
Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord FALL IN LOVE?!
STORY:
Nekomata Nuko
ILLUSTRATION:
teffish
SOL PRESS


CHAPTER ONE : THE DEMON LORD SAVES A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS
Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord FALL IN LOVE?!
Staring meekly at him was a woman who looked to be as gentle as a lamb.
Am I dreaming...?
STORY
Nekomata Nuko
ILLUSTRATION
teffish


LUINA
A KIND-HEARTED YOUNG WOMAN WHO INHERITED AN ORPHANAGE FROM HER PARENTS AND RUNS IT ALL BY HERSELF.
MARIE
AN ADORABLE, LIVELY LITTLE GIRL BEING RAISED BY LUINA AT THE ORPHANAGE.
ANIMA
A DEMON LORD FEARED FOR HIS LEGENDARY STRENGTH. HE NOW LIVES AT THE ORPHANAGE.
MYUKE
A HUNTER WHO LIVES AT THE ORPHANAGE. SHE WAS WARY OF ANIMA AT FIRST, BUT...


CHAPTER TWO : THE DEMON LORD BONDS WITH HIS FAMILY
"Are you sure?"
"Mm-hmm, I'm sure.
We're married, after all."

Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!

VOL. 1

Original Story by Nekomata Nuko
Illlustrations by teffish



ORIGINAL STORY: **Nekomata Nuko** | ILLUSTRATION: **teffish**

SOL PRESS

TRANSLATOR:
David Prileszky

EDITOR:
Adam Haffen

TYPESETTER:
Brandon Imber

PROOFREADER:
Simon Engmann
Mary Borsellino

PRODUCTION MGR:
Matthew Carolan

CEO:
Michael Valdez

DISCOVER MORE GREAT TITLES AT:
www.solpress.co

WHY SHOULDN'T A DETESTABLE DEMON LORD FALL IN LOVE?!
VOLUME 1
©Nekomata Nuko
Illustrations / teffish

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

©2018 Nekomata Nuko. All rights reserved.
First published in Japan in 2018 by HOBBY JAPAN Co., LTD.
English language rights arranged through HOBBY JAPAN.

English translation ©2019 Sol Press, LLC.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Sol Press, LLC.
11358 Knott St.
Garden Grove, CA 92841
www.solpress.co

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

Sol Press, LLC. is not responsible for websites not owned by Sol Press, LLC.

First Printing, September 2019
ISBNs: 978-1-948838-30-6 (paperback)
978-1-948838-31-3 (ebook)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the U.S.A.

Table of Contents

Cover-

Color Illustrations

Prologue: The Demon Lord Desires a Cozy Family

Chapter One: The Demon Lord Saves a Damsel in Distress

Chapter Two: The Demon Lord Bonds with His Family

Chapter Three: The Demon Lord Makes a Fortune

Chapter Four: The Demon Lord Wants to Spoil His Family

Epilogue: The Damsel Wishes to Have the Demon Lord’s Child

Afterword

Prologue: The Demon Lord Desires a Cozy Family

Rising over the wasteland, the sun's first light revealed an eerie scene. A group of a hundred-odd demons, their faces covered in scratches and bruises, prostrated themselves on the cold ground.

"We're terribly sorry!"

"We'll never act in such a foolish manner again!"

"Please forgive us, Lord Anima!"

Even the air itself trembled as the bruised demons begged for their lives. Forced to listen to their woeful pleas after getting caught up in a fistfight first thing in the morning, he let out an annoyed sigh.

"Forgiveness?" The wrathful voice sent shivers down their spines. "You want forgiveness?"

Some of them tried to steal glances at the source of that voice, but the moment they did, all the color drained from their faces. Their eyes were filled with terror, their instincts screamed at them to run for their lives, but the chains of their overwhelming fear were not easily broken.

The source of their paralyzing fright was standing above them, wearing black robes and a hood that concealed his face.

"Let me ask you this: how would you react if someone did the same to you? Would you forgive them?" He—Anima—glared at the horde with his crimson eyes and asked a simple but powerful question.

The demons huddled together even tighter under the immense pressure, exchanging glances in an attempt to pass the blame to one another, until at last, a silver-tongued yet feeble man answered.

"F-Forgive them? No. If anyone dared to attack our group, which includes the head of the Jullal Knights, the bishop of the Church of Mostor, the Elite Ten of the Oracles, and the chief of Clan Baroon, they would face certain death!" He boasted about the elite force they'd amassed for their operation.

Unfortunately for him, Anima had no idea who those people were.

Not only was he out of the loop, as he'd retired ages ago, but none of those supposedly intimidating enemies even posed a threat. In fact, he hadn't even had to resort to using magic; his trusty fists were enough to dispatch their forces, and as such, he found no reason to care about their names. But their combat prowess aside, the frail man's answer was correct. Such a sin as theirs could only be atoned for with death.

Their sin was attempting to assassinate Anima in his sleep. They had surrounded his house under the cover of the night and used a powerful spell to carve a deep, gaping hole around it. The house itself hadn't been damaged, as its walls had been enhanced with defensive spells, but the tranquil scenery he'd loved so very much had been ruined. They may not have landed a single blow on Anima himself, but that hadn't changed anything.

"You came here to murder me," Anima stated. "I suppose that means you were ready to lose your lives in doing so?"

"No, not at all!"

"I'm begging you, show mercy!"

"Please don't kill me!"

And he thought they were desperate *during* their battle.

He probably didn't have to worry about them coming after his life again, but unfortunately, they weren't the only ones who wanted him dead. He was the ultimate evil and wielded the powers of legends, after all; that there were countless wannabe heroes after his head was par for the course.

Some would challenge him alone; others would gather entire armies. Some would attack in broad daylight; others would wait until the dead of the night. Regardless of their methods, however, all who dared oppose him had their hopes crushed. None of them even possessed enough power to clip his nails, let alone kill him.

Even so, the fools too proud to believe the rumors of his power were innumerable. This was simply another day he had to teach a group of those fools the harsh truth of the world.

"I could've sent you to your graves at any point during our battle," Anima

stated matter-of-factly, “yet I held back as much as I possibly could. Why do you think that is?”

“B-Because you enjoy torturing your victims slowly and thoroughly?”

Anima furrowed his brow.

“Not even close. Listen, you have families, don’t you? That’s the reason I held back; if you fell here, your families would grieve.”

They all seemed to be from a bunch of different organizations. Even if some of them didn’t have families, they must have had friends waiting for them back home. As someone who was all too familiar with the excruciating pain of loneliness, Anima couldn’t bring himself to kill them. If he were to do so, he would be dooming others to his fate. Then again, he would quickly change his mind when faced with peskier foes.

“Now leave. Go back home before I change my mind.”

Their wills shattered, they scattered like a bunch of baby spiders. Anima watched them grow smaller and smaller with a lonesome gaze.

“Why…?”

Why did cowardly savages who snuck up on others and assaulted them with violent magic have friends and family while he was all alone? Anima asked this question of himself countless times, and he always reached the same conclusion: Because uttering his very name struck fear in people’s hearts.

“It’s all that bastard’s fault!” Anima groaned to himself.

“That bastard” was his woman-crazed father. He boasted a harem of numerous concubines, and they gave him countless offspring. His family was so large that he’d expected to have at least one person he could call a friend, but his naturally menacing looks pushed everyone away—his own mother wouldn’t even share her name with him.

That loneliness chipped away at him until he’d reached his breaking point. In pursuit of human contact, he left to find a wife and settle down with a happy, cozy little family. Being damned to solitude in his early years had left his people skills non-existent, however. He didn’t have the courage to talk to a woman, let

alone woo her.

Desperate for help, he gave in to his shame and asked for advice from his father, who told him one thing: “women flock to the strong”. The young, impressionable Anima admired the wisdom gifted to him by his old man. He was a strong, battle-hardened man with a flock of women attending to his every whim, after all.

If being strong means I can build a happy family, then becoming the strongest in the world means I can build the happiest family in the world! Driven by that thought, Anima set down the path of death and destruction.

He challenged the most elite warriors throughout the land. When humans could no longer stand up to him, he began battling demons, and at the end of his hundred-year journey, he was the most powerful being in the world.

Over the course of his innumerable battles, Anima sustained injury after injury until he no longer felt pain. His body became as hard as a rock; his muscles were ripped and damaged every day, only to heal and get stronger. He became so powerful that he could forgo magic, using only his bare fists to claim victory over his enemies.

With his power having long surpassed that of a normal human, he became known only as the Demon Lord. Bestowed with the title given only to the strongest of all non-humans, surely building the world’s happiest family was within his reach. Anima was elated that he could finally realize his dream.

