Whatever are you doing?! You forced me to swallow copious amounts of hot water!”

“Shut up! That entire fiasco was *your* goddamn fault! Do you have any idea how hard today was on me because of your stupid impulse?!”

“E-Ever the hypocrite! You did not look so displeased when you were frolicking with the little ones!”

“Don’t let appearances fool you! I was in a serious bind all freaking day thanks to your dumb ass!”

“H-How convenient for you to change your story to suit your needs! Moreover, I do not appreciate your discourteous manner of speech!”

“Lew, should we head back without them?”

“Good idea. I think they’ll be at it for a while, so this is a good time for us to leave.”

“Sooo sorry, Lefi! But you’ll have to forgive me, because right now, I can’t act like the adorable little shit you want me to!”

“Hmph. It is as you say, for in this moment, you are simply a boorish *man*! A ruffian! If you had only retained even an iota of how you were as a wee lad—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nell and Lew exchange rueful smiles over our outburst, then get out of the tub. But Lefi and I didn’t care. We kept going at it tirelessly. *More proof of our closeness, I guess.*

Side Story 2: A Fleeting Life and a Death Woven into the Future

I know. I know this is a dream. And I know he *is already dead. No one here knows he exists and everyone* there *has long since forgotten him. When all is said and done, his existence has vanished from the world.*

And yet, despite knowing this, I still have these sorts of dreams about him. Because he forms the nucleus of the existence known as "me." I and I alone must never forget that he exists. I'll carve the proof of his life into my heart so that he can live on.

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Not once had he ever thought about wanting to die. He had parents like everyone else. He had friends like everyone else. As a young man, he was poor like everyone else at that age, but he had enough to eke by day after day.

On the other side of Earth, all sorts of things plagued humanity. Conflict. Strife. Terror. Disease. Humans died for these unjust reasons and more. Compared to them, he lived a blessed existence because death posed no danger to him.

But he was unaware. He understood neither the purpose nor the value of his life. He had always known that he was a selfish human who lived his life according to his own selfish principles. And perhaps that was exactly why he felt he was all alone in the world. Why, even with so many people around him, he was still deeply aware of his aloneness.

Yes, he was alone. The big, wide world was shockingly narrow. All its brightness, all its color, faded.

The days were unchanging. He lived the same one over and over again. It made him want to vomit. He didn't know how to struggle against the weight, much less escape from it. He had no idea what he wished for, and no clear plan for what he wanted to do with his life.

He wondered if everyone was the same as him. If they, too, had concluded that there was no other way to live in this monochromatic world. If they had, then what a truly cruel world this was.

With those feelings in his heart, he died for a stupid reason out of his control. Like a pebble on the side of the road, he accomplished nothing, gave no meaning to his existence, until he breathed his last.

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“—ki. Yuki.”

I felt something warm on my cheek. The warmth melted the ice trapping my soul, serving as a gentle guide toward wakefulness as I opened my eyes.

“Ngh...”

Along with the light in the room, the first thing I saw was Lefi, a tender expression on her face for some reason. She sat on my lap, one arm wrapped around my back and the other stroking my head like she was soothing a baby.

“Be at ease, Yuki. I am here.”

So saying, she hugged me even tighter.

“Huh...? Wh-What are you doing, Lefi?”

“Hmm? Ah. You are awake, I see.”

Still holding me, she leaned back just enough to peer point-blank into my face.

“Tell me, how do you feel now?”

“Normal, I gue—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I suddenly sensed something weird on my cheeks. I reached up to touch it and felt liquid clinging to my fingertips. Apparently, I’d cried at some point while I’d been dozing off on my throne. Based on Lefi’s uncharacteristic thoughtfulness right now, I’d probably shouted in anguish too.

Shoot. This is so embarrassing. I wasn’t a kid, but here I was sobbing and moaning in my sleep like one. Not to mention that I was being comforted like

one too.

“Sorry. I’m fine. Guess I was a little tired.”

“I see. That is good. I shall take you at your word. You must take the utmost care of yourself; it will not end well for any of us should you collapse. Securing sustenance would be extremely difficult.”

“Worried for your stomach, are you?”

“Gah ha! Is that not reason enough to be concerned?”

Grinning, Lefi moved to get off my lap. Before she could, though, I grabbed her arms and stopped her. She stared at me, her eyes slightly widened in surprise, and I stared back, just as surprised as her. I hadn’t done it on purpose. My body had just kinda moved.

“What is the matter?”

“Uh, well, um, I...”

Panicking because I’d acted without thinking, I fumbled for words. Lefi’s intent gaze didn’t let up. Then, suddenly, her expression softened. She had to have come to some sort of decision because she plonked herself back onto my lap, relaxing into my hold. Except this time, instead of facing me, she sat with her back to my chest.

“Mm... The truth is, the little ones coerced me into accompanying them on their shenanigans until not long ago, so I too am feeling a mite weary. And since you make such a fine chair, will you not allow me to rest here a while?”

“Oh, yeah? Sure, then. Why not? A break might be just what you need.”

“Indeed. Now, all you must do is sit quietly like a good chair does.”

The silver-haired girl grinned up at me from her perch on my lap. With her body pressed against mine, her scent and warmth wrapped around me, easing my frayed nerves. In turn, I wrapped my arms tightly around her in a desperate attempt to banish the vague sense of unease still plaguing me.

Lefi. The feel of her. All of it told me loud and clear that I was here. Solid proof of my existence.

“Lefi...”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

“What for? I do not recall doing anything deserving of gratitude.”

She gave me a big, cheeky smile.

I knew. Ultimately, his life in his old world had amounted to nothing. It’d been meaningless. He’d left no mark on the world. Even his bloodline had died with him. But with his death had come meaning.

Was it fate? Or was it pure coincidence? Whatever the answer, the death that had cut his life short wove its threads into the future, creating the start of a new story.

This new story overflowed with color. Countless unbelievably vivid colors. He felt the purpose of life in each and every day: to walk through it beside *them*.

No one here knew him. All they knew was Demon Lord Yuki, not the young man from another world. That was all the more reason that I would make the most of life in this world without ever forgetting his feelings.

Should I make a grave for him someday? Leave behind tangible proof here too that he existed?

“Hey, Lefi?”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never told you everything about me, have I? Not in any real detail, anyway. So, to be honest with you, I’ve already died once.”

“Have you, now? This is certainly the first I am hearing of such a thing. You do have a tendency not to discuss yourself, so tell me what convinced you to have a change of heart.”

“Oh, y’know, stuff. I just felt like it, I guess.”

“Gah ha! I see, I see. You ‘felt like it,’ did you? Then will you tell me your story?”

Right. Where should I start though? How about...Earth.

“Okay, let me start with my original birthplace, Earth. You probably already know by now, but I’m not actually from this world...”

Chapter 3: Stampede

Today, I was back in the real throne room after another monster hunt. Hunting had been a daily thing for me lately because of my ongoing worries about the state of my DP wallet, but now that I was home, I decided to relax until dinner was ready. While I was chilling, Nell came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Mr. Yuki.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“I’m thinking about making a brief visit to the city, as my stay here has been quite long. I know we sent that letter some time ago, but if I don’t make an actual appearance soon, I’ll be inconveniencing a fair few people.”

“Ah, yeah. Now that I think about it, you’ve been here more than a month now, haven’t you?”

Yup, you heard right, peeps. That was how much time had passed since I’d seduced the young hero into joining this demon lord’s group. Nell and I had slipped into the border town we all knew and loved a while back in order to send a letter letting her superiors know she was alive and well, but she was totally right. It was time for her to actually show face.

I couldn’t bear the thought of life without Nell anymore, so I had no intention whatsoever of handing her over to the Kingdom of Alisia or whatever it was called. That said, I was also well aware of the fact that heroes were considered strategic arms in this world. Here, a hero was *literally* worth a thousand normal soldiers. I personally thought of heroes as game protagonists, but from Alisia’s perspective, she was invaluable. No run-of-the-mill commissioned officer could ever hope to stack up.

It was also very possible that the kingdom would send a search party out to find Nell. That was all the more reason for me to make it clear where I stood when it came to her.

“All right, let’s do it. Whaddya say we make the trek to the humans’ town

tomorrow?”

“Oh, um, don’t worry about me, Mr. Yuki. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“No, it’s about time I declare my intentions, y’know? I mean, I don’t plan on letting you go, but I also know you’re a hero. So, like, I wanted to square things away on that front.”

Though my words made her squirm a little in embarrassment, judging from her expression, they also made her incredibly happy.

“O-Okay, understood. Then let me ask you formally, Mr. Yuki. Will you accompany me?”

“Of course.”

“Ah, one thing I’d like to note ahead of time, Mr. Yuki. There’s no need to have Rir race us there at top speed like last time, all right? I’m not in a rush at all this time. Not even a little.”

“No? You sure? The Super Express Fluffrir Service is fun, though.”

“Only you think so, Mr. Yuki.”

Whaaat? But the Super Express Fluffrir Service is *fun.*

The next day. After the others waved us off, Nell and I had boarded Rir. We were currently making our way through the forest as he loped along super leisurely. The not-so-new-anymore members of our dungeon, my four pets, kept pace with us—Orochi the red snake, Yata the crow, Byaku the bakeneko, and Seimi the water sprite. Rir would occasionally command them to eliminate any monsters approaching us, and off they’d go to do his bidding.

Each of their levels was currently insanely high:

Orochi: Level 83

Yata: Level 72

Byaku: Level 79

Seimi: Level 71

There were some fluctuations because of their individual strengths and weaknesses, but overall, they all had relatively similar stats. Orochi clearly blew everyone out of the water in terms of level, though. Granted, that could be attributed to his specific role as the main attacker when the four of them fought as a unit. It was only natural that he leveled up faster than the other three when he was always central to their battle strategies.

Yes, yes, keep growing and improving so you can hunt even more monsters for me. Make my life easier. I have high expectations of you, homies.

"Mmm. Rir's fluffiness really does feel amazing, doesn't it?"

Eyes narrowed, Nell stroked Rir's fur. She sat in front of me on his back.

"Yup. Rir's fluff is the best in the world. In short, the most powerful fluff."

"What does that even mean?"

She turned her head to look at me, an amused smile on her face.

Looking at her now made me realize something. Out of all the folks in my dungeon, she was the most ladylike. The term "young lady" suited her perfectly. She'd gotten more relaxed as she grew comfortable with us, but there was still a gracefulness about her every time she said or did something. I suspected it was most likely the result of her being raised in the Church.

"So, hey. I know this is a bit of a random change in topics, but I'm curious about something. I just figured heroes were basically like soldiers, but did you learn etiquette and stuff too?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I did. Technically speaking, I *am* an important person, which means I often find myself meeting royalty and other distinguished individuals."

"Wow. Sounds like you've had an interesting life."

"In reality, I'd describe it as annoying. Hmm... Thinking back, my education in etiquette might have been more difficult than any physical training I undertook. How bowing has different types and angles for different situations, the order in which I need to use cutlery during meals, and so on. It still astounds me how much time and effort I put into remembering it all..."

The young hero spoke while staring off into the distance. Honestly, I could *feel*

the hardship she'd gone through in the emotion packed into her words.

"I wonder how everyone back in the city is doing... Oh, right, which reminds me. Mr. Yuki, do you think your letter made it to Ilyr?"

"Yeah. I'm almost positive it did."

I responded to her with a pained laugh, emphasis on "pained." Nell was referring to my reply to the letter I'd received from Alisia's little princess, Ilyr, a while back. I'd sent it at the same time Nell had sent her letter informing her superiors that she was safe.

Ilyr's letter had mentioned her desire to sneak out of the castle to see me. I'd written back something along the lines of, "Don't worry your father too much. Be nice to him, okay?" Just a completely inoffensive reply, basically. I'd been afraid of what might happen if I humored her even a little bit.

In any case, I'd decided that my best bet was to keep my letter as bland as possible. I had a feeling I'd be meeting her again at least once since I was tagging along on Nell's visit to Alisia's capital. Definitely didn't wanna rock the boat.

"Tee hee. If memory serves, you saved that child, didn't you, Mr. Yuki? You truly are a master at making girls fall in love with you. What is it that Lefi often calls you? Ah, yes, 'philanderer.'"

"But I never *want* them to, and I sure as hell didn't plan on her doing so."

"Also true. After all, you only rescue us girls once in a while, and even then, it's only by chance, hm?"

Nell grinned at me.

This was totally irrelevant, but whenever she smiled, she looked like one of those cheerful smiley faces. Might've been because she wasn't used to doing it. Anyway, I thought it made her look super cute.

"Stop beating around the bush, dang it. If ya got something to say, just say it."

"Mm, well, it's just that you saved me as well, so it was only natural that I fell for you too. That's all."

The young hero said those words in an extremely nonchalant way.

“Y’know, it always surprises me how easily embarrassing stuff like that comes outta your mouth.”

“I...can’t deny that I’m feeling a bit embarrassed at having actually said it. You might have infected me, Mr. Yuki.”

“Whaaat? Do I really say things like that a lot?”

“Now and then, yes. Actually, more often than not, your words make me blush. But, um...I l-like that part of you as well...”

“C-Cool. Thanks...”

“You’re welcome...”

“...”

“...”

Jeez. Could we be *any more awkward?*

“All right, all right, I can see it.”

It was six hours later on account of the fact we had taken the Local Fluffrir instead of the Super Express Fluffrir Service, which would’ve cut that down to just two. Ahead of us lay the frontier town we’d visited several times in the past, Alfiro. As usual, throngs of people flowed in and out despite it already being late afternoon. I spotted a line of folks waiting to get in at the massive doors set in the town’s outer wall.

By the way, the reason we’d decided to make a pit stop here instead of going all the way to the capital on Rir was because Nell’s business wasn’t all that urgent on this particular occasion. We’d been racing against time before, so we’d pushed Rir hard toward the capital, braving any dangers along the way. This time around, though, Nell and I would be enjoying a nice, slow stagecoach journey from Alfiro to the capital. I was honestly looking forward to it.

I jumped down from Rir’s back near a thicket concealing us some distance away from the town. Then, I reached up my hand to help Nell down. Once we both had our feet on the ground, I cheerfully patted my pet on his forehead area.

“Thanks a bunch, Rir. We’ll make our own way back, so don’t worry about us.”

Since I had that incredibly convenient teleportation necklace, we could return to the dungeon in a literal flash.