The rest of the world, on the other hand, was less so. Any woman he came across was either paralyzed with fear or ran away screaming. No matter what corner of the world he traveled to, no matter what country he traversed, women—no, mankind itself dreaded his very existence. To them, “Demon Lord” was not the title given to the one who ruled over the demons, but to the leader of the savage beasts who terrorized them. The grim tales and haunting rumors of Anima’s battles spread far and wide; his name became synonymous with death and destruction.

Cast out by mankind, Anima was not only categorized as a demihuman, but also branded the demons’ leader. He was treated with fear and disdain by humans, which made building a happy family a near-impossible feat. After all,

what sort of woman would choose to wed a monster?

Yet he didn't give up. Even if he couldn't start a family, he believed he could surely make at least one friend. None were willing to befriend the lord of the demons, however. There were some who reached their hands out to him, but as someone despised by the entire world, Anima learned to read the true intentions of strangers with a single glance. They may have approached him with a friendly smile and honeyed words, but it was all a farce to kill him.

The world saw him as an enemy. His father's advice damned him to eternal loneliness.

"I don't want to be the womanizer my father was; I just want a family. If just one person loved me, that would be enough to make me happy."

Demons lived for about three hundred years, meaning Anima was cursed to over a hundred fifty more years in solitude. Being branded the Demon Lord was a fate worse than death, but it also came with one more major repercussion: having a loved one by his side would mean they supported the destruction of mankind as well.

His partner would be punished in much the same way he was. They would be assaulted every day, being treated like a monster wherever they went. The chances of anyone willfully taking the risk of falling in love with him were practically zero.

Anima's last glimmer of hope at ever finding love was being eroded by the dark thoughts clouding his mind, when suddenly, a crimson circle appeared at his feet.

"Hm? What's this?"

The light it emitted enveloped his body from all directions and rapidly grew brighter, dyeing his vision red. He felt as though his stomach was doing somersaults.

When the strange phenomenon finally subsided, Demon Lord Anima met the love of his life.

Chapter One: The Demon Lord Saves a Damsel in Distress

“All righty, this should do it for today!”

As the sun began to set above the forest, Luina Scarlett stretched her tired back. After a hard day’s work in the fields, a large drop of sweat rolled down her innocent, charming face, and her beautiful, spotless skin was covered in mud. It wasn’t how one would expect a fair maiden to look at the end of the day, but her lively smile showed that she didn’t care to meet such expectations.

“Mommy! All done?”

A young girl, her hands covered in mud from copying Luina for a while, was squatting down next to her. She also had mud streaked across her forehead, which had probably come from wiping her sweat with one of her dirty hands.

“Yep! Thanks to your help, Marie, we’re already finished!” The gentle smile Luina wore as she spoke caused Marie’s face to light up with excitement.

“Mommy! Pet my head!”

“There, there. You’re such an angel; how could I not pet your head?”

“Lemme help s’more, Mommy!” Marie clung to Luina’s leg after having her soft hair stroked. “I want more pets!”

“All right, you can help me wash my hands!”

“I’ll make ’em sparkly!” she said, taking Luina’s hand as they walked to the well.

◆◆◆

“Heave-ho, Mommy!”

“Watch me!”

Answering Marie’s radiant smile, Luina pulled on the coarse rope. It scraped against her hands, but the heavy bucket slowly ascended from the depths of the well. Once it had made it to the top, she lifted it with shaky hands and gently

placed it on the ground, making sure not to spill any of the water inside. Marie then stuck her hands into it and splish-splashed around as she washed the dirt off.

"I'm all sparkly!" she exclaimed, proudly presenting her clean hands.

"Oh, look at you! Well done!"

"I did good! Mommy, can you get sparkly too?"

"Hmm, I don't know. Maybe if you cheer me on."

"Good luck, Mommy! You can do it!"

"Thank you! I'll do my best!"

After washing her hands in the remaining shallow water, Luina showed them to Marie, who carefully examined them. A radiant smile broke out on her face and she clapped her tiny hands together.

"Mommy, you're sparkly! You deserve pets!" She rubbed her tiny hand on Luina's head, but quickly removed it and put it over her stomach when she heard a small growl. "Did you hear my tummy say 'Grrrrr', Mommy?! It went 'Grrrrr'!"

"It sure did!"

"When's dinny?"

"Once we get home, okay?"

"Yaaay!"

She raised her arms high into the air, causing her baggy sleeves to slide down, exposing her tiny, surprisingly slender arms for a three-year-old. She wasn't starved by any means—if anything, she had an incredible appetite. She never left food on her plate. The issue was that her diet consisted solely of vegetables.

The last of her baby teeth had come in about three months prior, which had opened up a cornucopia of options when it came to daily meals. She was able to chew meat and fish, but they simply couldn't afford such things.

If only I were half as strong as my father was, Luina thought. *Then, I could give my children anything they'd ever need.*

The Scarlett family, renowned throughout the kingdom of Raiten, was financed by the government in exchange for aid in battle. Luina's father, specifically, was heralded as a hero. He was incredibly talented—the strongest of their bloodline—and had saved countless people on the battlefield, yet remained a down-to-earth, kind person who treated everyone as equals and loved his family above all else.

Having been brought up by such an incredible father, Luina's dream was to one day become the same strong, kind person he was. Unfortunately, however, instead of inheriting her father's almost completely pure Scarlett blood, she took after her mother, a woman with no magical talent. As a result, Luina's affinity for magic was almost non-existent.

Then, two years ago, disaster struck. Luina's father left for the battlefield, where he was cut down by a demon. The person who took over as the head of the family broke off their agreement with the government, sending them into poverty in the blink of an eye.

It was all too common that children lost their parents to demons. That was exactly the reason Luina's father had built an orphanage: to give the orphans a place to belong and a family to rely on. Most of the family's funds went into maintaining and running the orphanage, and the rest of their money was needed to treat Luina's mother, who'd fallen deathly ill after her husband's passing. As their funds began to dwindle, the family was forced to sell most of their possessions, until the fateful day about a year ago when her mother passed away.

In its heyday, the orphanage was filled with many energetic children, but as time passed and its funding had to be cut, most were adopted into different families. The only ones that remained at her home were Luina, Marie, and one other child. Their little family of three was nowhere near as lively as before, but raising two children with no source of income was a challenge in and of itself. The townsfolk gifted food and other various necessities every so often out of the kindness of their hearts, but those occasional gifts would only relieve so much of the pressure.

Luina's house was situated at the edge of the town and had very limited means of transportation; the reason they'd chosen it was its large yard they

could let the kids play in. She sometimes thought about letting go of the house filled with the memories of her family and moving into a flat with a better location. Doing so would be a reasonable way to make their lives a little easier, but moving into the city and losing her yard meant she would no longer be able to grow her own vegetables. With her self-sufficiency gone, food expenses would skyrocket, which could result in her children having to go hungry for a time. She was truly caught between a rock and a hard place.

Stop, she thought. *I can't let myself be caught up in this futility.*

Children were perceptive of adult's feelings; Luina always had to act cheerful not to make Marie worried.

"I wanna play after dinny!" Marie said brightly.

Despite having worked all day, she was as hyper as ever. Her bright eyes dispelled Luina's dark worries.

"Okay, then let's race back home! Are you ready?"

"Ready! I'm super fast! Look!"

Marie boasted of her skills and set her eyes on their house, which was right nearby. She was ready to rush off when a *crack!* rang out from the fence behind them.

"N-No way…" Luina squeaked after turning toward the source of the unsettling sound.

The color drained from her face. She decided to act cheerful around Marie, but the small, earthen-colored creature standing before her filled her with dread. "Wh-Why is there a demon here?"

Demons were hard-wired to hunt down humans. If left alone, they would sniff out human habitats and raid them. In order to prevent such raids, Hunters risked their lives patrolling the outskirts of any and all human towns.

It wasn't rare for people to be killed by demons outside of town, but inside was completely safe. Luina's home may have been on the edge of town, but it was no exception to that rule. Her father, like any other sane person, would never have built an orphanage anywhere that had even the slightest chance of

being attacked by demons. For all intents and purposes, such an event couldn't happen, and yet there was a small, earth-colored demon—a goblin—standing right in front of her.

Though about the same size as Marie, goblins were not to be underestimated. They were strong enough to easily smash through a wooden fence. Luina was in good shape, but one could rip her apart in mere seconds. Naturally, the young Marie stood no chance either. They had only one option.

"Run!" Luina screamed at the top of her lungs.

"M-Mommy?"

"Run back home! Now!"

Marie hadn't yet learned the horrors of the goblins; she was too young to know. From Luina's panicked voice, however, she understood that their situation was dire, so she set off toward the house, bawling.

That alone didn't save them from the danger, though, because demons were hard-wired to hunt down humans. After killing Luina, the goblin would make its way to the house and murder Marie as well. Therefore, Luina's duty was not to buy time. She had to kill the goblin, or it would be the end of their family.

"I'm sorry, Mom and Dad! Please forgive me for using our treasured artifact!"

She reached into her bosom and took out a pendant—a deep red crystal. It was, however, no simple ornament. It was a magic stone.

When demons perished, they left behind magic stones. By charging them with mana, one could replicate the fallen demon's powers. The more mana one poured into a stone, the more powerful its effects would be.

Luckily for Luina, who was so weak that focusing all her magic into the highest quality stone wouldn't allow her to defeat even a single goblin, the Scarlett family had been accumulating mana into their artifact for generations.

Using it would destroy all those years of hard work, but she had no other option. She clutched the stone and shouted a cry of hope.

"I'm begging you! Save Marie!"

In that moment, the pendant began emitting a blinding red light as if

responding to Luina's prayer. The countless rays of explosive light converged to form a single beam, which then created a circle on the ground, which gave off a light akin to that of the setting sun.

When the light faded, a man wearing a robe as black as the darkest night was standing before her.

◆◆◆

When the light faded, Anima found himself in an unfamiliar place. The morning sun above him was suddenly setting, and he hadn't lost consciousness at any point, so he must have been teleported.

There were other signs to support his theory as well: the desolate wasteland had been replaced by lush plains with a thick forest nearby, and staring meekly at him was a woman who looked to be as gentle as a lamb.

Her spotless skin was covered by a simple muddy dress, and her smooth blue hair, tied together with a ribbon, danced down her back. With the exception of her impressive chest, she seemed delicate and slender, especially with her beautiful face having lost its color and her azure eyes shaking with nervousness. Anima couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Am I dreaming…? he thought.

Anima often daydreamed about what his ideal family would look like. The number of children and type of home changed every once in a while, but one thing was constant: the wife he imagined always had a calm, compassionate air to her. The girl in front of him was obviously nervous, but even through the tears, a gentle warmth radiated from her eyes. He was smitten.

Staring at her any longer would only scare her even more, though, so Anima shifted gears and began weighing his options. He could either leave immediately, or he could take off his hood and reveal his identity.

By leaving, he could avoid scaring her, but that'd also mean giving up on the woman of his dreams. He'd no doubt spend the rest of his life regretting his choice. He wanted to talk to her—or rather, to build a family with her, and the only way he could do that was by revealing his identity.

Doing so had the potential to cause her to run away if terror, but for Anima to

hide his identity while being with her would be deceptive. That was out of the question, as the first step to building a happy family was honesty. More importantly, however, he wanted to be accepted. If she didn't love him for who he really was, building the family of his dreams was impossible.

"I mean no harm."

With that pitiful preface, Anima timidly pulled off his hood. He had snow-white hair, mean-looking crimson eyes, a surprisingly cherubic face, and two horns growing from the side of his head. The girl scanned his face, but the scream he'd expected was nowhere to be heard. Perhaps she was so afraid of him that she couldn't make a sound.

"U-Umm! Behind you! It's behind you!" she screamed in panic as that thought crossed his mind.

"Behind me?"

Anima turned around, where he spotted a tiny, hideous bipedal creature. Its eyes seething with bloodlust, it looked directly at him and began smacking his waist with its slender arms.

His heart sank. He couldn't believe that the love of his life would date such an ugly thing, but that was the only reason it would want to fight him, right? To save the one it truly loved from the clutches of evil.

Something similar had happened to him in the past. That man had fled in terror, but the repulsive little brute he currently faced showed no signs of running. For it to attack him with such dauntless courage showed that such a woman meant the world to it, and though his love for her didn't waver, he had no right to trample over others' happiness.

"Calm down. I'm not here to tear you two apart."

"What do you mean?!"

"Hm? Aren't you dating this little mongrel?"

"No! Not even close! I'm not dating *anyone*!"

She denied his claim and provided a piece of information so crucial that everything else ceased to exist for Anima. The woman of his dreams wasn't

dating anyone. While he dealt with the butterflies in his stomach, the girl timidly opened her mouth.

“Umm, are you okay? Doesn’t your waist hurt? That thing has been hitting you ever since you appeared.”

“Are you… worried about me?”

“Of course I am!”

Anima was completely charmed by the girl’s kind heart. He’d finally found someone who cared for his well-being.

“May I ask for your name?”

“I’m Luina…”

“Luina, listen to me,” Anima said, etching her name into his very soul. “You may have heard rumors of me being a cold-blooded, heartless monster, but I do have feelings. I haven’t shed blood in decades, so I don’t know if it’s cold or not, but I shed tears from time to time. Believe me when I say I’m not the detestable fiend people make me out to be. There certainly was a time when I rampaged through the lands, and fought countless battles, but I’m not a violent foo— Arghhh, you’re annoying!”

Anima grabbed the goblin by its head and threw it at the ground, causing the creature to bounce high into the air with a dry shriek.

Wha—? It’s so weak.

Anima was dumbfounded. He had meant to be gentle with the creature; he hadn’t wanted to kill it since it may have had a family. Regardless, though, he couldn’t afford to get caught up in that. Painful as it may have been, he had to focus on his conversation with Luina. Lamenting his mistakes could wait until he’d established a common understanding with her, so he cleared his throat and looked at her once again.

“Either way, I’m not some bloodthirsty monster, so please don’t be scared of me.”

There was no answer, only confusion. It must’ve been hard for her to believe that Anima wasn’t a cold-blooded murderer.

“I know what you want to say,” he continued, “but please believe me. I’m not the man the rumors make me out to be.”

Luina was in a daze. After Anima waved his hand in front of her face, she finally looked at him, then quickly bowed her head.

“Th-Thank you very much!”

She expressed her gratitude as tears welled up in her eyes.

“…What did you just say?” The tables had turned. Anima was in utter shock after hearing those words. As someone who was never thanked for anything in his life, he couldn’t process what was happening. “Wh-What was that? Did you say, ‘thank you’?”

“Yes! I’m incredibly grateful!”

“Why are you grateful to me?”

“Because you saved me!”

“Saved you?” He finally grasped the situation. “Wait, that thing attacked you?”

“That’s a demon!”

“That? A demon?”

Anima had fought countless battles with men and demons alike, but he had never encountered anything so feeble before. Either the demons of the land he was currently in were incredibly weak compared to the ones inhabiting his home, or the one he’d just sent flying was simply an extraordinarily weak specimen. Not like it really mattered, as, to him, no creature amounted to more than a pesky fly.

No matter the reason, it was hard to imagine that Luina was lying, which meant that there was no reason to mourn the death of that creature. Demons were governed by a simple rule: kill or be killed. While Anima was busy assessing his situation, Luina began to cry.

“We only just met, but you saved my life. I’m so happy I was able to summon such a kind person.”

“Me? Kind?”

Her warm, gentle words baffled him. The man who had always been treated as a monster felt care, gratitude, and warmth for the first time in his life. Such a blissful series of events could not have possibly been real. Maybe he was dreaming after all.

“Will you do something for me, Luina?”

“You’re my savior. As long as it’s within my power, I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Great. I want you to hit me.”

“Huh? Wh-Why?”

“Don’t ask, just hit me!”

“I-I can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“How could I hit someone who hasn’t done anything to deserve it?”

“You’re so thoughtful.”

Overwhelmed by her kindness, Anima slapped his own cheek. A loud *smack!* echoed across the fields, but due to his resistance to pain, he didn’t feel anything. He wanted to be hit by something more powerful, but using magic could have injured Luina as well.

“A-Are you okay?”

While he was busy coming up with a solution, Luina reached out toward his face. Anima had lost his sense of pain a long time ago, but his sense of touch was intact. When attacked, all he felt was that something had touched him.

So warm…

His cheeks could have never felt such warmth in a dream. Everything was real—Luina was real. Anima broke down in tears of joy when made that discovery.

“A-Are you crying because it hurt so much?”

“I don’t feel pain. I’m just… happy.”

“‘Happy’?”

“Yes. I’m happy to have been summoned by a woman as kind as you, Luina.” As he said that, he caught on to something. “Actually, what exactly *is* ‘summoned’?”

“I owe you an apology,” Luina said, averting her gaze. “The magic stone I used has the power to bring a being from another world to this one, but it can’t send them back.”

“‘Another world’? Is this world different from where I lived until now?”

“Yes. I’m terribly sorry for—”

“Thank you for summoning me.”

Anima interrupted Luina’s apology with words of gratitude.

“Huh? Wh-What?”

“Thank you. You saved me.”