“We don’t know how long this is gonna take, meaning we have no idea when we’ll be back. It’s up to you to protect the dungeon, okay? If anything happens, lean on Lefi. Same goes for the rest of you. Thanks in advance for looking out.”

“Grr.”

Rir added a bow to his rumble of acknowledgment. Behind him, the rest of my pets followed suit, lowering their heads in unison. They saw us off from their hiding spot as Nell and I headed toward the entrance gate.

The two of us took our place in line. It moved forward smoothly, and soon enough, we were at the front. Just as we were about to pass through the gate, a voice stopped us.

“Huh? Nh! Ser Nell! And the dem—”

When we turned in the direction it came from, we found ourselves looking at a familiar soldier. *Those weathered, battle-hardened features...* If I remembered right, he was the commanding officer of the army that’d been hell-bent on attacking me in the Demonic Forest way back when. Seemed like he had just been on his way out of the guardroom built into the gate. Surprised to see us, he rushed over immediately. *The heck? Why’s he so agitated?*

“Been a while, Commander.”

“I...do not know why the two of you are together. Regardless, Ser Nell, I realize how rude it must be for me to ask this, but might you accompany me to the mayor’s office right away? It’s urgent.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

The old man’s face soured when he heard her reply.

“Well, the discord in the seat of government has worsened ferociously. The situation wasn’t nearly this bad before your expedition to the demon world, Ser Nell, but now, even you yourself are a topic of discussion there.”

“Me? Truly?”

He nodded in response to her confused question.

“Yes, indeed. Matters have become quite complicated and aggravating, to tell you the truth. In any case, would you please visit my lord at his office?”

“Mr. Yuki, is it okay if I go?”

“No way I’d say no to anything involving you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Yuki. Then, um, Gamdia, was it? Please lead the way.”

“I’m much obliged. Follow me.”

Just like that, Nell and I found ourselves at the mayor’s residence. This marked my third visit here.

“S-Ser Nell! And demon lord, you as well?! Why are you here?!”

The man, the mayor of Alfiro—Releaux, if I remembered right—was buried under a pile of paperwork in what looked to be his office. He and the other old dude, aka the commanding officer who’d led us this far, had both had the same shocked reaction to seeing us.

Cheese Louise. Is it just me or does he look even worse than the last time I saw him? His hairline had receded further, and the dark circles under his eyes had gotten darker too. Just looking at him made me worry about him.

“Old man... Here, take this.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

I took out a Super Potion from Inventory and handed it over to him. He accepted the bottle from me with a puzzled expression.

“Think of it as a nutritional tonic. Drinking it will dispel basically anything bad weighing your body down, so take a sip if you feel like you’re on the verge of passing out.”

Well, the effects are a bit strong, so it’s possible it might work too *well.*

“I... Thank you. To tell you the truth, I have not been sleeping much lately. Perhaps my condition is worse than I realized if it compelled you to give me such an item.”

After letting out a self-deprecating laugh, the mayor composed himself and continued speaking.

“Right, then, demon lord. What brings you here? I understand Ser Nell’s visit, but yours...”

“I’ve decided to marry Nell, so I figured I’d drop by and tell you about it. Also a good chance to discuss anything related to this.”

“...I beg your pardon? Wh-What did you just say?”

“I’ve decided to marry Nell. But you know how she’s a hero? Well, I thought we should settle things on that front, all things considered. Ergo, I’m here.”

After hearing what I said, the mayor rubbed the spot between his eyebrows like his head hurt something fierce.

“Hold... Hold on, please. A demon lord is marrying a hero? Wh-What in the world happened to bring about such an outcome? M-More importantly, is he telling the truth, Ser Nell?”

“Um, well...y-yes, he is.”

Next to me, Nell gave him a small nod, her cheeks slightly red. It got me right in the feels every time she acted like this. She was like a cute little animal. *Sneaky, hero. Very sneaky.* But I’d allow it because she was cute.

“Well, there is truly a lot—too much, perhaps—that I would like to say on the matter. It does not concern me, however, so I will not interfere. The only thing I *will* say is that I wish you happiness.”

“Cool, thanks.”

I replied to the exhausted old man with a grin.

“Right, then. Considering the circumstances, it seems this concerns you as well. For now, I shall pretend I did not hear what you just told me. We will deal with it at another time. What’s important right now concerns Ser Nell.”

“What exactly occurred while I was gone?”

The mayor’s face turned grim at Nell’s nervously posed question.

“I’ll start by relating to you this country’s current predicament.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The stagecoach rocked and swayed. Outside the windows, lush, green fields spread as far as the eye could see, and blue skies stretched endlessly above them. I found myself getting a little bored with the repetitiveness of the scenery. Another carriage, similar to the one we were riding in, moved along ahead of us. Armed soldiers surrounded both of our coaches, serving as escorts on our journey.

Then, my gaze moved inside the carriage and landed on Nell, who sat across from me, deep in thought. She'd been like this ever since the mayor had given us the lowdown on things. I knew it was kinda inappropriate to think, but the way she looked right now—dejected, her head resting against the wall of the coach—her ethereal beauty reminded me of a painting.

As it turned out, both the situation this country was in and the circumstances surrounding her were fairly complicated. First, the crux of the problem this time around happened to be the insurrection the crown prince had staged. You know, the hot mess I'd thrown myself recklessly into. As we all knew, that particular incident had already been resolved. Thing was, there were some major issues that'd come afterward.

Dozens of conspirators involved in the insurrection orchestrated by the prince, who himself had been being manipulated by demons, had gotten their heads literally chopped off. This had caused temporary political instability in the capital. The government had been able to recover quickly enough because of the king's desperate efforts, which had included a dramatic change in essential personnel, but not long after, other countries had begun interfering.

Alisia's neighbors, as well as other countries with whom it had uneasy relationships, had noticed that it was in a volatile state and taken advantage of the situation. They'd engaged in border skirmishes, intentionally conducted military exercises, and initiated trade disputes. In short, they'd commenced harassment campaigns that were anything but subtle.

This news hadn't surprised me all that much. Considering its powerful status among human nations, strategies along these lines were par for the course. Regardless, though, their actions had still caused tremors throughout the

kingdom.

Apparently, the hardest part of all this was that Alisia's newly appointed officials were being either headhunted by their enemies or straight-up coerced into committing espionage. The espionage thing was especially tough, with these people being lured in by bribes. And it didn't stop there. Some officials were leaking confidential information not maliciously but because they weren't used to their roles, while others were spilling government secrets by falling for honeypot traps.

The reason Alfiro's old mayor hadn't been sleeping much was that, in addition to running his town, he'd been tasked with cleaning up these constant messes. Poor guy'd been commuting back and forth between Alfiro and the royal capital all the time. The way the king and his people had dealt with the aftermath of the rebellion had led to a considerable decrease in the number of domestic political opponents, but it was obvious to pretty much anyone how exhausting their never-ending workload was.

As for the stuff with Nell, the decrease in national stability also meant a decrease in public safety. The worse public safety became, the more people wanted something to cling to. They sought a refuge to liberate them from their regimented lives and daily anxieties. In Alisia's case, its people clung to two things: the Church and the hero.

The Church made sense. People in this world died from illness and injury a lot more often than people on Earth did. On top of that, life here was a struggle every day, and some couldn't even be sure they'd be getting a next meal. It made sense, then, that they would submit to religion, especially if being a faithful adherent came with the promise of their life being better.

Which brought us to heroes. As far as this country—no, as far as the humans of this world were concerned, heroes were the people featured in the bedtime stories their parents had told them as kids. The champions of eld.

Nell actually told me stories about this world's heroes a while back. To summarize, "Heroes are champions who save people and guide them. The people of this country feel safe because a hero lives among them." Something like that.

Except, as one object the masses clung to, Nell had been on a military expedition in the demon world during a time of great political turmoil. Basically, the fact that a hero, whose entire existence revolved around protecting the nation, hadn't been *in* the country when shit was going down posed a serious problem.

Even though Nell's absence from the country had been to protect it in the first place, the people didn't know that. This was a critical situation that wasn't to be made light of, but damn, the folks of this era were *idiots*.

Once they'd realized she wasn't around, they'd started hounding the Church, which had played a vital role in her education, with questions like "Why isn't she here?!" Since the expedition to the demon world had been a top secret operation, the Church hadn't been free to just blab about it willy-nilly, making its only response "You need not trouble yourselves over the hero, for even now, she fights for God and God's children."

In reality, the Church had only spoken the truth. The whole thing should've ended right then and there, with the masses realizing they'd been carried away by rumors. But then, Nell'd actually disappeared completely. That was the month or so she'd spent in my dungeon. And the one letter she sent during her stay... Well, it hadn't amounted to a whole lot.

With her whereabouts unknown, both the Church and the kingdom's key personnel had fallen into chaos, running around in confusion as they'd tried to sort out the situation. To use an easy-to-understand example, it was like a country not knowing what'd happened to its sole nuclear weapon. That was how bad things'd gotten.

Of course, seeing as she was a human being and not actually a weapon, they couldn't just keep her contained to one place at all times. Plus, I thought it must've been pretty normal for them to lose contact with her once in a while, what with the dangers inherent to her role as a hero. Occupational hazard and all that jazz. *I guess the timing was just really bad, huh?*

What made the whole thing worse was that one of the morons hired during the governmental staff shakeup had let slip to the public that no one actually knew where exactly she was. Naturally, that'd only fanned the flames of

commotion even more. There was also the fact that she'd gone missing once before, when the Church hadn't known where she was or if she was even still alive—which was also related to my dungeon. Specifically, that'd been her very first visit.

Because she'd disappeared for a second time, people'd started questioning her abilities as a hero. I still hadn't met any human who even came close to her potential, but in this world, you had to prove yourself with real achievements. Not to mention that normal people couldn't actually see others' stats.

So, with all of these adverse conditions one after another, there was currently an uproar in the royal capital about dismissing her from her "post" as a Hero. The rotten cherry on top of this garbage sundae was that these people hadn't even known if she was safe or not before pushing for this.

I couldn't decide if too many coincidences had piled up or if she'd just ended up being that horrendously unlucky. I knew one thing for sure, though: I bore a tremendous amount of the responsibility for the situation she'd been forced into. The main cause of all this was me keeping her in the dungeon for way too long.

"..."

I watched her silently for some time while thinking. *I... What should I do? What do I want from her?*

I needed to make things clear once and for all. Though Lefi was the one who'd kicked things off between us, I couldn't deny that I loved Nell too. I had no intention of ever letting her go and fully planned on us living our lives together from here on out. But because she had deep ties to the human country, doing things my way would put a massive burden on her.

"Nell."

"Hmm? What is it, Mr. Yuki?"

I hesitated for a second, but then I leaned over, picked her up from her seat, which was across from mine, and plopped her down on my lap. Her warmth and nose-tickling scent soothed me.

"Whoa! M-Mr. Yuki?"

“Maaan, I love how warm your body is! Feels great!”

“What in the world prompted this?!”

After letting out a dramatic “ha ha ha,” I kept talking.

“So, Nell. What do you wanna do?”

“Do you...mean in regards to me being a Hero?”

“Yeah. What do you wanna do?”

“...”

She pressed her lips together tightly at my words.

“Me, I...I want to be with you, Nell. Forever and ever. And it’s not just me. I’m dead sure everyone in the dungeon feels the same way. But you’re a hero for a human country. Unlike the rest of us, you have something else binding you.”

“Yes...”

“Why are you a hero?”

Nell opened and closed her mouth for a bit before softly, haltingly speaking again.

“I... I want to...help people.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And... And I thought that by becoming a hero, I-I could make life easier for—for my mother, who raised me by herself.”

“Yeah.”

“But right now, I want...I want to be with all of you more than I want to be a hero. I was so focused on—on living out the rest of my life as a hero until a short while ago that I’ve come to d-despise myself for acting so indecisively lately. Which has only led to...to me troubling everyone. I hate it.”

Her voice made it sound like she was choking back tears.

“I’m so...so tired of doing things in half measures. I just... I don’t know what to do about myself anymore... I don’t—I don’t know what I want anymore...”

Nell sniffled and hiccuped throughout her rushed monologue. Then, tears

started falling from her eyes as big, fat drops, like a dam she'd desperately been holding back had finally broken.

"Hnghhh! M-Mr. Yuki..."

She might've been a hero, but she was also just a girl. That girl buried her face in my shoulder, her face crumpling as she sobbed in earnest. I gently rubbed her head, over and over again.



◇◇◇

In a certain noble's mansion, a party was taking place. The flamboyantly dressed attendees' brilliant, contrived smiles matched the room's dazzling decorations. Three men stood off in a corner, speaking quietly to each other so others wouldn't hear while keeping an eye on their surroundings.

"What? The hero has appeared?"

"Indeed. One of my subordinates spotted her in that frontier town, Alfiro. She's currently en route here, to the capital, in a stagecoach."

The dark-bearded man spoke to the one who smiled faintly and had a gentlemanlike aura. Their extremely portly companion, the third member of their group, snorted derisively at their exchange.

"Hmph. The town run by that upstart country bumpkin? He's the king's dog, isn't he? It makes sense then that he would get along with the Church's minions, considering how that organization curries favor with the king the same way he does. Infuriating curs."

"Now, now. Let's not say anything we'll regret. After all, when she returns, she'll find that she no longer has a place to call home."

The gentlemanly individual's pleasant smile never wavered, and the obese man responded with a smirk.

"Ah, yes, since you've already extended your reach into the Church."

"Heh heh. Only because of like-minded individuals within it. Like-minded individuals who lament the current circumstances out of an abundance of patriotism, eh?"

"Patriots swayed by bribes, you mean. You aren't concerned about information leaks?"

The man with the dark beard seemed a bit worried, so the gentlemanly individual replied reassuringly.

"Not at all, so there's really no cause for concern. They have been of the same mind as us since the beginning. It wouldn't be metaphorical to call them comrades."

"Ah, I see. My apologies, then."

“Please. There’s no need. In truth, we have gained many comrades through the methods you espouse.”

The bearded man and gentleman laughed together.

“Yet that hero also has a great many allies. Do you not think her sudden reappearance may inconvenience us?”

The gentlemanly individual nodded in understanding at the obese man’s words.