He had no attachments to a world where he was hunted and detested by everyone, but in a new world, he was a nobody. The terrifying rumors and his countless enemies were no more. He could build a new life from the ground up. Furthermore, a gentle girl was standing right in front of him. He had been nothing if not rescued.

“A-Aren’t you mad at me? You’ll never be able to return to your world. You’ll never be able to see your precious friends again!”

“There’s only one person who’s precious to me, and that’s you.”

“M-Me? Umm, we only met a couple minutes ago, didn’t we?”

“We may not have a long history, but you hold a special place in my heart. I will remember the moment we met for the rest of my life.”

“Okay, uh, may I ask what ‘you hold a special place in my heart’ means?”

“It means I’m in love with you.”

“You’re in love with me?! Really?!”

“Yes. You mean the world to me.”

“The whole world?!”

She was redder than an apple, but Anima's expression remained unchanged.

"Luina, I want to spend my life with you."

"Y-Your life… Does that mean you want to marry me?"

"I'll be happy as long as I have you by my side," he said, nodding enthusiastically. "If possible, I'd like to marry you."

"B-But we only just met! I don't even know your name!"

"I'm Anima. Please marry me, Luina."

Anima had no experience in dealing with people—he didn't know what a proper proposal was like. His only option was to dive straight in.

Luina's confusion was probably due to his awkwardness, but he couldn't give up. He desired Luina's love more than anything else. That was why he'd decided not to beat around the bush; he'd simply tell her how he felt.

"Anima, why would you like to marry me?"

"I want to start a family."

"Do you long for a family?" she asked, seeming to have finally understood him.

"I do," he said with a nod. "I've always dreamed of having a family. A family to rely on in times of trouble, to share my joy. Honestly, I thought I would've been fine marrying anyone as long as I could have such a family before, but I can't imagine spending my life with anyone but you. The warmth of your eyes ensnared my soul the moment I saw them, and the gentle care you showed in your concern for me stole my heart. I love you, Luina."

Anima poured his heart out to her in order to confirm his feelings for himself. There had to have been other girls in her world who wouldn't be afraid of him; there had to have been other kind, gentle women. Even so, the moment he spotted Luina, he knew she was the girl of his dreams. There wasn't anyone more beautiful in her world or his own, and of the countless beings she could've summoned, it was he who was standing there. If not for that, they never would have met—what was that if not proof they were destined for each other?

He couldn't imagine life with anyone else, and in order to build a family with

her, he was ready to sacrifice everything. Finally, he'd found the words he wanted to tell her, when a young girl came rushing out of the nearby house.

"Mommy!" Tears streaming down her face, she pulled a broom as she approached him. "I-I'll, hic… get… hic… the scary man!"

Anima panicked as the sobbing girl glared at him. He was used to seeing grown men shriek in terror as they realized their own futility, but seeing a child cry always tugged at his heartstrings.

Without any tricks up his sleeve to cheer children up, calming down a crying child was a herculean task for him. Chilling rumors about him may not have been circulating in his new world, but that didn't make his naturally mean look go away, to say nothing of the horns on either side of his head.

It was natural for demons to have horns, but neither Luina or the child had one, which alluded to the fact that Anima was considered atypical in their world. Forget consoling the child, he would have been happy to simply not traumatize her.

"Calm down, Marie." Luina gently pet the girl's head just as Anima was about to reach his wits' end. "Anima isn't scary at all. He shooed the monster away."

Luina's kind words surprised the little girl.

"…Really?"

"Yes, really. Anima protected both of us."

"You beat it?"

The small child named Marie sniffled and looked up at Anima, whose heart was racing due to being stared at by a child for the first time in his life. Flustered, he settled for a simple nod.

"Don't worry. I defeated the demon."

Marie's face bloomed into a radiant smile. She dropped the broom and clung to Anima's waist.

"Thank you, Mishter!"

The bottoms of Anima's eyes rapidly warmed up as he looked at Marie's pure,

bright smile. In his old world, parents would often tell their children, “If you do something bad, Anima will come and eat you!”, causing them to fear him, but Marie rushed up to him with a smile and even hugged him. All in all, it was no wonder that Anima was moved to tears.

The innocent little girl, however, didn’t know about his circumstances. In her mind, tears meant that something bad had happened.

“Mishter, you hurt? Ooh! I’ll make the hurt go bye-bye!”

Saying that, she raised her arms high into the air and stretched herself as much as she could.

“Your head!” she cried. “Your head!”

“What about my head?”

“Too high!”

Seeing tears begin to well up in Marie’s eyes, Anima once again fell into panic.

“What should I do?”

“Maybe you could squat down?” Luina suggested.

“Like this?”

The moment he crouched, Marie began petting his head. He had horns growing from the sides of his skull, yet the little girl didn’t even flinch.

“Pain, pain, go away! All better?”

He didn’t understand how that could possibly heal any injuries, but he knew that she was earnestly trying to help him. The gentle feeling of Marie’s hand rubbing against his head enveloped his body, mind, and soul with a loving warmth.

“Thank you. It’s much better now.”

“You hear that, Mommy?” Marie cooed, smiling ecstatically at Luina. “He thanked me!”

“I did! Well done!”

“Mm-hmm! And, and, my tummy’s all rumbly!”

“Oh, then let’s have dinner when we go back inside. Would you like to join us, Anima?”

“A-Are you sure?”

“Of course! I’ll cook extra tonight.”

“Do you mean it?” Anima was shaking. He looked at Luina with his cloudy, crimson eyes. “You’re really going to treat me to a warm, home-cooked dinner?”

“Why are you crying?”

“I have never been happier in my entire life.”

Anima’s usual diet consisted of demons. Once in a while, he would visit human towns in search of some booze, but the moment he set foot into one, either the bars closed and everyone hurried inside or the villagers outright deserted their homes. If he kicked down doors because he knew the owners were only pretending to be out, they would give him all the food, alcohol, and money they had while begging for their lives, only to tell everyone the next day about how the Demon Lord himself had robbed them.

Having to spend his days munching on demons all by himself was a thing of the past, though; Luina had asked him to eat with her while wearing a gentle smile. She was definitely the one for him.

“Marry me, Luina.”

He proposed once again, to which Luina furrowed her brow.

“B-But, I’m always busy with—”

“With what?”

“Well…”

Anima watched her steal a glance at Marie.

“I have to take care of the children. Even if we did get married, I wouldn’t have time to act like a proper wife. Not to mention that we’re poor, and since I’m running an orphanage, it’s always so hectic with the children running around. You wouldn’t have the money to do anything, or even the time to

relax.”

“What is an orphanage?”

“It’s a place to raise children who don’t have living relatives.”

“That’s great news!” he shouted, realizing that meant the two weren’t mother and daughter by blood. “Now I want to marry you even more!”

Luina stared at him like he’d just grown two extra heads.

“Which part of what I said was ‘great news’?”

“Having troubles means that I can help you. Isn’t helping the person you’re in love with the greatest thing ever? Plus, I would never allow a child feel lonely, because… I’m all too familiar with the agonizing pain of loneliness. Lifting some of the weight off your shoulders, allowing you to focus on the children, and making sure everyone is always happy would be a dream come true for me. Luina, I’m serious. If I can’t marry you, I at least want to work here.”

Even if they couldn’t get married right then and there, Anima could still become friends with Luina and help raise the children. Simply spending time in a bustling household would release him from his damning loneliness, and that alone would be enough to make him happy.

“I see…” she said as the look on her face became more relaxed. “You’re a strange one, Anima.”

“In a bad sense? If so, just tell me and I’ll change immediately!”

Luina shook her head.

“You don’t have to change. I want you to stay the kind, strong person you are. You know, I’ve always wished for a man like that to be by my side. Marie seems to have taken a liking to you as well.”

“R-Really?”

“If you don’t believe me, let’s ask her. Do you like Anima, Marie?”

“I love him! He beat up the monster!”

No child had ever said such a thing to him before. While Anima was struggling to contain his happiness, Luina turned towards Marie.

“Marie, do you want a daddy?”

“Uh-huh! ’Cause I want him to carry me like the other daddies!”

Marie’s longing for a hug from her father was all too familiar to Anima. He was always jealous of other children who were carried by their parents or were allowed to sleep in their arms. Forget being carried, his own father wouldn’t even take him anywhere. If Marie was fine with him being the one to do it, Anima was ready to hug and carry her anywhere in the world.

“Marie, do you want Anima to be your daddy?”

“Yeah! I want Mishter as Daddy!”

Marie hugged his leg with a beaming smile, and Luina turned to face him again while he lost himself in that pure, innocent expression.

“Are you sure about this, Anima? Do you honestly want to marry me?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything. I will always love you, no matter what may come.”

Blood started to rush to Luina’s cheeks.

“You won’t be able to lead a comfortable life with me…”

“Nothing matters as long as I can stay by your side, Luina. All I’ve ever wished for is a happy family. I’ll do anything to fulfill that wish and build a warm home full of smiles and love.”

Anima’s straightforward confession made Luina blush even more. She cast her eyes downward and pondered for a second before lifting them again.

“Okay. Let’s have a wonderful future together.”

She agreed, fulfilling Anima’s one and only dream. It moved him to tears—he was so happy he couldn’t even form words.

“Mommy!” Marie said, rubbing her stomach. “My tummy’s hungy!”

Luina smiled gently at her.

“Let’s have dinner, then. I’ll head to the kitchen through the back door and get ready, so please show Anima to the table. Can you do that for me, Marie?”

“I caaan! C’mon, Daddy!”

After wiping the tears from his face, Anima caught up to Marie, who was trotting a bit ahead, and they made their way into the house.

◆◆◆

Luina placed a hand on her chest as she watched Anima make his way toward the house with Marie, her heart pounding against it.

Just how hard have I fallen for him?

She hadn’t expected to be struck by Cupid’s arrow when she’d summoned Anima. The moment she’d laid eyes on him, she saw a man crushed by loneliness. The pain nested deep within his eyes spoke volumes; he was a man who had been deeply scarred through constant rejection based on unjust rumors.

Then, he’d looked at her with trembling eyes, deathly afraid of being rejected once again. Seeing his terrified look, Luina had wanted to do something for him—he’d saved them from certain death, after all. Even if he hadn’t, though, Luina still couldn’t have left him alone. She’d wanted to heal his wounds and have him move in with them, but while she’d been trying to find the perfect chance to make her offer, Anima had asked her to marry him.



His proposal had sent her heart into turmoil. She'd wanted to become friends with him first and take things one step at a time, but had changed her mind after hearing his story.

It wasn't the first time she'd been proposed to out of the blue, but everyone who had done so had looked at the children as pests, obstacles in the way of the life they'd imagined with Luina. Anima, however, was different. He not only loved her, but he also genuinely cared for the children. One look into his eyes confirmed that it wasn't just a farce to woo her.

I can't believe fate brought me together with such an incredible person.

For as long as she could remember, Luina had looked up to people with the strength and heart of her father, and Anima was just that sort of person. It wasn't difficult to see why she would fall in love with him, especially after how hard he'd tried to convince her. He had the power to protect them from danger, and he loved others' children as his own. When she realized that building a happy family with a man like him was well within the realm of possibility, she decided that she would marry him.

Luina's ideal family was the same as Anima's: a warm home full of smiles and love. But in order to build that, she first had to make him smile. That was her duty as his wife.

I hope he likes my cooking.

Excited to be praised for the dinner she was about to put on the table, Luina left for the kitchen.

◆◆◆

Anima followed Marie through the house, the wooden floor creaking under his feet as they made their way to the dining room. At its center was an old wooden table surrounded by four chairs, one of which had been worn by the sands of time and was visibly wobbly. It would definitely snap if he sat down on it.

"…Where should I sit?" Anima asked timidly.

He'd been fine while Luina was with them, but being alone with Marie caused

a turbulent storm of anxiety to rage deep within him. What if she suddenly broke down crying? He'd tried to use his softest voice, but there was no guarantee that his naturally menacing look wouldn't scare her.

"I wanna sit next to you!"

His anxiety vanished the moment he saw Marie's innocent smile.

"I… I want to sit next to you as well, Marie." After squeezing those words out, he sat down in the chair next to the one she'd climbed into. "How big is your family?"

There were only four chairs around the table, meaning there couldn't have been more than two people Anima still hadn't met.

"Me, Mommy, and Myukey!"

"Is Myukey your sister?"

"Mm-hmm! And then you, Daddy!"

Anima once again found himself on the verge of tears as Marie pointed right at him. She welcomed him, the big, scary monster of his world, into her family. That was the very moment he swore to become the best father he could and to raise Marie with the love and care she deserved.

I don't know what makes a good father, but thanks to my dad, I'm very well aware what makes one the worst.

His father's life revolved around flirting with women. He didn't commit to a single one, instead showering every woman in sight with affection. They also enjoyed his company and unrelenting love, but due to that lifestyle, no one paid any heed to Anima.

In order to avoid having such a sweet little girl experience the same loneliness he had, he couldn't hog all of Luina's attention for himself. Anima would love everyone in his family equally; the exact opposite of his father's parenting should make him a good parent, after all.

"Sorry for the wait!"

While he was coming up with ways to become an ideal father, Luina entered the dining room with a large pot. Inside was a rich, white soup full of finely

chopped vegetables. It was the kind of meal Anima had longed for while he'd been munching on fried demon meat alone. Taking a deep breath, its sweet, appetizing aroma entered his nostrils.

"It's a hearty stew with a mix of veggies! Please, enjoy it."

After filling her bowl to the brim, Luina sat down, leaving the last wobbly chair for Myuke. Anima couldn't let a child sit on a chair like that, so he decided he'd switch seats with her once she arrived.

"Where's Myukey?"

"Oh, you heard about Myuke?"

"Marie told me earlier. Is she asleep?"

Luina looked back at him with a hint of worry in her eyes.

"She's…"

"Myukey isn't home!"

"Is she on a trip?"

That would explain Luina's look of concern. She must have been lonely without Myuke around.

Anima wanted to meet her as soon as possible. He wanted her to accept him as well, and experience the hustle and bustle of life as a family of four.

"I'll introduce you once she's back around next week."

"I'm really excited to meet her. By the way, can I start eating?"

"Of course, dig in! I hope you like it."

"I'll love everything you cook for me."

Anima excitedly picked up his spoon and was ready to dig in at a moment's notice.

"Ahhh! You gotta say thanks first!"

He hurriedly put the spoon back down after being scolded by Marie.

"How do I do that? Can you teach me?"

“Watch! Like this! Thank you for the meal!” she said as she clapped her hands together, her lively voice filling the room. She then stared at Anima and asked, “Did you see it, Daddy?”

“Thank you for the meal. How was that?”

Marie broke into a radiant smile upon seeing Anima awkwardly clap his hands together.

“Wooow! Daddy’s so smart! Mommy, did you see? Did you see what Daddy did? He’s so smart!”

“I saw it. Well done, Anima!”

“Me too! I did well too!”

“Yes you did, Marie. Well done!”

“Ehehe!” With a delightful smile, she scooped up a spoonful of stew, and brought it to her tiny mouth. “Yummy!”

She put her hands on her cheeks, joy plastered all over her face, and Luina smiled gently.

“I’m happy you like it! Eat up!”

“I will! Daddy, can you munch?”

“What does that mean?”

“She’s asking if you can use the spoon.”

“I see. I can use a spoon, but how did you know what she was asking?”

“Because I’m her mommy.”

“That makes sense. Then as her daddy, I’ll have to learn her language quickly.”

“Daddy, can you munch? Lemme do the cabbage!”

“‘The cabbage’?” He tried to figure it out, but to no avail. “What is that?”

“She wants to feed you. Open your mouth when she says ‘Here comes the *carriage*’.”

“Oh, okay. In that case, could you do it, Marie?”

“Uh-huh!” Marie scooped up some stew. “Here comes the cabbage!”

She moved the spoon toward Anima’s mouth. He opened wide and took a bite.

“Mph—!”

The warm stew’s sweet aroma spread through his entire mouth. It was thick and rich, and the minced vegetables left a wonderful aftertaste. The flavors were simple and gentle, yet it left a stronger impression on him than any meal he’d had before. All he could do was stare into space in an attempt to internalize what he’d just experienced.

“…Do you like it?” Luina asked nervously.

“I love your cooking,” he replied, nodding like a bobblehead after being snapped back to reality.

The warm, fuzzy feeling Anima felt well up in him as he watched a dazzling, tender smile blossom on his wife’s face almost made him tear up.

“I’m so glad,” Luina said. “I made a lot, so don’t hold back! Eat as much as you’d like!”

“Me too!” Marie chirped. “I’ll eat lots!”

“Good! Eat as much as you’d like, Marie!”

Anima put his spoon down and watched as Luina started eating her dinner.

“…Am I using my spoon strangely?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Then why are you staring at me?”

“Because watching you makes me happy. Thinking that a woman with eyes this gentle is now my wife fills me with so much happiness that it makes me want to cry.”

“I-I see…” Her cheeks suddenly turned bright red. “Can I watch you as well, then?”

“Watch my face?”

“Yes. Thinking that a man with eyes this gentle is now my husband fills me with so much happiness that it makes me want to cry.”

“My eyes seem gentle to you?” Anima had been cast out by his siblings due to his mean look, so why was it that Luina thought they looked gentle? “Don’t you think they’re scary, like I’m constantly scowling at you?”