“Indeed, and I’ve already made my move. All we have to do is wait here in the capital for her return, after which she herself will tighten the noose around her neck.”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Daaang, this place is fancy. Not that I expected anything less of the inn a noble stays at. But my castle is ten times fancier!”

“Mr. Yuki, I know your castle is extravagant, but I think it’s best if you don’t say such things out loud, hm?”

“Does this sass mean you’ve calmed down, Nell?”

“Oh, um, y-yes. Although I’m incredibly embarrassed right now...”

Her shy expression and the way she was idly scratching her cheek were proof of that. After she’d finished sobbing her heart out, she’d fallen asleep, exhausted from all the crying she’d done. I’d enjoyed staring at her cute sleeping face up until a short time ago, when the carriage had finally stopped.

She looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Cleansing herself of the turbulent emotions seemed to have helped her clear her mind and organize her thoughts on everything. *I wonder what she...* Well, whatever she’d decided, I’d hear about it eventually. I was just relieved to see her smile again.

It was already nighttime. We weren’t in the royal capital yet, though. Instead, we were stopping over in a town that marked the halfway point. Riding Rir would’ve gotten us to the capital in just a few hours, but normal stagecoaches weren’t nearly as fast as him. My big, fluffy buddy could travel at the speed of a passenger train.

That was why we needed to spend a night in this town, where we were currently in the process of securing rooms at the lodge Alfiro's mayor used on a lot of his travels. He was traveling with us too. Well, more accurately, the old man's subordinate was waiting for the inn staff to finish checking us in.

After learning that Nell was safe and sound, the mayor had decided to accompany us on our journey to the royal capital in order to minimize the impact and chaos her return would have. It hadn't taken me long to figure out that the old guy had a pretty high standing within the country right now. The top brass having entrusted him with a lot of issues related to law and order made that real clear. *I'm glad you're getting ahead in life, dude, but don't work too hard.*

"Dem—Lord Yuki, you would be amenable to sharing a room with Ser Nell, yes? You *did* mention that you intend to wed."

The mayor corrected himself before he could finish saying "Demon Lord."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. That's cool, right, Nell?"

She still looked a little embarrassed, but she nodded.

"Don't you think it's a bit late to be asking me that now? I already sleep together with you, Lefi, and the others every night. Although I feel a bit...nervous? Excited? A lot of things, since this will be the first time the two of us are alone..."

"Huh? Why?"

"Nope, never mind!"

I found myself feeling a bit confused by her suspiciously bright smile. Then, I suddenly thought of something and asked her on the spot.

"Okay, so, I probably should have asked this a while ago, but does your affiliation with the Church make you part of the clergy?"

"Huh? Yes, it does."

"Then, um...you're not breaking any rules or anything? Based on what I know of the clergy, they were really strict when it came to stuff like marriage. And, well, I'm technically already a married man. I know polygamy isn't accepted

everywhere either, so I wondered if you might be, like, doing something forbidden."

I'd be the first to admit that I didn't know all that much about religions, but at the same time, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the clergy here swore celibacy to their god. Folks here just gave off those old-school kinda vibes. Of course, I had zero plans to actually hand Nell over to any god or gods, I just needed to know what I was up against so I could handle the situation.

I couldn't deny that I was a little nervous to hear her answer. She stared at me for a second, her eyes wide. And then, for some reason, she started giggling.

"Wh-What the heck?"

"Oh, you know, just thinking that you really *should* have asked that a while ago."

"Ugh, jeez. My bad, okay? I only remembered to ask after we got here. Gimme a break."

"You really don't care about such details, do you, Mr. Yuki? Maybe that's why you're marrying a hero despite being a demon lord?"

"Sh-Shut it. You should be grateful to my carelessness for getting us hitched, woman."

"Tee hee. Yes, indeed. I am ever so thankful for that part of you. In any case, I have no issues with the sleeping arrangements. I've heard of such religions, but my God is quite magnanimous when it comes to such matters. The presence of love permits a great many deeds, you see."

"Huh. Interesting. We're good to share a room, then?"

"Yes, we are."

Nell beamed at me. *Damn. She's too friggin' cute.*

"Ahem!"

That cough brought us back to our senses, and we jerked around to face the owner of the voice. It was the old mayor, whose expression was both warm and exasperated at the same time.

“Though I am quite pleased to see how strong your bond is, would you mind taking the key to your room from my subordinate?”

“R-Right.”

“I-I apologize, Lord Mayor!”

“No, no. It’s fine. I am, in fact, relieved to know how famously you two are getting on—much more so than I imagined. You two make a charming sight.”

He smiled ruefully.

Anyway. We took our room key from the escort who’d finished the checkin process. He also told us our room’s location.

“W-Well, then, Lord Mayor. We’ll be retiring to our room now.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna call it a night.”

“Understood. We have an early start tomorrow as well, so I suggest you rest up thoroughly.”

A tinge of awkwardness still lingered in the air as Nell and I split off from the mayor and his people, all of us heading to our rooms.

But we didn’t enter ours. My body twitched, and I stopped abruptly on the spot.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Mr. Yuki?”

“Aaargh... Goddammit. Just when I thought I could relax. Nell, keep your weapon at the ready.”

“Nh!”

Without questioning me at all, she wrapped her sword belt around her waist, her gaze sharp.

“What is it? Is something the matter?”

The old man mayor had noticed the change in us and called out from the opposite end of the hallway, his expression puzzled.

“There’s a group of monsters heading toward this town. A huge number of them.”

“What?!”

“How far away are they, Mr. Yuki?”

“Pretty close. I think they’ll be here in less than half an hour.”

While I answered her, I opened Maps to check what my Scout ability had picked up on. *Yup. I was right.* The monsters were charging straight toward this town from the same direction we’d traveled. As far as a breakdown went, there were orcs, ogres, goblins, and the like. Basically, they were all humanoid monsters—though these species weren’t treated humanely. And this particular horde was unusual in that there were goblins and orcs riding wolf-and boar-like monsters. “Riders,” they were called.

They show up almost right after we arrive in this town? Is this timing a coincidence, or...?

And then. *Clang. Clang.* The alarm bell started ringing, echoing throughout the entire town. It sent the inn’s other customers into a panic. We could hear the inn staff’s raised voices all the way here as they desperately tried to calm folks down.

“Well, it seems you are correct, Lord Yuki. You were able to recognize the threat before even the night guard on alert outside. You are truly a demon lord.”

“Gotta have a nose for things like this in the Forest, y’know? Otherwise, you can’t survive there. More importantly, old man, you’re a bigwig, right? You should definitely evacuate to a safe place, and fast.”

“No. Times like this are precisely when nobility must lead the charge. Sir Gamdia!”

“Yes, my lord!”

The former military commander, who’d been on standby next to him the whole time, snapped to attention.

“I’m loath to cut short our escorts’ rest, but we need them back. We make for the residence of this town’s mayor. There must be a way we can assist.”

“Understood. I’ll gather them immediately.”

With that, he raced off to summon his subordinates, his movements brisk like a soldier's.

"Mr. Yuki, please... Won't you help me?"

"Like you even have to ask. If that's what you want, of course I will."

I grinned and shrugged nonchalantly. She responded with a smile of her own, her grave expression relaxing a bit.

"Ser Nell, Lord Yuki. I shall head for the mayor's residence. What are your plans?"

"Hmm... How 'bout I drive 'em back? I doubt I'll be able to rest now, and also she asked me to help. As far as an exact strategy goes, I can decide after I do some recon from the sky. Nell, what are you gonna do?"

"I'll head to the town's outer wall. Mr. Yuki, which direction are the monsters arriving from?"

"The same one we came from. I didn't sense hide nor hair of the things until a few minutes ago."

"Got it. I'll head to the large front gate—the one used to enter town. Mr. Yuki, once you have a handle on the situation, would you let me know the details?"

"Yeah, I'll meet up with you as soon as I see everything with my own eyes. There you have it, old man. We're gonna do what we need to do."

"Understood. Then I shall adjust accordingly as well. You know, were I alone in such a situation as I usually am, I would need to gird my loins and make the necessary preparations myself. So, truthfully, I find relief in hearing you two discuss your tactics."

"Yeah, honestly, you can chill if you want. Right, Nell?"

"Mr. Yuki, I would suggest that you don't drop your guard like you normally do, or else you'll find yourself in yet another tight spot. It happens to you way too often, hm?"

"Y-You got it. Don't drop my guard and be serious. That about right?"

"Ha ha! Seems I need not worry about either of you, then. But please, do be

careful. I pray for your good fortune.”

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“Lord Nigella!”

The mayor of Alfiro, Releaux, stormed into this town’s—Senguria’s—mayor’s residence as if he were launching his own assault.

“Lord Releaux?! Why are *you* here?!”

“Coincidence. I stopped here on my way to the capital, but perhaps it was fortuitous considering this emergency. Forgive me if I’m being impertinent, but I thought I might be able to offer my aid, so here I am.”

“I see. Though this is an unfortunate event for you, I must admit that I’m grateful for your presence. It heartens me tremendously to have you, once known as the God of War, here.”

Releaux inadvertently gave a wry smile in response to the Senguria mayor’s words.

“That’s all in the past. In any case, please tell me everything you know. I heard monsters are racing here to attack?”

“Word travels fast, eh? Yes, that’s correct. The night watchman confirmed a sighting of a monster horde heading toward our town. At least a few hundred, if not more.”

“Quite a lot.”

“Indeed. All some variety of orc, ogre, or goblin, and all Human-level monsters. It’s... It’s a stampede. There is no other way to describe it. We had no indications beforehand either.”

Both their expressions were grim, but a slight smile curved Releaux’s lips.

“In this case, though, it very well may be a blessing in disguise.”

“What do you mean?”

“Actually, this might not turn out to be so unfortunate after all. It pains me to constantly rely on them, but since they have decided to act and handle the situation, it’s up to me to worry about the aftermath.”

Nigella stared at Releaux in bemusement as the mayor of Alfiro muttered to himself.

"All righty, let's check out the assholes who interfered with our bedtime."

As per usual, I was flying around in the sky with my Stealth ability active. Using my superpowered demon lord vision, I scoped out the direction the monsters were coming from.

"Hot dang, that's crazy."

A swarm of monsters, one big enough to fill the woods surrounding the town to capacity and then some, charged relentlessly toward us. Not as many as the horde of ants I'd encountered once upon a time, but an overwhelming sight nonetheless. These guys were totally uncoordinated, though. Maybe because they were from all different species, or maybe because they were just dumb, they fought with each other while racing in the same direction.

Like Nell had said, I had a tendency to drop my guard. Or, to be more precise, I didn't think hard enough about things, which led to failure. That was why I had to be extra careful now. Based on what I was seeing, though, I doubted I'd have to work all that hard to exterminate the entire lot. I mean, I was pretty much a pro at one-versus-many by this point, considering how many battles I'd been in.

"So, the problem's over *here*, is it?"

My eyes moved from outside the town to inside it. *Ehhh, I'll take care of it later.* It didn't look like shit was about to go down on that front just yet, meaning their work was probably already done. First thing on the agenda for me, then, was dealing with the monsters.

Now that my recon was done, I went looking for Nell to share information, and... *Bingo.* She was on top of the town's outer wall, racing back and forth down the passageways outfitted with cannons and other defensive equipment. She moved alongside the soldiers, helping them stock up on arrows and prepare cannonballs. I could tell that the sudden attack had caught the garrison with their thumbs up their asses.

There were others besides Nell doing their part too. Probably just regular

civilians given that they were unarmed, but they were rushing around just like she was, doing whatever they could to help the soldiers from inside the defensive walls.

Oh, wow. Look at everyone working together so well. As I thought that, I realized that the sudden attack had probably left them stranded here because there just wasn't enough time to escape and take refuge. Helping the garrison was their only option if they wanted to survive.

I landed stealthily in a hidden alcove and put my wings away. Then, I waited until no humans could see me before dissolving Stealth and heading over to Nell.

"Nell."

"Mr. Yuki! Um, I see you're wearing that mask again."

"Yup. A masked man next to the hero. Makes me a more believable ally, dontcha think?"

"Well...I guess it's fine."

Nell gave that rueful answer as I shrugged carelessly. Just like she'd said, I was wearing the same mask I'd worn the last time I was in the royal capital. Thinking about what would happen after all this, I'd decided that concealing my identity would make it easier for me to act. And, most importantly, it was my favorite. Tee hee.

I spoke again while helping her with the equipment resupply.

"Anyway, Nell, lemme tell you what I saw. Goblins and orcs. A few ogres that looked kinda strong. Definitely a lot of 'em, but all small fry. The two of us can definitely annihilate them."

"No, they're not actually what anyone would consider small fry. But because I've accompanied you and Rir on your monster hunts in the Forest, I find myself thinking, 'Oh, well, that's not terrible at all,' and it makes me a bit scared of myself."

"It's just like you said, though. I'll lose if I drop my guard, so I'm trying extra hard not to do that. In any case, I plan on fighting them a bit further back where

I'll be out of sight, so I can't help you out too much. Wouldn't be right if I stole the spotlight from the hero, ya feel?"

"I really don't think you have to worry about that."

Nell looked confused by my response. I just shook my head at her.

"No, I *do* have to. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but my basic fighting style is flashy. I go all out with firepower like the idiot I am, whether it's magic or brute force. I can totally see myself attracting way more attention than you, which wouldn't be great for you right now because of your weak standing. Can't have rumors cropping up about how 'the hero is weaker than her companion,' right?"

"Urk. You're right."

She looked pensive, but I kept talking in an intentionally light tone.

"Here's the thing, Nell. Think of this as your chance to show the haters up for good. You're more powerful than other humans and it's not even close, so prove your strength to them by stomping these monsters into the dirt."

"W-Well, I'm not so sure..."

"I am. This is totally your golden opportunity. These chumps are all sitting ducks ready and waiting for us to murder 'em."

Nell kept quiet for a while. Then, she finally gave me a small nod.

"Okay. Okay, understood. I'll try my best."

"Nice. That's the spirit."

I grinned, then almost immediately hardened my expression. I leaned in close to her before whispering so that others couldn't hear us.

"One last thing for ya. Listen very carefully. I'm getting an enemy signal from within the town. But there aren't any monsters inside. You understand what that means, yeah?"

"Nh! Should... Should we do something about that? The enemy will continue operating in the background while we fight."

"No, I think it'll be fine. I plan on keeping my eye on them the whole time, but

I’m pretty sure nothing more will happen. We can leave it well enough alone for now.”