“Your eyes do slant, but it doesn’t look like you’re scowling at all. Actually, I find it cute how wet they are now.”

“R-Really… I’m happy, but that’s rather embarrassing…”

“Hehe. That’s payback.”

Luina’s teasing giggle made Anima’s blood rush to his cheeks. He was completely overwhelmed by the intense feelings of happiness and awkwardness. He wanted to do more to make this cozy little family happier.

“What are your plans for after dinner?”

“I’ll do the dishes, then draw a bath, bathe Marie, and put her to bed. After that, I’m thinking of doing the laundry.”

“Can I help with anything?”

“Would you help Marie take a bath? I’ll do the dishes in the meantime.”

“What does that entail?”

“Watch over her while she’s in the tub. She loves to play around in the water, so if we’re not careful, she could get lightheaded and end up drowning.”

Marie’s safety was in Anima’s hands. The pressure was immense, but it showed just how much trust Luina had in him. He was ready to fulfill his duties, no matter the adversities he’d have to face.

“Got it. I’ll help her take a bath.”

“Thank you! I’ll get it ready for her once we finish dinner.”

“How do you prepare the bath? If it’s difficult, I can help you.”

“The tub is full today, so I just have to warm it up. It’s been getting warmer out, but I still don’t want Marie to catch a cold.”

Collecting water and then warming it up. The process of preparing a bath seemed to be the same as in his own world. Getting used to his new life wouldn't be too difficult with such similarities between the two worlds.

"Do you fill the tub yourself?" Anima asked.

"Yes, from the well in the garden."

"I see. Then I'll take that job over starting tomorrow. Let me handle all the physical labor around the house."

"I'm really glad I summoned someone as kind as you. I was worried about what would happen if I summoned someone scary—I could make them listen to my orders, but who knows how much power I'd need to exert control over them."

"What do you mean by that?"

Luina grabbed the pendant hanging from her neck and looked straight into Anima's eyes.

"I summoned you using this magic stone. Magic stones are—"

She explained that, in her world, demons left behind crystals when they died. Those crystals were called magic stones, and by focusing one's mana into the stone, they could replicate the passed demon's power.

"For example…" She held her right hand out toward Anima. On her ring finger, she wore a ring embedded with a tiny crystal. "This is a stone left behind by a fire lizard. I don't have much mana, and this is a cheap, low-quality stone, but I can at least use it to create a tiny flame."

Strength notwithstanding, she seemed to be able to produce fire without any issues. Anima considered helping out with that as well, but it was probably for the better to leave it to her.

Demons from Anima's world had four elemental classes they could utilize: fire, earth, water, and wind. Some excelled in one area, while others were proficient in all four. Anima himself, for example, could use earth and fire magic. He was able to build a sturdy house by fortifying the earth with his magic, and could burn an entire forest to ash in the blink of an eye.

He'd been honing his powers—both physical and magical—for over a hundred years; a simple mistake in controlling the strength of his flames could set the house, or in the worst-case scenario, the whole country, ablaze. It was better for everyone's safety to let Luina take care of heating the water.

"This might come as a surprise, but I should mention it while we're on the topic… I grow a tail when I use my fire lizard stone."

"A tail?"

"Mm-hmm. Replicating a demon's powers can cause you to temporarily inherit some of their physical traits."

Anxiety began building inside him. What if Luina thought his horns were temporary results of using a magic stone? What if she got scared after learning they were his own, permanent horns? He had to clear up any misunderstanding right away.

"Luina… Are you afraid of men with horns?"

She understood Anima's inner struggle, and gently touched the pendant on her necklace.

"Those two horns on your head don't matter to me at all. I fell in love with you because you're strong, yet gentle and kind. I wouldn't change a thing about you."

Her warm words tugged at his heartstrings; he couldn't even respond. Luina accepted him as he was. He still couldn't believe that he'd been blessed to have such an angel as his wife. If someone had come up to him yesterday and told him that he was going to meet such a girl, he'd have dismissed it as some sort of cruel joke.

"I'm so grateful to have met you, Luina."

"I am too. I never imagined that someone like you could be summoned with the Harbinger stone."

"Is 'Harbinger' the creature that left behind that magic stone?"

"Exactly. The Harbinger apparently held the power to summon familiars, which would be bound to its will. The reason we can talk to each other despite

being from separate worlds is that there needs to be communication and mutual understanding for orders to be carried out.”

“That Harbinger seems like a neat creature to me.”

“Not at all. It’s common knowledge here that the Harbinger used countless familiars to wreak havoc on this world. I heard it even summoned a dragon, of all things! Its reign of terror came to an end after its familiars were defeated, but a lot of people lost their lives in the battles.”

Anima was surprised at how evil the Harbinger sounded.

“Does that mean you haven’t seen the Harbinger’s rampage yourself?”

“No. Their tyranny happened over three hundred years ago. There was also an ongoing war during that time, but the warring states formed an alliance in order to stop the Harbinger.”

“Oh, I see. So it was one of your ancestors who killed that demon.”

Luina was in possession of a magic stone, so it was safe to assume that it had been passed down by her family. Confirming that suspicion, she nodded.

“My family had been channeling their power into this stone for decades in hopes that it would put a stop to the Harbinger were it to rise again. Personally, I never wanted to use it, but I had no other choice.”

Luina was attacked by a demon, which forced her hand in order to save Marie, yet she seemed to feel guilty about using the stone.

Anima couldn’t let her feel anxious, as it’d go against his picture of the ideal family: one full of smiles.

“Don’t worry, you used that crystal the way you were supposed to. If the Harbinger rises again, I’ll make sure to destroy it; you don’t even have to use your power to order me. Like I said, I’ll do anything for you, including bathing Marie and putting her to sleep.”

“Daddy, go night-night with me!”

Marie raised her head and spoke while happily munching away at her dinner.

“As long as you and Luina are okay with that,” Anima replied.

“I wanna be with you and Mommy!”

“Of course I’ll sleep with you,” Luina said. “Seeing your sleeping face will no doubt make my heart skip a beat, but a wife should always sleep next to her husband. Besides, we only have one bed.”

“Really? In such an impressive house with so many rooms?”

“We have a lot of rooms, but we sold most everything that would sell. If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t have been able to afford anything.” That put the wobbly chair into perspective; no one would buy that. “Ah, but there’s always food on the table thanks to the wonderful field outside!”

Luina’s cheerful voice lifted the heavy atmosphere from the room, and Marie doubled down on it.

“I helped Mommy lots today!”

“Did you now? You’re a very good little girl. How old are you?”

“Umm… I’m three!”

“Three years old? You’re practically a newborn. And Luina, if I had to guess, you’re probably around… a hundred, correct?”

“A HUNDRED?! E-Excuse you! Do I look like a wrinkly old lady to you?”

“Not at all, you’re very youthful. Eighty, perhaps?”

“That’s no different! This might come as a shock, but I’m only twenty.”

“Twenty?! That means there’s over a hundred years between us.”

“There’s that big an age difference?! How old did you say you were, Anima?”

“A hundred and thirty.”

“You’re deceptively old. I figured you were older than me, but you could be my great-grandpa.”

“In my world, a hundred and thirty is the prime of your life, so don’t worry. I’ll help you with everything from carrying water to bathing Marie!”

“That would be wonderful. Then would you help me in the field the day after tomorrow?”

“Hm? What are we doing tomorrow then?”

“I’ll finish the housework in the morning and show you around Garaat in the afternoon.”

“You gonna go to town?” Marie asked, interrupting their conversation. “Me too! I love town!”

“Sure! We can all go together!”

“Yaaay! Daddy, carry! Carry me around!”

“You got it! Leave the carrying to me!”

The next day, Anima would head into town with his daughter in his arms and his wife at his side. Simply thinking about it made him giddy with happiness. While imagining their day together, he took a big bite of the world’s most amazing stew made by the world’s most amazing wife.

◆◆◆

Around the time when Anima proposed to Luina…

A certain man in his mid-thirties walked restlessly around in his mansion in Garaat. His unkempt brown hair reached down to his shoulders. A thick layer of dirt covered his round face, carved with wobbly lines by the beads of sweat that were stopped by the stubble covering his nervously chattering jaw. The man’s name was Krain.

“Wh-What the hell happened?!” He bashed his staff, decorated with an azure crystal, against the wall and scratched his head in rage. “No way! There’s no way my goblin was defeated with a single strike! This is nonsense!”

Krain was a magic stone collector. From among his countless magic stones, he’d used one of the rarest and most valuable—the Goblin King stone, which summoned a powerful clod goblin as his puppet—to attack Luina. It was not an act of whim; he had spent weeks planning the attack, but he had been negligent in his preparations. He’d caught a glance of Luina’s pendant before, but though he wasn’t able to assess its power from just that, he decided to take the chance.