I’d dispatched an enhanced Evil Eye that was secretly recording everything as we spoke. It was bigger than the old type, but that just meant a big fat power-up for its internal battery. It could run continuously for about two hours now. *Mwa ha ha. As my dungeon grows, my secret gadgets, too, continue to evolve.*

“All right, looks like the monsters’ll be here soon. There you have it, Nell. The enemy is weak. Annihilation won’t be too hard. But keep your guard up even after we finish the job.”

“Understood. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Good. You ready?”

She nodded. Then, I stepped up onto the wall’s edge and jumped down in a single bound. After a few moments of being airborne, a heavy shock wave ran through the soles of my feet. I’d successfully landed on the ground. With that done, I turned around and looked up at Nell, beckoning for her to follow suit.

“Urk... H-Here I go!”

She hesitated for a moment before determination shone in her expression. And then, aiming for where I was, she leaped. I extended both arms to catch her falling body.

“Gah... That was super scary.”

“Okay, but with your physical abilities, a fall from that height wouldn’t even hurt you.”

“Doesn’t change the fact it was scary!”

I grinned at her outburst before setting her down.

“Ah! Two people fell down!”

“Wh-What?! At a time like this?! Dammit! Hurry and open the gate! You folks down there! Are you all right?!”

Soldiers’ panicked voices drifted down to us from the top of the outer wall.

“Ah, crap. Nell, they’re coming out.”

“Right, leave it to me.”

She stretched out a hand, calling up her magic.

“Absolute Barrier.”

A giant wall erupted from her palm. It was a truly monstrous barrier, running as far along the town’s rampart as I could see.

“Wh-What is this?!”

“A wall?!”

Shouts of surprise and confusion rained down from above us.

“Wooow. So this is your barrier magic, eh? It’s my first time seeing it.”

“Oh, right, I never showed it to you, Mr. Yuki. Yes, indeed, this is my barrier magic. My unique ability. We don’t have to worry about taking unnecessary damage from things like stray projectiles now. On the off chance something *does* happen inside, I’m sure you can fly in undetected, yes?”

“Yeah.”

I decided to put Nell’s barrier to the test. First, I knocked on it lightly. Then, I punched it hard. Both times, I could feel how solid the thing was. *Ouch.* Yup, this thing would totally keep the soldiers inside. We could deal with the monsters without having to worry about the town garrison. In short, it was time for us to raise some serious hell.

“Nell, I know this wall wiped out half your magical reserve, so here, drink up.”

While I spoke, I took one of my rarely used bottles of MP Potion out of Inventory and tossed it to her.

“Thank you. Ack, so bitter.”

She took it obediently from me, downed the liquid in one gulp, and made a face. From next to her, I reached back into Inventory and grabbed my beloved sword, En, real name Zaien. She was unsheathed.

“En.”

“Mrgh... Is it my turn?”

“Yeah. Sorry, kiddo, were you sleeping? My bad for waking you up out of the blue.”

“I’m...fine.”

En responded to me telepathically, still sounding a little sleepy.

Yup, she was on this trip with me and Nell. I’d brought her along because she was my most cherished weapon and I would never let go of her, and she’d been nice enough to stay in her sword form while she was in Inventory to give me and Nell some privacy. I’d planned on giving her a little outside time once we were able to take a breather, but between riding on Rir and then being confined inside the stagecoach, I just hadn’t found the chance. Because of that, I’d decided to take her out in our room at the inn, but that obviously hadn’t worked either seeing as we were, y’know, *here*.

I felt awful for making her endure shit like this all the time. Once we got back to the dungeon, I’d play with her until she was so tired that she had no choice but to sleep.

“Mr. Yuki...”

A touch of anxiety colored Nell’s voice. I switched focus from En in my hands to what was in front of us.

Countless torches burned within the darkness, their flames wiggling and dancing. The vibrations on the ground overlapped with each other, transforming the sounds of their many footsteps into a single tremor that shook the earth as they drew near.

I hefted En onto my shoulder and faced my whole body forward. Then, I turned my head to look at Nell. Grinning behind my mask, I spoke.

“All right. Let’s do this.”

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“Oh, right. Nell, lemme see your holy sword for a sec.”

“Huh? Okay, sure. Here you go.”

At Yuki’s words, Nell handed over her holy sword, Durendal, without any fuss. He took it with his free hand, the one not holding En, and scrutinized the blade intently.

“Um, Mr. Yuki? What are you doing? I don’t think my sword is supposed to be vibrating like that, you know.”

Additionally, the pale light usually emanating from her blade was growing steadily brighter, dispelling the darkness of the night. It became so blinding that it even made her squint.

“All righty, that should do it. I just poured a whole lotta magic into your holy sword.”

“What?”

“You can have it back now. When the enemies are finally here, I want you to imagine yourself shooting the magic inside it super far. One shot should be enough to eliminate a bunch of them. Also, if things get *really* hairy, I want you to call me right away. Don’t even think, just yell for me. Got it?”

“Oh, r-right. Understood. If at any point it seems like I won’t be able to handle them, I’ll make sure to summon you, Mr. Yuki.”

Nell took her holy sword from Yuki, and he waved at her. In the next instant, using some kind of mysterious magic, he disappeared, seemingly melting into the darkness along with En, whom he had hefted onto his shoulder.

“So, pouring magic into my sword...resulted in this?”

Once Yuki had vanished from her sight, Nell dropped her gaze to her weapon, which continued shaking and emitting fierce light, and muttered to herself in an astonished tone.

“Grrraaawr!!!”

She jerked her head up when she heard that primal roar. What she saw was a

swarm of monsters charging toward her, their thunderous pace shaking the very ground beneath her. She hadn't forgotten their circumstances, but without her realizing it, the horde had shortened the distance between them considerably. At the rate they were going, they would arrive in less than five minutes.

"I don't really understand any of this..."

But she understood that he wanted her to do this. Unleash the Magic Edge. She had been taught swordsmanship by the butler—the previous hero—who was regarded as a vaunted champion in the human world. And he excelled at this particular technique. It involved concentrating magic at the tip of one's sword and letting it loose to slash everything in its line of fire without actually cutting it down.

Nell wasn't very proficient with the Magic Edge, however. Every time she tried to use it, she would lose control of the magic, leading to an attack range that was unnecessarily wide. *Do I need to worry about Mr. Yuki when I attempt it?* He was more powerful than her, though, as well as having been the one to ask her to perform it. Even if she unleashed the explosive technique, she was certain that he would dodge the attack should he find himself in its way.

She shook off the unnecessary thoughts running through her mind, then gripped her sword firmly in both hands, lifting it high.

"Haah..."

A deep exhale. The sounds around her faded into the distance as she focused her whole self on her sword. *Such incredible power.* The magic suffusing her weapon felt like it would run wild at any moment in its forced containment within the instrument. And running in tandem with the physical blade was the razor sharpness of the magical blade.

Keeping her awareness focused on her sword, she looked ahead. Perhaps owing to their sighting of a human, each monster in the pack bellowed and raised its weapon high overhead. They were so close now that she could make out each individual silhouette, see the bloodlust spilling from their eyes. She clearly saw goblins riding wolf-type monsters and orcs riding boar-type monsters.

At this distance, I can hit them.

“Hyah!”

Nell swung her sword aggressively at the horde of monsters racing toward her. With it came an explosion, giving off an earsplitting roar and a violent flash of light. Her clothes fluttered vigorously under the onslaught of the gust of wind created by the explosion. The powerful shock wave shook the trees and plants in her immediate vicinity so hard that she wouldn’t have been surprised to see them uprooted entirely.

The Magic Edge blasted away everything in a straight line as well as anything nearby. It left behind a fissure so deep that it could have been mistaken for one formed by an earthquake. The attack rushed forward seemingly endlessly, slashing through everything in its path, before finally disappearing. All that was left was an enormous pile of corpses and a massive crater in the earth—a disastrous ground zero in the middle of the forest.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“S-Such incredible might!”

“The glitter from that sword... C-Could it be a holy sword?!”

“A holy sword?! That would mean...the girl is a hero?!”

“I-I see! It certainly makes s-sense for a hero to unleash an attack of such formidable strength!”

Nell heard excited voices coming from behind her, atop the town’s outer wall. They were singing the praises of the hero. In front of her, the surviving monsters hurriedly stopped their charge and stared at the evidence of her Magic Edge attack in bemused shock.

“...”

She, too, remained silent and motionless, her face stiff with amazement. Her eyes lowered to look at the tip of her sword as she tried to understand what just happened. *Mr. Yuki?! How much magic did you even put into this?!* Though the words didn’t escape her lips, in her heart, she screamed them with all her might.

“Whoa. That was Nell, huh?”

The explosion gave off a *boom* that sounded like a bomb going off. Immediately after, chunks of monster flesh started falling all over the place. I muttered those words as I watched it happen. *Well,* that’s *super gross.* It was literally raining blood.

“What...a loud sound.”

“Amazing, right? I call that the Nell-and-Yuki Special. It’s our combo move.”

“Yes...amazing. But it would be even more amazing if you and I did it, Master.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, you’re right. The two of us would probably set the place on fire.”



The fact En hated being outdone was a trait she’d clearly picked up from a

certain someone. I grinned at her words before weaving my way through the horde of monsters, Stealth active. They stood frozen in place, stupefied by Nell's attack.

This time around, I'd decided to play the role of a supporting character. I couldn't steal the limelight because the whole point of this operation was to make sure she stood out. But I didn't want to overwhelm her or risk her getting hurt either, so my job in all this was to weaken the enemy as stealthily as possible.

How was I going about this? Well, when monsters moved in huge packs like this, there was only one effective way to weaken them: by destroying whoever was giving the orders. In short, the boss.

"Sup, ya big bastard?"

Deep in the enemy camp, I deactivated Stealth and called out to the thing in front of me.

"Grr... Grr..."

The monster scowled ferociously at me, not even agitated by my sudden appearance. He'd picked up on my presence a while ago. I could tell by the fact that, y'know, he'd been glaring in my direction since before I'd even dissolved my Stealth ability.

The monsters' leader was an ogre. A massive mofo around twice my size, wearing nothing but a loincloth. He had lacerations all over his body, and one of the horns jutting out of his forehead was broken in half. His scarred and battered appearance was a testament to the many battles he'd seen.

For a weapon, he had a club roughly my height. The thing was rough and boorish, like it'd been forcibly carved out of a tree. *I feel like it'll hurt if he flings that at me.* I doubted it could cause me any real damage besides pain, though. Or, well, it *probably* couldn't.

Race: Ogre

Class: Ogre King

Level: 72

I had actually confirmed that he was the leader of this pack of monsters via Maps as well as my aerial recon earlier. It made sense considering that most of the group was made up of goblins and orcs, both of which were weaker races than ogres. If I recalled the classification system correctly, goblins were categorized as Hazardous, while orcs and ogres were Human-level monsters, with ogres being ranked higher. In other words, out of all the monsters gathered here, the ogres were the strongest. And within the group of ogres, it was no surprise to me that everyone obeyed this guy, the one with the highest level.

"Gegahgah?!"

"Gugurrr!"

At my sudden appearance, the other monsters around me immediately went on high alert. I could feel their desire to kill me as they yelled. But the ogre-in-chief brought his fist up next to his head and the commotion quieted right away. *That's a leader for ya.* He obviously held the reins here, and he was holding them pretty tight.

Surrounded by his allies like he was, the commander of the monsters was in the perfect position to kill me. He wasn't siccing his subordinates on me, though, and I knew why. It was because he recognized how much stronger I was than him. He understood that it'd be pointless to even try.

"Yo, big boy. I dunno why you're here or what made you come here. You might even have a good reason for being here. But too bad for you, your timing sucks."

"..."

I didn't know if he could understand what I was saying, but the ogre-in-chief remained silent as he stared down at me.

"Well, we're both men. And we gotta face off like this seeing as we're enemies and all. Anyway, I think that's enough chitchat, don't you?"

With that, I held En straight out in front of me, pointing her right at the head ogre. He closed his eyes in response. For a second, I thought he was thinking

about things in silence, but then they suddenly snapped open and he bared his insanely sharp tusks at me in a savage smile.

Tightening his grip on his club, he readied himself for battle. Seemed to have signaled or instructed the other monsters somehow too because within moments, the area around us opened up and we found ourselves in a special ring.

“Heh heh. Gotta level with ya: I was actually hoping this’d be your answer. You get what I mean, right?”

“Grrraaawr!”

The ogre-in-chief bellowed and swung his club overhead. I grinned broadly before taking up my own stance, wielding En sideways.

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“You there. Might I ask you something?”

“Wha— L-Lord Releaux?! Wh-Why are you here?!”

“Hmm? Have we met before?”

“Yes, about five years ago now. I served under your command while this country was at war with its neighbor. I’m deeply grateful for the experience. Thanks to your leadership, both I and my subordinates survived.”

The commanding officer of Senguria’s garrison saluted Releaux, who had left the other mayor’s residence and was now walking along the pathway on top of the town’s defensive wall.

“Ah, I see. I’m honored to hear you say so. As for my presence here, well, it’s a coincidence.”

Releaux squeezed the other man’s hand in a firm handshake before continuing.

“More importantly, there’s something I’d like to ask. How is the battle progressing? This translucent wall...I wager it’s the hero’s magic?”

The commanding officer nodded in response to the question from Alfiro’s mayor, who was gazing upon the “wall” surrounding the rampart.

“Yes, I do believe it is. Before the battle even started, the young lady who is evidently the hero constructed this wall, preventing us from venturing outside.”

What Releaux saw beyond the wall was the young hero, cutting down the invading monsters in a single stroke. The disparity between their combat capabilities was so great that it made one wonder who the true aggressor was.

“Mm... It seems I need not have worried, then. I apologize for my next request. I know very well that I’m an outsider here, but might you not provide me with a few details on the situation?”

“O-Of course, my lord! And in no way do I consider you an outsider!”

The commanding officer spoke hurriedly, then continued respectfully sharing information with Releaux.

“She is responsible for stopping the first monster unit completely in its tracks. As you can see, their second unit isn’t faring very well against her either. Additionally, my own unit has suffered no injuries or fatalities.”

Releaux turned his gaze to the soldiers stationed atop the rampart. Fire lit their eyes as they shouted words of encouragement down to the hero. *This is the only support they can provide since her magical barrier is keeping them sequestered within.*

He found himself smiling a little at the garrison’s state. As his eyes once more swept over the scene below, he realized that he couldn’t spot the young man who should have been with her. He voiced his concern out loud.

“I have another question, if you would. Is she fighting alone? There’s no young man with her?”

“I couldn’t tell for certain whether or not the person who jumped down with her was a young man, but I believe they were an attendant or some such. You’re right, though. I don’t see the other person either.”

The commanding officer’s words forced Releaux into a thoughtful silence for a while. *Could he possibly be fighting deep within the enemy’s ranks for the sake of Ser Nell’s reputation?* If he had gone down with her, there was no doubt that he had headed off to battle.

Considering that they couldn't see him anywhere, however, he must have meant that he was fighting in a location hidden from them. The only reason he would deliberately choose to conceal himself...was to avoid being conspicuous? By doing so and leaving the young hero alone here, the citizenry would bear witness to her abilities at work. *That must be it, because I can't imagine him fleeing.*

"Hmm..."

Releaux couldn't be certain of what exactly the young man was planning, but based on his actions thus far, he thought it likely that the demon lord was using this dangerous situation to restore some of the hero's honor and stained reputation. If that was indeed his aim, he had succeeded in his endeavor, as evidenced by how the soldiers watched on in awe and admiration at the hero's overwhelming power. The mayor of Alfiro could easily imagine tales of her exploits here spreading far and wide in the blink of an eye. She would be spoken about in taverns all over the town and sung of in ballads spun by minstrels.

Goodness gracious. What an astounding character.

"Lord Releaux, how should we proceed?"

"You ask me this even though I'm not the commanding officer here?"

Smiling wryly, Releaux continued speaking, giving the other man's question a proper answer.

"Well, far be it from me to deny your request. We must remain fully prepared. Though she currently has the upper hand, one can never predict the tide of battle. I believe we should be ready to assist the moment it's necessary. Furthermore..."

He paused there, his smile transforming into a goading one.

"Do you not think it a disgrace to us as warriors that we would leave the fighting to a lone girl? There's no denying her might, but I think it prudent to send down a strong unit capable of handling the small fry. Although I'm uncertain if she'll create a gap in the wall for us to march through."

"Ha ha ha! Sir, yes, sir! Truer words have never been spoken! We are indeed

warriors, after all! I'll prove to both the hero and the monsters that my men and I are not merely dull decorations!"

The commanding officer's renewed energy conveyed itself through his cheerful voice. After saluting Releaux, he strode off briskly to gather his unit. Seeing the other man's enthusiasm, though, Releaux found himself experiencing a twinge of worry.

"I hope I didn't make a tremendous mistake by lighting a fire under him..."

Not that it mattered. It was much better to fight side by side with comrades than it was to let one person put on an overwhelming display of force. The garrison's assistance would foster a greater sense of camaraderie among the soldiers as well as with the hero.

"All I can do is say another prayer for this to all work out."

He murmured to himself as he watched the hero fight outside the rampart.

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Strong.

So thought the ogre king. Before him was a humanoid man so thin that he could be broken with just one of the ogre king's hands. But within that man dwelled a tremendous power. It was the same sort of power that rooted enormous trees to the ground, and just like them, he was unwavering.

If the ogre king lunged, his opponent stopped him with one hand. If he unleashed a spinning kick, his opponent caught his foot and threw him. If he swung his club from high above, his opponent easily deflected it with his massive sword. To his surprise, the third time his club struck the man's sword, it ended up slashed through the middle, sending its remnants flying everywhere.

Not much time had passed since their battle began, but the ogre king already understood one thing. This man was so much stronger than him, who was the strongest of all the monsters living in this region. He knew his feelings didn't fit the situation, yet he nevertheless found himself enjoying the fight.

His people were a warrior clan. They respected the mighty and acknowledged their strength. The fate of his race rested on this battle, but happiness, pure and

simple, spread through him at the opportunity to test himself against such a powerful person. It made him feel incredible, like he had caught a glimpse of the vastness of this world.

He must not be the one who destroyed our village, then. Only the profoundly weak acted in such a despicable manner as to slaughter and hang women and children while the warriors were away from the settlement. A man this overwhelmingly powerful, one who had approached him boldly and by his lonesome, had no reason to have taken such underhanded measures. All he would have needed to do was unleash his fighting spirit.

Judging from the craven tactics utilized, the ogre king had assumed that the humans had intended to provoke him and his people. Without giving it another thought, he had dragged his subordinates here in retaliation. Now, however, he realized that the humans had not, in fact, wanted this.

In all his time fighting against humans, he had witnessed their strong subjugate their weak. He had watched them fight among themselves, so he knew how complicated and bizarre the human world was. Therefore, it was entirely possible that on this occasion as well, complicated human circumstances he didn't understand had prompted some coward to want him and his people to attack. In short, he and his clan were being used by this mysterious, spineless person, unwittingly dancing to their tune.

Normally, he would allow his resentment free rein—unshackle his fury and rampage freely, returning as many humans as possible to the earth. But this time, he wasn't all that angry. He knew that even if he died here, once their battle was over, his opponent would unleash a bloodbath upon the coward.

And so, the two of them fought. Not in anger, but in the pure art of war, as warriors. For the time being, all the ogre king wanted to do was revel in his good fortune and enjoy this wonderful battle from the bottom of his heart.

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"Looks like I win, huh?"

"Grr..."

The big guy lay on the ground in defeat. I stomped on his chest and pressed

En's blade against his neck. With a look of resignation, the ogre-in-chief let go of the club I'd cleaved in two. Instead of finishing him off, though, I pulled En back and hopped off him.

"I won't kill you. In exchange, you're gonna take your people and get lost. If you don't wanna cooperate, then that's up to you, just know that I'll annihilate all of you."

I jerked my chin in the direction they'd originally come from, signaling to him where they could hightail it on back to. Killing him would only cause the horde of monsters, already barely under his control, to run amok, which meant more problems for me in the long run. The best option for them and me both was for the monsters to retreat while their leader was still alive.

The ogre-in-chief used his massive, log-like arms to push himself up off the ground. He nodded in acknowledgment of my request, his eyes no longer radiating the violent fighting spirit they'd been up until a short time ago. *Well, damn. This guy's pretty smart for a monster.* It made me wonder if ogres as whole were intelligent or if he was just special. The probability of the former might've actually been high.

The goblins and orcs surrounding us continued to shout in agitation, like they were saying, "Kill him!" But the ogres stood there in silence, their arms folded, after watching me defeat their chief. I figured they probably had nothing to say because I'd gone head-to-head against their leader and come out on top. By nature, they must've had the hearts of warriors. There were all kinds of monsters in this world, after all.

That reminded me of something Lefi had once said: that names change from time to time, generation to generation. Though humanoid species treated them as monsters, it was entirely possible that ogres just hadn't been able to communicate with them due to a language barrier. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn they were just as intelligent as the rest of us. With that in mind, there was a chance that they were treated as humanoids in other parts of this world.

"Grr."

The ogre-in-chief stared briefly at the town's defensive wall, then raised his

voice. I could tell he was giving out some sort of command to the monsters around us.

“P-Pigii?!”

“Gyaaa! Gyaaa!”

All of the non-ogres screeched angrily at him, rebelling against the idea of turning back when their target was right in front of them.

“Graaawwwrrr!!!”

Each and every one of them immediately went quiet when the ogre-in-chief let loose that tremendous roar. He gave me one last glance, grinned knowingly, then turned his back on me.

“Don’t worry. I have no reason to make things worse for you.”

The ogre king didn’t turn around at my words. He just took his monster horde and headed back the way they’d come.

“Oh! M-Mr. Yuki!”

“What’s shakin’, bacon? Sounds like I missed a party here.”

Once I’d made sure that the monsters were reluctantly on the retreat, I’d headed back to where Nell was by the town’s rampart. There, I found enthusiastic voices filling the atmosphere. A whole bunch of soldiers had surrounded Nell, who looked troubled, as they excitedly shouted, “Praise be to the hero! Praise be to the hero!” and swung their weapons high.

I noticed that the barrier she’d put up using her special magic was already gone. *Yes, yes, very good.* The hero’s reputation was clearly back on the rise. Sneaking around in the shadows to help her out had worked wonders in this particular case.

“Ha ha ha! You sure are popular, huh?”

“Mr. Yuki, you knew this would cause a huge commotion, didn’t you?”

“No way, José. All I see is them recognizing the great hero’s tremendous efforts in protecting the town, y’know? Well, a small part of me *did* think it’d be

nice if this happened.”

I shrugged unapologetically, and Nell made an exasperated sound, squeezing her lips together tightly. Not a second later, though, her face relaxed and she smiled ruefully.

“Hmm? Ser Hero, who might this be?”

A man next to Nell went from yelling enthusiastically along with the others to questioning her. His uniform was slightly better quality than everyone else’s, so I assumed he was the commanding officer.

“Oh, um, well, he’s...”

“Her attendant.”

“Right... My attendant...”

I answered for her when she fumbled for the right word to describe me. And what did I get in return for my help? A vaguely displeased look. *Hmm... Ah, got it.*

“Aaand also her fiancé. We’re on our way to the royal capital to discuss some things.”

“M-My word! The hero is betrothed?!”

“Ah— Ah ha ha. I am.”

This time, Nell’s expression underwent a sea change as she nodded happily in response to the commanding officer’s words. *Jeez, what a lovable goof.*

I crouched down behind her legs, thrust my head between them, and stood up, lifting her onto my shoulders.

“Ack! S-Stop that!”

“Feast your eyes, everyone! This is our savior, the esteemed hero!”

“M-Mr. Yuki, what in the world?!”

“Aaaye! Our hero!”

“Our savior!”

“Our goddess!”

The soldiers surrounding us followed my lead and bellowed too.

“And my soon-to-be wife! Mwa ha ha ha! Be jealous of me!”

“Wh-What did he say?!”

“Th-The hero has a man?!”

“B-But I wanted to ask her on a date after this!”

In just a few moments, the soldiers had gone from joining me in cheering for her to revolting against me. They started kicking me—damn hard, I might add—and hurling insults at me. But the kicks of human soldiers had no effect whatsoever on a demon lord’s flesh, so I continued cackling like a madman, completely unbothered.

So, just like that, I wandered around with Nell on my shoulders as she buried her scarlet face in her hands. Never mind the mild sense of bloodlust emanating from the soldiers toward me. While goofing around with them—

“The hero is our savior?! Surely you jest!”

Like a bucket of cold water, a man’s angry voice immediately dampened the celebratory atmosphere brought on by us successfully repelling the monster attack. I turned my head in the direction from which it came and found a lone man. His ordinary clothing made me think he was a townsperson. Everyone else focused on him too, irritation tinging their gazes because he had destroyed our fun.

Ugh, here we go.

“Didn’t the monster arrive *because* of this woman, this so-called hero?!”

“What nonsense are you spouting?! You dare accuse the hero of summoning those godforsaken monsters? You wouldn’t be saying such a thing if you had witnessed her efforts! She worked harder than anyone to drive them back!”

All of the soldiers murmured in agreement, but the man was undeterred by their sentiments. He jabbed a finger at Nell and continued his verbal assault.

“Then explain how a stampede occurs without any warning only when this woman is in town! Do you really think something like that was a coincidence?! The monsters attacked because this woman was here! She’s the reason we

were in danger!”

“I-I would never—”

“Silence, you wolf in sheep’s clothing! The gall to shamelessly call yourself a hero while putting our lives at risk!”

Since she was on my shoulders, I could feel her body trembling violently because of the man’s angry shouting. *Mm... Inch. Resting. So* that’s *why they showed up.*

I cast my gaze around us, observing the people clustered here. Most people stared at the man with their brows knit in disapproval of his behavior. But I noticed a few whose eyes betrayed their misgivings about the situation as they watched Nell, clearly misled by his words. I heard some people voice their doubts out loud, which made me wonder if there were some shills mixed into the group of folks.

Aight, you wanna go? Then let’s go. If that was how our enemy wanted to play the game, they could count me in. I argued with Lefi basically every day of my life, so if they thought they could win a verbal battle against me, they had another thing coming.

Oh, and I’ll kill you later, you son of a bitch. The fact that he’d chosen to insult my woman in front of me obviously meant that he wanted a war with me.

I set Nell back on the ground and pushed her behind me before stepping forward aggressively.

“Huh? And who are *you*?”

The man scowled suspiciously at me, but I ignored his question completely.

“You sound real sure of yourself, dontcha? You really think the hero is the culprit here?”

“Y-Yes, I do! Chaos erupted the moment this infernal woman arrived! She must have done something somewhere, and those monsters came here in retaliation! As far as the timing is concerned, the only reasonable explanation is that she stirred up the trouble herself so she could claim credit for resolving it!”

“You’re saying some funny words, my guy. You mentioned this all went down

the moment she arrived, but tell me, how'd you know we'd be in town today? It took a whole day for a carriage to get us here, and we didn't arrive all that long ago. Almost sounds like you know everything about the hero's movements, hm? Probably have since before we even got here."

The man clammed up immediately. After a few seconds of silence, he spoke again.

"I-I just happened to see the hero exit the coach earlier today. Pure chance."

"Oh, yeah? You saw her get down from the coach, didja? Even though we got off at the inn's stable? Preeetty sure I didn't see you there."

"Kh!"

His face instantly twisted in shock, like he knew he screwed up. Yup, we'd disembarked from the carriage inside the stable, which itself was connected to the inn. And though I called it a stable, it wasn't like the kind you'd find on a farm. No, the inn's amazing stable practically resembled an indoor parking lot.

Lots of VIPs apparently frequented the inn, meaning there were times they had to arrive in secret. So, with that in mind, the stable had been designed in such a way that nobody outside could see inside. Not even a little bit. Its construction on that front was astonishingly thorough.

"The inn we're staying at is a favorite of a local lord we know. Naturally, you can imagine how strictly management runs things there. So there are only three ways you could have been inside the stable when we arrived: as a member of the staff, another inn guest, or an intruder."

I wasn't actually sure if management ran a tight ship at the inn, but I didn't need to since I was talking out of my ass. Just needed my argument to sound convincing.

"So, which one are you? If you're part of the staff or a guest, we can just stop by later and have them confirm as much. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to verify your identity. If you're an intruder, though, I don't have a clue what'll happen to you. The folks here will probably let the garrison handle things."