His plan should have been perfect. He’d picked a day when Myuke, the only one in the family with a Hunter license, was out, and made sure to wait until

the end of the day when Luina was already exhausted from work, decreasing her chance of running to practically zero.

Under the veil of the night, he'd snuck into the heart of the forest, summoned the clod goblin, and ordered it to remain on standby until the perfect moment. When everything was in place, the goblin had broken through the fence and attacked Luina.

However, that was when the unthinkable had happened. A crimson-eyed, white-haired man had appeared out of nowhere. Krain had simply wanted Luina and her kids to experience the horror of demons, even if it had resulted in a few broken bones and while he hadn't wanted to see *her* killed, that was not true of the mysterious white-haired man. The seeds of terror would surely take root within Luina's soul were someone to die in front of her, so Krain had ordered his minion to kill the man.

Clod goblins were much stronger than common, run-of-the-mill goblins. They were able to break boulders with their bare hands; the frail bodies of humans crumbled under its attacks.

Yet somehow, the white-haired man hadn't so much as flinched. Not only had there been no signs of damage after the goblin's relentless attacks, it was as if he hadn't even felt the mighty demon's strikes. To add insult to injury, he'd killed it as easily as he'd swat a fly. The cow-like horns sticking out from the sides of his head led Krain to believe that it must have been the effects of a minotaur magic stone, capable of enhancing one's physical abilities, but that didn't fully explain the unbelievable power he displayed.

"I wasn't prepared to deal with something like that…"

Krain was in total panic. He had experience with the method he'd used; a number of people had fallen before his goblins. He'd even used them to murder several prestigious Hunters, making it especially painful to have failed to intimidate a simple village girl and her children.

"I-I may not have hurt her, but she was deathly afraid!"

Clod goblins were deaf, but they had eyesight. Krain may not have been able to hear Luina's scream, but by looking through the goblin's eyes, he'd definitely seen all the blood drain from her face. His job had been to plant the seeds of

terror into her soul, and the idea that her life could suddenly come to an end at the hands of a demon should have been more than enough to torment her.

She didn't have the means to hire a Hunter, nor the strength to undo the shackles of fear. Marrying a powerful man who would protect her for the rest of her life would be the only way to release herself from the overwhelming dread. If that man also happened to be filthy rich, he could free her from her life in the village as well. The allure of safety and luxury for herself and her children should have made Luina more than willing to accept a proposal from such a man, so despite the slight hiccup, Krain had managed to complete his task.

Failing his duties would have resulted in severe punishment, but fulfilling them would be justly rewarded. With the money he was to receive, he would be able to live in the lap of luxury. He would be able to have any woman he wanted, enjoy the finest alcohol, and savor the most exquisite food.

"I can't wait to tell Lord Malshan about my grand success!"

Excited for his reward, Krain left to report to his employer, Lord Malshan.

Chapter Two: The Demon Lord Bonds with His Family

A couple of years before being summoned—

Anima visited a desolate town. He saw people here and there, aimlessly wandering along the dirt road. Usually the townspeople would flee the moment they spotted him, desperately trying to save their lives, but he was using an oversized hood to cover his face. In doing so, he made himself stand out, but it was better than showing his face.

I have to get this over with before I'm discovered. He had two goals in mind when visiting the town: One was to get a drink, and the other was to annihilate the local criminal organization known as the Anima Confederacy. *"Anima Confederacy" my ass. What a joke.*

As the name implied, it was supposed to be a crime syndicate Anima had built. He, however, had no recollection of creating anything of the sort. Simply put, they'd stolen his name to further their criminal activities.

Throwing the Demon Lord's name around was enough to coerce victims into giving up their possessions without a fight; the group was raking in money without even lifting a finger. What awoke Anima's wrath, though, was that their activities damaged his reputation even further. Due to the Confederacy's wrongdoings, people became even more terrified of him, which made fulfilling his dreams of a happy family incrementally more difficult.

That wasn't to say the group didn't have value, though. By destroying the Confederacy and clearing up the misunderstanding, he'd surely be heralded as a hero. The tales of his good deeds would overwrite the terrifying rumors that surrounded him.

At least, that was his hope when he'd decided to put a stop to their wrongdoings. There was the issue of him having no idea who was behind the Confederacy or even where they were based, but he planned to ask around while treating himself to a drink at the bar.

After entering a beat-down bar, Anima sat down at the counter and nodded

at the bartender, saying, “Pour me a drink.” He couldn’t see well in his oversized hood, but the bar was completely silent, signifying that there were no other guests.

It wasn’t like he’d expected anyone else to be there; no person had the freedom to have a drink at the bar while the Anima Confederacy was on the prowl. He had to act quickly in order to save the town.

“What sort?” the bartender answered coarsely.

He couldn’t see the bartender, but judging by his voice, he was older. Anima had to be extremely careful not to reveal his identity, lest the old man drop dead from a heart attack.

“Your cheapest booze.”

If the rumors were to be believed, Anima had hoarded an unimaginable wealth from his countless pillages, when in reality, he was dirt poor.

“Coming right up,” the bartender replied before putting a glass down in front of Anima, who reached out to it before freezing in place.

Oh, no. I can’t drink this.

In order to drink from a glass, he had to raise this face. That would’ve immediately blown his cover. On the other hand, not drinking it would look suspicious.

“Hm? Don’t you want the drink?”

Too late. He grinded his gears for a moment and came up with a solution.

“Damn, I dropped some coins.”

He deliberately dropped some coins on the floor, then crouched down with the glass in his hand. Hidden under the counter, he could finally enjoy the drink he’d ordered.

Ahhh… this is so good. I’m sure it’d taste better if I drank it with my significant other…

After a few seconds, he put his empty glass back on the counter and stood back up, thinking it was about time for him to ask about the Confederacy.

“Eeeeep!”

The bartender suddenly screamed and jumped over the counter. Despite tripping over a chair, he scurried out of the bar.

“What happened?!”

Thinking that the Anima Confederacy might have shown itself, Anima scanned the bar, but he was all alone, meaning the bartender got scared of him and ran…

Did he recognize me?

If he had, he would’ve ran without making Anima’s drink. He couldn’t have seen Anima’s face from behind the counter, so the mystery of why he’d fled the bar remained unsolved.

“Gyahahaha! You’re done for! Time for you to kick the bucket, oh-so-heinous Anima!” While Anima was busy racking his brain, a behemoth of a man entered the bar, his triumphant laughter reverberating through the empty establishment. “You shouldn’t’ve drunk that poisoned booze, moron!”

“Poisoned booze?”

The puzzled look on Anima’s face made the gigantic man even more obnoxious.

“Yeah, you heard right! Thanks to my inescapable information network, predicting your actions is easy as taking candy from a baby! But hey, don’t be so mad at me! I was against killing our precious piggy bank! Hahaha, do you have any idea how much money you’ve made us?! But you see, some people knew you were comin’ and wanted to see you dead, and I’m not some dumbass who’d turn down such a generous bounty! Killing you will turn me into this land’s hero, too! I’ll be mankind’s grand savior and be swimmin’ in money until the day I die! So drop dead for me, will ya?! And that ain’t even the best part! I don’t even have to get my hands dirty! You won’t last much longer with the strongest poison known to man—direct from the poison scorpion only found in the Desert of Perish—flowing through your veins!”

Certain of his victory, the man had become rather talkative. By the end of his long-winded speech, two things were certain: he was a member of the Anima

Confederacy, and he, along with the town, had planned to poison Anima.

“Poison scorpion, you say? Is that the gluey demon? The one that you bite into and it fills your whole mouth with that gooey, umm…”

“Exactly! It’s gooey when—Wait, what?” Blood drained from the burly man’s face. “You ate one? Did you seriously eat a poison scorpion?!”

“What else is there to eat in the Desert of Perish?”

At the height of his century-long training, Anima had crossed the dreaded Desert of Perish. It was rumored that not a single person had come back once they’d set foot into that merciless, desolate hellscape.

During his time there, his diet had consisted solely of poison scorpions. He had consumed countless venomous demons beforehand, which had made him virtually immune to poisoning. Forget killing him, eating them didn’t even upset his stomach. There was no way a bit of poison scorpion toxin, which had been diluted in alcohol, would so much as faze him.

“Y-You monster! D-Do you not feel anything? Not even a little bit dizzy?!”

“Nothing.”

“No, that can’t be right! It has to work! I’ve got an endless arsenal of spells, and just one will be enough to blow you to smithereens after you’ve been weakened by my poison! I mean, it’s gotta be working, right? Right?! I know you’re just acting tough!”