"..."

The man didn't answer my question—no, he *couldn't* answer it. He knew he'd dug his own grave with all the stupid shit he'd said. Maybe realizing that everyone's grim stares were focused on him, he glanced around before raising his voice angrily.

"D-Don't change the subject! Who or whatever I am isn't important right now!"

"Well, gee, I guess you've got a point. Hypothetically speaking, then, let's say Nell *is* the cause of all this. Who gives a shit?"

"What do you...?"

Puzzled, the man stared at me. In response, I grinned broadly behind my mask, and with a dramatic flourish, pointed outside the town. The crowd's gaze moved with my finger, going from the man to where it was pointing—to the enormous crack in the earth Nell's technique had created with the help of my transferred magic.

"You gonna stand there and tell me the town was in danger? When? Did anyone get hurt? Can someone please tell me what danger this man is referring to? Huh? I'd *love* to know!"

"I-I can attest to that scar in the ground! I saw the hero blast the monsters away with one attack!"

"Me too!"

"I saw it too!"

A lot of the soldiers joined in, agreeing with me.

"Yes! That's light work for a hero! If we ourselves were heroes, we could exterminate a horde that large in under an hour! Monsters are nothing!"

"Aaayyyeee!!!"

They roared exultantly. I'd worked behind the scenes too, of course, but no one here knew that. As far as they could tell, Nell'd vanquished the monster swarm on her own, and when I looked around, they were all shouting in solidarity with Nell. I might've overdone it a tad, but I was in too deep now, so I doubled down and raised my voice again.

“Do you all understand now?! A hero’s existence isn’t such a fragile thing! A thousand cheers for our vaunted hero!”

“For our vaunted hero!”

I thrust my fist high into the air, and everyone nearby raised their voices even higher. *Damn. Gotta say, it’s kinda fun being a firebrand.*

By the way, Miss Nell had a strained, rueful smile on her face as she stood next to me. Exasperation oozed out of her, like she was saying, “Ahhh, do whatever you want. I don’t care anymore.” *Wait, I think I* actually *heard her say that.*

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“Shit! Damn it all to hell! I wasn’t told about *any* of this! I did my job right, so it’s not my fault the ruse didn’t work!”

While hurling epithets, the man—Kakuza—drove his coach harder as the sky lightened.

“They lied to me! ‘She’s barely stronger than a soldier’?! What a load of bullshit! That woman’s power is monstrous! This is why aristocrats can’t be trusted!”

He ground his teeth in fury when the image of the aristocrat who had given him this “job” floated in his mind. Then at that moment—

“Ooh. I definitely wanna hear more about *that*.”

“Nh?!”

The moment he heard the voice coming from behind him, Kakuza whipped his sword out from its sheath and spun around, swinging it. But his attack slashed through only the air. Immediately after, a sharp roundhouse kick made contact with his head, flinging him off his coach.

“Hrgh!”

Perhaps the horse felt the violent shock wave through its reins because it brayed in agitation before it crashed headlong into a tree growing alongside the road. The coach rolled and toppled sideways. A few seconds after Kakuza slammed into the ground he heard the echoing sound of his carriage smashing.

“Haah. Haah.”

Kakuza’s breathing had stopped momentarily due to the sudden impact, but he forced his lungs to work, breathing in and out deeply. He then rushed to his feet, wary of his surroundings, and spotted the assassin right away. It seemed he had leaped from the carriage before it had crashed. He stood very nonchalantly a short distance from Kakuza.

“You... You’re the masked bastard from before.”

“Done pretending to be a concerned citizen, eh? You move pretty well, just so ya know.”

The assassin was the masked man he’d gotten into a verbal sparring match with earlier. He had no weapons; his hands were completely bare. *Is he a martial artist, then?*

“What are you doing here? Trying to avenge your precious hero bride because I made her look like a fool?”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that. But I just figured we’d have ourselves a chat. There’s a lot I want you to tell me. See, I’m curious as to why you were trying to rile up the crowd. Based on your whining, it must’ve been because some shithead noble hired you to, right?”

“...”

Kakuza looked around furtively for his sword. He’d been separated from it after being kicked from the coach, and it now lay on the ground a few paces from him. He could dash to pick it up.

But can I kill him? Surely the masked man was skilled. He had, after all, introduced himself as the hero’s attendant. Even just the way he’d moved earlier was telling of his abilities. On top of all that, he had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, which undoubtedly indicated that he excelled at magic as well.

However, Kakuza deemed it likely that he was the conceited type. He was aware that he had the upper hand, and his lack of a proper fighting stance was proof positive of that. The masked man was just that confident in his ability to kill his adversary. But it also meant he had an opening that could be taken advantage of.

Kakuza immediately thought of a way to trick his opponent into dropping his guard. He affected an air of panic and tried to make himself sound as foolish as possible when he spoke.

“W-Wait, please! I was wrong for trying to frame you both because I had ulterior motives! I was dazzled by the huge sum of money! I-I’ll tell you the name of the noble who hired me!”

“Hmm? Go ahead, then. Tell me.”

“It was a noble from the royal capital, one who ordered me to frame the hero —”

Halfway through, Kakuza perceived the momentary loosening of tension in the masked man’s body and took the chance to dash toward his sword. He kicked it up, caught it by the hilt, and closed in on his enemy in one fell swoop. Without hesitation, he let his momentum carry his swing.

“What?!”

But no one was there. The man who had been standing in that spot a mere moment ago had vanished. Not even his shadow remained, so once more, Kakuza’s sword sliced through air. He hurriedly tried to regain his battle-ready stance, but his confusion cost him time. Time enough for a powerful blow to his back to sprawl him out on the ground.

“Gaaah!”

“Hey, c’mon, whatcha playin’ at, man? You gotta give me a warning before you get all energetic on me. Anyway, back to our chat. Who hired you and why were they trying to screw with us? You’ll tell me everything, won’t you?”

Kakuza heard the voice from above his head. He tried to escape, but as soon as he did, a sharp pain shot through his left leg.

“Nghhh!”

Sweat erupted from his body. He clenched his teeth to try to fight off the agony. When he glanced at his left leg, he saw a knife jutting out of it, the blade having pierced through his leg and into the ground. Blood gushed profusely from his wound and was staining the earth red. The masked man kicked the hilt

of Kakuza's sword, forcing him to loosen his grip on it, before speaking casually.

"Oops, my bad. You moved so suddenly that I ended up dropping my knife by accident. I'm really clumsy, so you gotta be careful, okay?"

"Y-You bastard! How dare you do this to—"

"Whoa, I dropped another knife because your shouting surprised me."

Without a single qualm, the masked man plunged a knife into Kakuza's right leg this time, pinning it to the ground as well.

"Rgh... You're the scum of the earth! Everything's gone to hell in a handbasket because of you and your bloody woman! Your woman is a monster and you're a goddamn crook!"

"Oh, hey, thanks for the compliment."

Kakuza panted heavily from the acute pain. He ranted and raved, but nevertheless kept his composure as he desperately scanned his surroundings for a way out. *My sword is... Damn, I can't reach it.* He could well imagine the other man breaking his arm before he so much as wrapped his fingers around his weapon.

The bigger problem, though, was the state of his legs. He was severely limited in his range of movement now. His only remaining option was to draw the knife hidden in his breast pocket and slit his enemy's throat.

He no longer needed to bluff or take more unnecessary actions. He only needed to move fast enough to kill the masked man.

Kakuza stealthily took out his knife, ensuring that he wasn't caught in the act. Since his legs were tacked to the ground, he desperately twisted his torso around, exhausting every last bit of energy to attack.

"Sorry, dude, but I don't plan on giving you any turns."

This attack, too, failed to inflict any damage on the masked assailant. He caught Kakuza's arm halfway through his swing and forced him to finish the motion he'd started, fully extending his arm. Then, with all his might, the masked man twisted Kakuza's elbow in the opposite direction of its range of motion.

“—!!!”

A popping sound that should never be heard was followed by a wordless scream unwittingly spilling from his lips.

“Oof. That looks like it hurts. No worries, though, ’cause I’ve got five bottles of Super Potion here. It’s kind of a waste, but I’ll be nice and use ’em all on you if I have to. And if it makes you happy, you can keep your mouth shut for as many of my questions as you want. Man, who’da thunk I’d find a super masochistic guy like you, huh?”

The masked man kicked the hidden knife Kakuza had dropped the moment he’d broken his arm. Then, he sat down right in front of his face.

“So, I know you’re a total masochist and all, but I gotta say, it’d make my life a lot easier if you just gave up now. I’m not actually into sadism, you see. If anything, blood and guts and stuff freak me out. You get what I mean, right?”

Through the gap between his mask and his face, Kakuza caught a glimpse of the other man’s brutal smirk. It sent a chill racing down his spine.

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That man had turned out to be a secret agent sent by some piece of shit aristocrat from the royal capital. His job had been to set Nell up and ruin her reputation even more. He’d timed his destruction of the monsters’ habitat to coincide with her arrival in town, and after pissing them off, he’d probably used a scent or something to make them chase him. Ergo, the monsters had grouped into a horde and charged toward the town.

His plan had hinged on the surprise attack causing extensive damage to the town and its people, thus allowing the bad guys to do more maneuvering. But nothing had gone as they’d predicted. Nell’s bravery had not only prevented fatalities but also resulted in the monsters withdrawing. In other words, the bastards had failed from the get-go.

Now I understood why his accusations against Nell had felt forced. Instead of having the townsfolk focus on the hero’s actions driving back the enemy, his goal had been for things to go sideways so that he could get them pissed off about the damage to the town *despite* the hero’s presence. That way, he

could've placed the blame on the hero and her inability to help.

Sucked for him that Nell and I had completely shut down the monster stampede. Because of us, his attempt to turn the townsfolk against her had been a last-ditch effort to salvage the situation. And then I'd jumped in to argue with him, ruining things even more. When all was said and done, their plan had gone absolutely nowhere. *That's what you get, asshole. You tried fucking around, and you ended up finding out.*

Oh, and the name of the pissant noble who'd hired the secret agent? Argos Radlio. By framing Nell, he'd hoped to fan the flames of distrust currently among the populace, with the end goal being her dismissal from her post as the hero. The noble apparently hadn't told his goon any of the particulars about their aim, but I had a pretty good guess. Those jerkoffs had probably wanted to get someone sympathetic to their faction brought on as the hero instead. That way, they'd have a powerful pawn of their own on the board. After all, if they had a hero as their yes-man, it would give them a lot of sway with the country *and* the Church, which was a powerful organization here. *Christ. This whole situation is getting more and more sus.*

Clearly, I'd made the right choice in accompanying Nell. Considering we'd already been attacked by monsters, something bad probably would've happened if I'd let her come alone. And since this assault had failed, I wouldn't've been surprised to see those bastards try something worse. *Cocksucking shitheads.*

Very few people in this country actually saw Nell as her own person. She was a hero, and they thought of her as such. But before she was a hero, she was just a girl. Whenever she acted courageously or wielded her hero powers, she was still a timid scaredy-cat on the inside, she just pushed through her fears and fought desperately because she wanted to protect others. Unlike me, who would be a self-centered jackass until the end of both time and the world, she actually had a strong heart. She was truly a good person.

Most people didn't know a single thing about her; they saw her only as a hero and everything that symbolized. Then there were the douchebags kicking up a fuss about her being weak or whatever, as well as those who tried to use her for their own political bullshit. It seriously made me wanna kill someone. *These*

chucklefucks sure got some nerve.

The dipshits who thought of Nell as a symbol for them to use and destroy for their own selfish reasons... Well, they wouldn't see me coming. Because I'd destroy every last one of them. Everything they'd built, and everything they were. Though I'd already failed once in the demon world, these bad guys could bet their asses that I'd be a thousand times more careful now.

"Hmm... And what of the man?"

The old mayor guy, Releaux, asked me that after I'd told him what I'd learned so far.

"If he's lucky, he'll live. Maybe."

I'd chopped off his arms and legs, then dumped him in the ogre-in-chief's nest. Ninety percent chance he was already in their stomachs was my guess.

"Ah, I see. I shan't inquire further. Still, Argos, you say... In that case, I think it entirely possible there are even bigger names working behind the scenes."

The old man's expression grew even more grim.

"Oh, yeah? Why do you say that?"

"Because Argos is a man infamous for his scheming. Dark rumors always surround him. But he's a nobleman of middling rank. He lacks the power to infiltrate an organization as unyielding as the Church using one of his own people."

"Which means there's a high-ranking noble—or several—working in the shadows."

Releaux nodded in response.

"Yes, that's quite likely. I'll conduct my own investigation into the matter once we reach the capital. If there *is* someone like that helping him, there should be information about them somewhere. The moment I learn anything, I'll make sure to relay it to you, so you can rest assured on that front."

"Cool, thanks. And sorry for dragging you into all this."

"Any danger to the hero also poses a danger to us. It's only natural that I

would cooperate with you, considering your efforts to protect her. Although there is one thing I must ask you. What do you intend to do once we reach the capital?”

I thought about his question in silence for a bit. *Once we reach the capital, huh?* Well, the first thing I had to do was inform the right people that I planned to marry Nell. I was guessing that meant a discussion with her boss, the lady knight commander, as well as the king, both of whom I’d met the last time I was there. I hadn’t yet decided what to do after, though, especially now that we suddenly had more pressing matters to attend to.

Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone? What if telling them I planned to marry her had a domino effect that ended up exposing the enemy? Whoever wanted her gone was sure to find out about our pending marriage once word got out, which should definitely force them to make a move. Nell and I going about our business in the capital meant the enemy would naturally appear at some point. And if I killed them one by one as they showed up, I had to eventually get to the mastermind behind it all.

“I’ma do my own thing. If they wanna test me, I’ll teach ’em what a bad idea that is.”

“Then...would you do your best not to hurt the citizens?”

“Of course. I know that any unnecessary damage will only worsen Nell’s standing.”

When I replied with a shrug, the old man sighed audibly in relief. *Damn, does he really think I’m some kind of massacre lover?* I found the thought unexpectedly disturbing.

“Thank you. I’m glad to hear that. I know very well what you’re capable of. If you were ever to unleash your full strength upon us, we would be powerless to stop you.”

“Nah, you overestimate me. I totally have lots of opponents I can’t win against, you know.”

I mean, there were plenty of times I’d run away from attacking monsters because I’d realized I would’ve died otherwise. Not to mention the few

occasions where I'd impulsively thought I could win only to have the tables turned on me, forcing me to flee then too. Although lately, what with the increase in handy tools as well as the instant dungeon teleportation device, I'd been taking the opportunity to fight higher-ranked monsters alongside Rir and the others. I was always practicing my swordsmanship too, but a lot more of my battles now relied on the use of traps and tools that could target an opponent's weaknesses.

The tools I'd bought with DP and the traps were my own. Not created by the dungeon but by me via my elemental magics. Stone spikes, poisonous bogs, magical bullets, magical land mines, iron maiden-type traps, and more. Granted, they weren't as powerful as the ones I'd created inside the dungeon, but that was probably because I hadn't mastered the art of creating them yet. I just had to keep at it like I had with my water dragons, though. Once I had it down pat, I was sure building high-powered traps and setting them at my opponent's feet would be as easy as breathing.

Even then, though, there were still plenty of opponents I couldn't beat. Just more proof why the forest I lived in was unexplored territory!

"Well, I would wager that has more to do with your habitat than anything..."

"The world is huge, so there's definitely people and things stronger than me. More importantly, when are we leaving? It's too late today, right?"

"Indeed. Even if we commence our preparations now, we won't be ready to depart until later in the day. That would put us in the capital late at night, which is why I changed our departure to early tomorrow morning. Therefore, though the sun is still up, I recommend you take your rest now. You must be exhausted, yes?"

"Sure am. Where's Nell? She already head off to our room?"

I glanced around us, looking for her. We were currently in the inn's lobby, which was bustling with people going in and out despite it still being early. The commotion from the monster attack had probably kept them all awake. I spotted a few of the mayor's subordinates too, but Nell was nowhere in sight.

"No, she isn't here. She went to assist with the monster corpse cleanup. They managed to make a good deal of headway, but the work will carry into

tomorrow, so the soldiers took her to a tavern after doing what they could. I believe she tried to turn down their invitation since you were still working, but, well, it seems she couldn't refuse in the end."

"Ahhh, yeah. She's kind of a pushover."

I could totally imagine the awkward look on her face as she failed to tell the enthusiastic soldiers no and then got dragged off by them. The old mayor dude continued speaking, a bit apologetically now, when he noticed my wry smile.

"I sent a few of my guards to accompany her, so I don't think anything untoward will occur. Though perhaps I should have tried harder to stop her since she's not yet wed?"

"Ha ha! No, it's fine. You don't have to go *that* far. It's not like she's a dumb kid who needs babysitting. I'll just pick her up and then we'll go to our room together to rest."

"Understood. You'll find her at the tavern close to the outer wall. They opened up outdoor seating because of all the rowdiness, so I believe you'll find it easily once you make your way there. It might not be as loud anymore since quite a while has passed, but there should be a few drunks loitering about to show you the way."

I waved to the mayor in acknowledgment, then left the inn's lobby.

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Awed by the sight in front of me, I couldn't help murmuring a few words.

"Well, this definitely counts as a landmark, I guess."

A disastrous pile of corpses—no, wait. A bunch of drunks' bodies crowded the path before me, soldiers and townsfolk alike. *Actually, "disaster" definitely fits the context.* They writhed and moaned on the ground like zombies, their expressions anguished. If someone who didn't know the situation saw this, they'd think they were looking at a scene straight out of hell.

That said, the whole area reeked of booze, so I very much doubted that anybody would misunderstand what exactly had gone down here. A single glance was enough to convey the revelry that'd taken place the night before. It

made me wonder if the soldiers had overdone it here because they hadn't had much to do during the attack itself.

I carefully made my way forward, stepping over the not-corpses as I headed toward the large building that looked to be the tavern—and the source of this particular disaster. I peeked inside.

"Aha. This is definitely the tavern he was talking about."

"I'd like to welcome you, but unfortunately, as you can see, we won't be open today. My apologies."

One of the staff, a man, called out to me when I stepped inside. He was in the middle of cleaning up.

"Oh, no, I'm just here to collect someone I know, so don't worry about me. Damn, though, you got it tough too, dontcha?"

"Ha ha! Well, this is our business, after all. And we couldn't be more grateful to have this many customers frequent our establishment."

"Fair enough."

The indomitable spirit of commerce, right? Once we finished our exchange, I started looking for a girl within the pile of corpses inside. It very much resembled the one outside.

"Hellooo? Miss Nell, where might you— Oh, there you are."

She was passed out at a table surrounded by a bunch of wasted dudes, using her arms as pillows. I walked over to her and shook her shoulder.

"Miss Neeell, I'm here to pick you up."

"Ngh... Mr. Yuki...?"

She slowly pushed herself up as she rubbed her eyes sleepily.

"Let's go, sleeping beauty. If you wanna rest, do it at the inn."

"Tee hee hee. Mishter Yuuuki..."

I couldn't tell if she was still a little drunk or just half asleep, but Nell slumped against me, rubbing her face on my chest. *Based on how she's acting, it's probably both, huh?*

“Yes, yes, Mr. Yuki at your service. Cheese Louise, how much did you drink?”

“Hrm... A lot. I’m sorry, Mr. Yuki. We drank looots while you were still working.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not petty enough to complain about something like that.”

“Ohhh, that’s right. You’re sho kind, Mr. Yuki.”

It looked like the alcohol hadn’t completely left her system because not only was Nell slurring her words a little, but she also wasn’t making much sense. In any case, I lent her my shoulder so she could stay on her feet.

“Heeey, Mr. Yuki.”

“Sup?”

“I want a piggyback ride!”

“Dude, how much did you *actually* drink?”

“Looots!”

Smiling ruefully, I crouched down in front of her. A warm weight settled on my back. I stood up again after she wrapped her arms securely around my neck. *Jeez... This is why drunks are a pain in the neck. Good thing I don’t mind if she does it again.*

“Mmm... You smell so good, Mr. Yuki!”

“Ummm, how about you *don’t* say stuff like that out loud? It’s embarrassing for me, y’know.”

“Nope! Impossible!”

No? “Impossible,” you say? Well, I tried.

I walked toward the inn carrying Nell on my back as she continued talking and acting like a kid.

“Hey, Mr. Yuki?”

Nell spoke suddenly, breaking the silence after a while.

“What’s the happs?”

“I thought reeeal hard. About the job of bein’ a hero.”

“Yeah?”

I listened to the words she spoke in my ear and gave a noncommittal response.

“And I came to a conclusion. It’s suuuper tough to be a hero. People’ll say and do bad things to you just ’cause you’re weak. No matter what I think or do, rumors’ll always spread about me that are sooo far from the truth. I can’t even do anything if I don’t have power. So it’s a sin for a hero to be weak.”

“...”

“But still, I wanna be a hero, y’know? Not for anyone’s sake but my own. No matter how much people hate me, I still love this country sooo much. And I wanna keep living my life as its hero.”

“Is that right? You must *really* love this country, huh?”

Even if its people criticize you behind your back and its nobles want to use you as a sacrificial pawn in their bullshit political games? Despite all that, she still loved her homeland.

“Yup, I do! Oh, but I love you too, Mr. Yuki! Sooo much. You have nooo idea how much fun it is to spend every day with you and the others in your castle. It makes me sooo happy. In fact, even though we haven’t known each other all that long, just getting to be with you makes me as happy as can be.”

She kept talking.

“That’s why I’d like to be with you forever, just like this. I want to spend my life with you, Mr. Yuki. But...I’m sorry.”

“Because you can’t be a hero while living with us in the dungeon, right?”

“Yes. My pride won’t allow it. What little pride I have as a hero won’t allow me to go to you. Not... Not until I see with my own eyes that peace and stability have returned to this country, that it can flourish without me. I can’t go to you until then.”

“Your pride, huh?”

Well, I can't exactly argue with that, can I?

"Mr. Yuki."

"Hmm?"

"I know I'm being suuuper selfish right now, but...can we keep our relationship the way it is? Despite how I am? I can't be with you in your dungeon, but I still...I still want to exchange vows. Can we?"

Her voice shook a little as she asked me timidly. As for me, I unlinked my arms, letting her fall off my back. I heard the *thud* as she hit the ground.

"Ow, ow, ow! Honestly, what are you doing?!"

"You moron."

"Owww!"

I turned around and flicked her lightly on the forehead as she objected to my treatment of her.

"Seriously, what do you take me for? Do you really think I'd give you up over something like that? You *do* know I'm a demon lord, don't you?"

"I...don't. I don't think that. You're right, you *are* a demon lord."

"Damn straight. Demon lords are demon lords because of their greed. They never give up on what they want, and that makes me the right guy for you 'cause I'm no exception! I ain't gonna be bothered just 'cause we have to live apart for however long. So, listen up, Nell."

I extended my hand down to her since she was still on her butt.

"It's time for *me* to ask *you*. From here on out, even if we can't be together every day, and even if our paths are different..."

I spoke thoughtfully, hiding my embarrassment.

"Even then, I want you to stand next to me. Will you spend the rest of your life with me?"

Nell remained silent for a bit. Then, with tears welling in her eyes, she nodded slowly.

“Yes.”



She took my hand. I grinned and yanked her up, wrapping her slender body in

my arms when she was back upright.

“Having said that, we’ve already got a bunch of other people who’re gonna live their lives with us, and you know how much more of a racket they’ll make once they find out. Think you can put up with it for a while?”

“Heh heh. You’re so right. I accept, especially because I myself enjoy the racket. In fact, I think I might actually prefer it.”

“Oh, yeah? Good to hear. That’s a weight off my shoulders. But sheesh, you really are a coward, arentcha? Pretending to be drunk and all. Like I would ever let you go.”

My words instantly made Nell’s face flush scarlet. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see steam come puffing out of her.

“Y-You knew?!”

“Yeah, pretty much. I’m guessing you really were kinda drunk when you woke up, but then your bad acting gave you away halfway through. Especially when you started talking like you usually do.”

I understood that she’d needed the facade of drunkenness because her cowardice wouldn’t have let her reveal her true feelings otherwise. She could say such outrageous things *because* of the alcohol, so she’d put on the act to encourage herself.

“Ughhh! I-If you knew, then there was no reason to make me say all those things!”

“Sorry, but I like teasing people!”

“Mrgh! D-Darn you, Mr. Yuki! You idiot! Imbecile! Brute of a demon lord!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the hell’re you thinking, whipping your sword out in the middle of town?! Also, haven’t we done this before? Or is this déjà vu I’m feeling?”

I nimbly dodged her holy sword as she swung it furiously at me.

“Shut up! A wicked demon lord like you should just perish!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! Oh, my sweet, naive hero! Wickedness will never die! So long

as this world exists, it will be resurrected again and again!”

“Darn it! Stop right there, you!”

Grinning maniacally, I ran away from the red-faced hero chasing after me.

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“Goodness gracious. I came rushing when I heard the hero was in the guardroom, only to find this. What in the world were you thinking?”

The old mayor grumbled in exasperation. He looked exhausted.

“W-We’re sorry, Lord Mayor...”

“Y-Yeah, our bad. Seriously.”

Shame-faced, Nell apologized and I followed suit next to her.

“Well, I know I know that you two are quite close. But Ser Nell, you must remember your position as a hero. Please think before you act in a public place.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. I unthinkingly fell into my old habit, and... I really am so sorry about causing all this trouble.”

The old man nodded, acknowledging Nell’s remorse. Then, he turned to me.

“And you, Lord Yuki. You must be more aware of your surroundings. When you’re in the human world, please consider the time and place for your actions. I suggest you learn more about humans since you are intent on marrying Ser Nell. Mm, how strange it feels for me to be saying such things to a demon lord...”

“Yes, sir. I’ll devote myself to those studies, sir.”

I should *know how humans operate on account of the fact I used to be one...*

To clear things up a bit, Nell and I had continued our game of demon-lord-and-hero tag for a while after our talk. But suddenly, for whatever reason, the garrison soldiers had blocked our way—specifically mine. They’d stood there imposingly, and questions had erupted in my brain. Then, without warning and to our confusion, they’d put not just me but Nell too in shackles before taking the two of us to the guardroom.

Later, I'd found out that they'd received reports from concerned townsfolk. Something about, "The hero is brandishing her holy sword in pursuit of an unknown man!" Seemed they'd misunderstood our game of tag for something more sinister because not a single soul here would've ever thought the hero would succumb to her anger and wield her holy sword recklessly. They'd just figured that if their savior was chasing someone, he must've been a shady guy. So, off they'd gone to raise the alarm in an attempt to help her, leading the soldiers to investigate.

I want it on record that in no way, shape, or form am I a shady guy. The nerve of everyone to suspect me like that.

Anyway, Nell'd grasped the pickle we were in quickly enough and hurried to clear up the misunderstanding. It was standard procedure for the garrison to have someone verify our identities before they'd let us go, though, just like cops had done back on Earth. We'd asked them to call the mayor to vouch for us.

Honestly, I felt awful for causing this mess over something so silly. The old dude sighed softly after looking us over, then changed the subject, silently conveying that his lecture was over.

"On another note, it appears the people here have realized that you were the masked individual. What do you think of that? After all, you used the mask to conceal your true identity as a demon lord, yes?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, no worries. I had an idea, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to show my face. And you don't have to worry about anyone finding out about me being a demon lord. I've been real careful on that front."

Keeping my identity hidden forever was never gonna happen as long as I was intent on marrying Nell, though I *had* already changed my stats and name to the same ones I used whenever I disguised myself as human. But I was fine with people knowing I was the man behind the mask now. Although my goofing around with Nell had unintentionally led to my face being revealed, I'd always planned to reveal that Mask was me at some point in time anyway.

I didn't wanna pat myself on the back or anything, but I *was* the mysterious attendant Wye—the man who'd averted a crisis in the royal capital once before. And this time around, that very man was heading to the capital to

declare his intention to marry the hero. I would immediately stand out, and the powers that wanted to ruin Nell would definitely be interested in me. By doing this, I hoped to reduce Nell's burdens and workload while simultaneously forcing the enemy's hand.

Once they knew my true identity, it would be much easier for them to come after me since they wouldn't be stuck trying to figure out the mystery of the masked man. Long story short, my strategy was to use myself as a decoy and lure them in. *A demon lord is the most expensive kind of bait too. Can't get any higher quality than this, so come get a taste, assholes.*

"Hmm. I will not press further if you have some stratagem of your own, but...are you sure about this? Supposing your identity as a demon lord *is* revealed, acceptance of your engagement will be the least of your problems, you know. In that event, the hero will be branded a traitor and summarily exiled from the human world."

Nell jumped in to respond to the mayor before I could.

"We'll manage when the time comes. Should it happen, I'll stand by his side in full defiance, so you need not worry, Lord Mayor. But thank you very much for your concern."

"Well, as someone who serves this country, I sincerely hope we can avoid such an outcome. Though I see you have already steeled your resolve, Lady Hero."

"Yes, I have! I plan on continuing my duties as a hero as long as the country will allow me to. However, if things turn out differently, I'm fully prepared to live alongside this person, as aggravating, mean-spirited, idiotic, childish, mischievous, reckless, and prone to failure as he is."

"Uhhh, Miss Nell? Are you perhaps still furious about earlier? I realize there's a compliment hidden somewhere in there, but I honestly can't say I'm happy about it at the moment."

"Oh, no, I'm not angry at all! I'm not immature like you, Mr. Yuki. I'm quite capable of letting the past stay in the past, you see. Water under the bridge, and all."

“Respectfully, Miss Nell, I struggle to believe you, considering how hard you’ve been digging your elbow into my side for some time now. Are you quite certain you aren’t enraged? To me, your actions don’t match your words.”

“Aren’t you just imagining things?”

Oh, am I? Is *it my imagination? Yes, indeed, this dull pain digging at my guts must be a hallucination.* Her attack was zoned in on the exact right place because despite my demon lord body, it actually hurt like a mother. But maybe my sensory organs were just out of whack. *Yes, yes, that must be it.*

A strained smile stretched across my face at the continued pain in my side. Nevertheless, I turned to the mayor and kept talking.

“A-Anyway, the chances of my true identity being revealed are slim to none, so don’t worry. I don’t plan on making a world-class mistake like that. I’ll become the perfect human using my mysterious demon lord powers. The only things people will say when they meet me are, ‘Oh! A human!’ and ‘Ah, he’s a human, eh?’”

“I feel as if I am the only one still ill at ease because I don’t quite comprehend any of this.”

“Lord Mayor, you finally have a handle on Mr. Yuki, hm?”

Goddammit. How come no one can ever trust me in times like this? Was it because of how I acted on the reg? It must’ve been. I could think of plenty of other reasons too, but, well... *C’mon, people, I’m a demon lord! You gotta cut me* some *slack!*

Epilogue: Return to the Royal Capital

“What is it?”

The man who always had a faint smile on his face, the one with the gentlemanly aura—Argos—posed that question, his expression unintentionally serious.

“Bah. It seems Kakuza failed to incite the townsfolk against the hero. I apologize for the delay in seeking confirmation; I erroneously assumed he would do his job.”

“No, I’m not particularly bothered. Please continue with your report.”

Argos grimaced briefly before pasting his usual smile back on and urging his subordinate to keep speaking.

“Initially, Kakuza succeeded in luring the monsters to the town as the hero arrived there. I was able to verify the considerable size of the horde that attacked.”

“Hmm? You mean to tell me he succeeded on that front but failed to agitate the crowd?”

“Correct. Evidently, the hero succeeded in forcing the monsters to withdraw. And she did so while preventing both the town’s residents and its garrison from suffering even a single casualty.”

Argos couldn’t conceal his bewilderment upon hearing his subordinate’s words.

“Well, if that’s truly how the situation panned out, I can understand his failure to turn the people against her. But was the hero always so powerful? As far as I’m aware, her abilities pale in comparison to her predecessor’s.”

“I realize what I’m about to say might sound rude, but I think it possible you might have underestimated the potential hidden in one chosen to be a hero. Although I must admit, it’s unexpected for a single person to annihilate hundreds of monsters on her own...”

“So, in short, you’re saying she’s a hero through and through. Understood. Then henceforth, we shall proceed with our plans in such a manner that she won’t be able to display her abilities again. And whatever became of Kakuza?”

“His situation is a bit...odd.”

“Odd, you say? How?”

Argos found it somewhat puzzling that his usually succinct subordinate was suddenly at a loss for words. Still, he waited patiently for the rest of the report.

“Kakuza’s corpse was found in the monsters’ lair. It seems the monsters made an example of him, because the damage to his body was extensive. Except...some of his wounds were made by small knives.”

“Interesting. Despite his success in leading the monsters where we wanted, his remains wound up in their lair. Moreover, his body sported wounds evidently not inflicted by those monsters. Meaning that a third party tossed Kakuza into the monsters’ lair in an attempt to cover their tracks, yes?”

“Most likely. And there’s one more piece of information related to that.”

“Tell me.”

“An individual claiming to be the hero’s fiancé. He’s accompanying her on the trail and wears a jester’s mask.”

“Ah! The aptly titled Mask who appeared during the rebellion in the capital, eh?!”

Argos’s eyes widened in surprise, and his subordinate nodded in response.

“We still lack definitive proof it’s the same man, but the hero was nearby the last time this ‘Mask’ appeared, so it’s likely they are one and the same.”

“Hmm... To summarize, you believe Mask is the one responsible for disposing of Kakuza? And you’re therefore concerned he may have obtained information related to our operation?”

“I must emphasize that our details regarding this individual remain vague, so we can’t be sure one way or the other. However, I think it would be prudent to take extra caution since there’s a very real possibility of an intelligence leak.”

“I agree, though this is certainly becoming complicated, hm? If he truly is the same masked man, then we know how powerful he is. Especially because he eliminated Kakuza, who was arguably the most accomplished and cunning fighter among my subordinates. I have a feeling that if we make even one misstep, he will devour us.”

Argos ruminated in silence for some time before speaking again thoughtfully.

“In any case, we don’t have enough information. Let’s leave the hero to her own devices for now and content ourselves with simply monitoring her. The man takes precedence. You can use half of your personnel, so find out as much as you can about him as quickly as you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man bowed his head to Argos, then hastened out of the room. Alone now, Argos’s smile faded, replaced by an eerily stoic expression. He began muttering to himself.

“How absolutely infuriating. Useless, worthless fool. He couldn’t even bring down an arrogant little girl who’s constantly lionized as a hero or what have you. The least he could have done was take his own life before any information could be extracted from him.”

Argos ground his teeth in rage for a moment before relaxing his face into its usual faint smile.

“Well, it matters not. By the time she arrives in the royal capital, it’ll already be too late. I *will* have her taste despair for sullying my plans.”

His soft, cold chuckle echoed throughout the room.

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The next day. Somehow, word of Nell’s departure had gotten out, and a whole lotta townsfolk had come to the inn to see us off. Several hours had passed since we’d gotten back on the road.

“Ya know, I didn’t realize until now just how much time people have on their hands in a carriage. I really thought coach journeys were supposed to be more fun.”

“Oh, yes, I totally understand what you mean. The scenery is pretty much all the same around here. It’s very monotonous to look at. Right, then, Mr. Yuki, I have a full house.”

“Gahhh... Just a two pair for me. Gotta hand it to ya, your poker face has gotten *damn* good.”

“Naturally. I had a lot of training playing every day with everyone.”

I moaned dramatically and shuffled the cards while Nell beamed at me. *Phew, thank Lucifer.* Unlike her smile yesterday, which had been absolutely terrifying beneath the surface, today’s was genuine because it reflected her happiness at winning. It looked like her mood had brightened considerably.

After the ruckus yesterday, we’d taken a nap in our room, then spent the rest of the day shopping for whatever she’d wanted. Everything’d been on me, of course, which had clearly been a good idea on my part. Plus, I’d learned that girls loved shopping regardless of the world they came from. *Why is it that they can shop for hours on end without getting tired?*

That sorta thing exhausted me *real* quick. It might’ve been because we’d gone after I’d spent an entire day hard at work, but I’d been mentally done halfway through. And by the time we were done, I’d been totally wiped out. Not Nell, though. She’d been as lively and energetic as ever. Turned out that even a demon lord’s tireless body was no match for a girl on a shopping mission.

To get back to the present, as Nell and I were playing cards to pass the time, I felt the carriage rock a little and start to slow down.

“Oh?”

I stopped dealing the cards so I could look out the window, where I saw a wall. A massive wall that completely filled my vision no matter where I looked.

“Oh! This mean we’re here?”

The royal capital, Arsil. I tried to see why we’d stopped and spotted a line of other carriages ahead of ours and the mayor’s.

“...”

Nell followed suit and gazed outside. Then, for just a moment, her body

stiffened. Based on her reaction, she'd been secretly terrified the whole time—even while we'd played cards—imagining what it would be like when we finally arrived in the royal capital.

"Hey. You'll be fine."

I placed my hand on her head, patting it gently before continuing.

"I'll be right next to you the whole time. Count on it. And you've got other people besides me who have your back. So hold your head up high and give 'em hell. You don't have a single reason to be afraid."

"Yup...I know. Thanks, Mr. Yuki."

She kept her attention on the capital's outer wall, but she nodded slowly, her expression determined.

Special Story: Proof

“All right, I’m done!”

With the finished product in front of me, I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I’d put up a black, heavily polished stone with a single name carved into it. In other words, it was a gravestone. A few flowers bought with DP served as decoration. I thought it made for a nice sight.

I had a sweeping view of the castle from this spot, but it was also in a far-off corner of the meadow area. I doubted the other dungeon residents would notice that there was a gravestone here.

“It’d be way too embarrassing if they found out I was making my own grave.”

Even *I* thought I was being an overly sentimental fool by doing this, but it was to make sure I never forgot that I would be me no matter what. The me in this world lived every day to the fullest. I could say wholeheartedly that I was fulfilled. I was even confident enough to shout boldly from the highest peak that I was the happiest person in the whole wide world.

But I could only savor this happiness because of the me who’d lived in my old world—because of *him*, who’d lived and died there. And the longer I lived in this world, the more my memories of my old life would fade away. Eventually, I wouldn’t be able to recall most of them.

That wasn’t a bad thing in and of itself, though. If anything, it meant I wasn’t a slave to the past, that I could live by cherishing the present and the future. But even so, a young man had still lived in my old world. He’d had this name. It was only right that I at least left this behind as unforgettable proof of his existence.

I’m sure he’d be happy to see something as beautiful as this. I was satisfied with it, so there was no reason he wouldn’t be too. I nodded to myself, staring down at it. As I did...

“Yuki? What are you doing?”

“Dwah?! Whoa, jeez, you scared me...”

Lefi had snuck up behind me without me noticing. Since her wings were out, she'd obviously flown here. She made them disappear when she landed, and now, she was staring at me with a puzzled expression.

"H-How did you know I'd be here?"

Eff. I built this here specifically so nobody would find it. And yet, someone had found it right away.

"The same way I always know where you are. I can sense your presence."

"Huh. Fascinating."

I felt kinda happy hearing her words. She continued speaking, her eyes on the gravestone I'd made.

"Now, then. Might this be the grave for your former self? The one from your old world?"

"Yeah. I wanted to make it so that I'll never forget, no matter how many years, decades, or even centuries pass. So I guess it's less a grave and more proof that I lived."

"'Proof'... I see."

Lefi stared intently at it.

"These characters etched into the stone. Do they represent your name in that world? How do you read it?"

I thought about her question for a bit, then shrugged.

"I dunno. You tell me. What do you think?"

"Nh... W-Well, I cannot rightly say... Does the lower of the lines say 'Yuki,' perhaps?"

"Oho, you figured *that* out real quick. Bull's-eye."

"I could at least discern that the separation of the lines indicated a family name and given name, so it was simple enough, I suppose. But the line above it... Argh! You know there is no way I can read this! You will answer me right now!"

"Ha ha ha! Maybe I'll tell you when I feel like it."

With a grin, I deflected her question and kept talking.

“What’re you doing here, anyway? You need me for something?”

“N-No. No, nothing of the sort. I, um... I realized you were alone, you see.”

Huh. So she’s not here for any particular reason?

“So, what, you wanna be alone with me?”

“Hmph. I found myself at loose ends and wondered if you might not be feeling lonely. As such, I ventured here to make certain that was not the case.”

Lefi looked away from me with a huff, her cheeks pink. Meanwhile, I couldn’t help smiling again because of the charming words spilling from her mouth. I plopped myself down on the carpet of grass and beckoned for her to join me, and without so much as an objection, the silver-haired girl sat down next to me. When she did, I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close, hugging her tightly against my side.

“...”

She stared up at me. But, feeling no need to say anything, she just rested her head on my shoulder. Her weight was warm and comforting. The heat radiating from her body and her sweet scent always calmed me down and made me feel completely at peace. I was pretty sure the sensation was a conditioned reflex by now.

“Hey. Lefi.”

“What is it?”

“I’m unbelievably happy.”

“Well, that is a given, considering you have taken three fine women as your wives. If you still found yourself unhappy even in such a state, I would have no choice but to beat you.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, you’re right. And when you’re right, you’re right.”

For a while after, we sat in comfortable silence. Then, it was Lefi’s turn to speak her mind.

“Yuki.”

“Hmm?”

“Um...I, too... Being able to nestle together like this with you. Passing the time together with you. Words are not enough to describe...my happiness.”

“Yeah.”

That was my only response.

We did nothing. We said nothing. We just snuggled together, our bodies touching and warmth welling up within our chests, as we whiled away the time in this world that slowly flowed by.

Afterword

Hello, this is Ryuyu! Thank you so much for buying volume 6!

Let me start off by doing a little advertising. The second volume of the manga went on sale this month too! Note Tono is in charge of it, and just looking at the drawings warms my heart. I would cry tears of joy if you bought that as well!

Right. On to this volume. Hot on the heels of his marriage to Nell, Yuki decided to wed Lew too. I'd wracked my brains over Lew even when writing the web version of this story, but I still ended up making her one of his wives. I have no regrets. If you're wondering why, well, it's because the author himself is fond of her! Personally, I'd have to say she's my favorite. I bet we'd have so much fun if we became friends.

Last but not least, I'd like to end with acknowledgments. To my editor, who does all the tedious page adjustments and such on my behalf. To Daburyu, whom I bow down to forever because I'm honestly no match for you. To Note Tono, for illustrating the wonderfully charming manga adaptation. To everyone else involved in the production of this work, and to the readers who have stuck with me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much.

Until the day we meet again!