“I’m telling you, it didn’t work!”

Anima grabbed a chair and threw it at the man, who blasted through the wall and landed outside the bar. There was a crowd around the ruined wall and passed-out man, waiting there to witness the Demon Lord’s death firsthand. They were petrified to see Anima standing there, fit as a fiddle.

“Aaahhhhhhhhhh!”

“H-He’s alive! Anima is aliiiiiive!”

“R-Ruuuuuuuuuun!”

“H-Hide the women and children! Quickly!”

“There’s no point! He’ll just burn the whole place down! We have to flee the town!”

“Wait, don’t run!” Anima cried. “Listen to me! I came here to defeat the—”

“Ahhhhh! He’s coming after us!”

“Mommyyy! Mommyyyyy!”

“D-Don’t cry!” he begged. “I’m not scary! L-Look, peek-a-boo!”

“Gyahhhhhhhhhh!”

“Nooooo! My baby! Not my baby!”

“Mommyyyyyyyyyy!”

“N-No! Please, listen to me!” He was desperate to explain himself, but nobody would lend an ear to his pleas. “This is all a big misunderstanding! I’m not scary…”

◆◆◆

Anima slowly opened his eyes at the warm, gentle rays of the sun seeping in through the small window. He could hear the lively chirp of birds from outside as he moved his sleepy eyes from the wooden ceiling to the portrait hanging on the wall.

“It was a dream…”

It was, but everything he saw had happened in the past. In the end, no one had listened to a word he’d said. Later, rumor spread that he had forcibly taken over the town, which had become completely deserted despite him not having done anything.

He’d been devastated back then, but none of it mattered any longer. He’d found a family, after all. Every day for the rest of his life would be full of happiness and love.

“Hm?”

To cheer himself up, he wanted to take a peek at the face of his beloved while she slept, but Luina was nowhere to be found. Luckily, though, she wasn’t the only one he considered beloved.

Anima lifted the blanket to find Marie clinging to his waist. The warmth of her body seeped through his clothes, soothing his very soul. Seeing her adorable sleeping face filled his heart with happiness.

In his old world, there wasn't a single person who would love him. His new one, however, had at least two, and he would be visiting the town with them later in the day. He was so excited that he had barely gotten any sleep, but that was the least of his concerns.

I wonder if the people of this world are going to accept me…

There were no terrifying rumors about him circulating, but he had a naturally menacing look, and horns on the sides of his head. He could play off the horns by saying they were the side effect of a magic stone, but the same couldn't be said of his look. Luina and Marie loved him, but there was no guarantee that others would feel the same. If they were to consider him a scary monster, it could easily hurt his loved ones as well.

"Did you hear? She married a monster!"

"Your daddy is scary, Marie!"

He could already hear the hurtful comments thrown their way. He couldn't let his family suffer because of him, so for the sake of their safety, he decided that he'd wear his hood. There was still plenty of time before they planned to set out, though.

I should get up soon.

Luina was already awake, probably busy with housework. If he wanted to lessen her burden, he had to get up as well.

"Marie, it's time to wake up," he whispered while staring at the ceiling.

She didn't seem ready to get up, but Anima didn't want to leave her alone. She'd definitely be scared to wake up in an empty room. It wasn't impossible that she'd panic and try climbing out the window to look for Anima and Luina, or even just roll off the bed, but waking her from such a peaceful sleep didn't sit well with him. All he could do was whisper to her.

"Mm… Not yemhhh…"

Her adorable voice made Anima smile.

“But the sun is already up. Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

“Nooo… I don’t wannaaa…”

She wouldn’t let go of Anima’s waist even though she’d spent the entire day prior running around.

She’s clinging to me…

He was happy to find himself in such a situation, but staying in bed for too long would make him break his promise. He could have been a bit more stern, but he was afraid of making Marie cry. The only solution was to make Marie want to get up on her own, and luckily, he had just the tool to do so.

“We’re going on a trip today.”

Marie had been very excited about going to the town, and sure enough, she seemed to take an interest in Anima’s statement.

“Today? A trip?”

She slowly raised her head, then rested her chin on Anima’s chest and carefully examined his face.

“Mishter, who are you?”

Anima’s world ceased to exist. Blood froze in his veins and his stomach contorted.

No. This can’t be happening.

His beloved daughter didn’t call him “Daddy”. In a single night, he’d been demoted from loving father to random stranger. He was nothing more than a passerby on the streets.

While Anima drowned in despair, Marie rubbed her eyes. When she opened them again, her face lit up with excitement.

“Ah! Daddy!”

“Yes, I’m here! Daddy is here for you!”

Anima’s frown instantly disappeared. Marie was still half asleep, hence she

hadn’t recognized him as her daddy. By spending more time with her, she would surely get to a point where she would recognize him first thing in the morning.

“Daddy! Daddy’s here!”

“I’m here! Daddy’s right here! Tell me, who loves Daddy the most?”

“Meee! Who loves me the most?”

“Me!”

While playing with Anima she glanced to the side.

“Where’s Mommy?” she asked.

“Hmm, where could she be? If only there was someone who could help me look for Mommy…”

“I will!”

The two left the bedroom in high spirits. They made their way toward the kitchen, but Luina was nowhere to be found.

“Mommy’s not here…”

“Maybe she’s outside.”

“Ousside! Lessgo!”

“Yep, let’s go, Marie!”

They made their way out of the house, which stood proudly beneath the endless blue sky and was surrounded by a beautiful, emerald-green lawn. On the left-hand side of the house lay the field and the well, and on the right was a small barn. The main entrance connected to the gate with a paved road, after which a dirt road, surrounded on both sides by a thick, lively forest, led to the town. A gentle breeze shook the forest’s leaves before passing by Anima and Marie.

“Maybe Mommy’s here!” Marie lead Anima to the garden, where Luina was in the middle of hanging the laundry to dry. “Found Mommy! Daddy, look! Mommy’s there!”

“Oh, so she is! Good job finding her!”

“Do I get pets?”

Marie looked at Anima with sparkles in her eyes. She wanted him to pet her head, but he’d never done that for anyone before. If worse came to worst, he could accidentally hurt her if he wasn’t careful.

“You won’t pet me…?”

“Of course I will, silly. Well done!”

Seeing tears build up in the corners of her eyes, he couldn’t hesitate any longer. He placed his hand on her soft, fluffy hair and softly moved it from side to side.

“Ehehe!”

Marie’s happy chuckle confirmed that Anima had successfully pet his very first head. It made him feel a bit more like a parent.

“I’m glad to see you two getting along this early in the morning!”

Luina smiled gently as she watched the heartwarming scene. She was drenched in sweat despite the chilly morning air, and her hair, tied behind her so it wouldn’t get in her way while she was working, waved in the breeze.

Anima found her beautiful with her hair down, but she was incredibly cute with it tied up as well. Realizing that such a gorgeous woman was his wife made him the happiest man in the world.

“G’morning, Mommy!”

“Good morning, Marie. Good morning to you too, Anima.”

“Ah, good morning. You’re up early; have you been working this whole time?”

“With small breaks here and there, yes. I made breakfast, then came out here to hang the laundry. Thanks to your help, I’m already done with everything!”

“What exactly did I help with?”

“You see, when Myuke is out, I always have Marie around and have to play with her while doing the chores. I worry she might run off somewhere, so I always want to have her by my side, but with you here to look out for her, I don’t have to worry about that.”

It seemed like Luina was also worried about something happening to Marie while she wasn't looking. Anima's intuition was spot on. He wanted to keep that up and be a father Marie could be proud of, but he also had to become a model husband.

"I'll do anything to ease the burden on you. Is there anything I can help with?"

"Think you could help Marie wash her face while I get the table ready? Do you know how to use the well?"

"I do! You heave-ho and it pops up!" Marie pulled Anima to the well. "C'mon, it's there!"

Once there, Anima tugged on the rope, raising the bucket of water with ease.

"Whoaaa! Wow, Daddy! You're so strong!"

"I sure am!"

"You'll beat the bad guys!"

"You bet I will!"

The enemy of his beloved daughter was his enemy as well; he'd destroy anyone for her sake. He washed his face while swearing to protect her at all costs, then the two went back into the house for breakfast.

The table had multiple small bowls of salad on it, and there was a big wooden bowl filled with a steamy red soup in the center. The soup didn't have any discernible aroma beyond its slightly acidic scent, but that, combined with how tasty it looked, was enough to whet Anima's appetite.

"I made tomato soup this morning!"

"It looks great. Can I start eating?"

"Of course! Please, dig in!"

"Daddy, you 'member what to do?"

"Hmm, I wonder. Think you can watch to see if I do it correctly? Thank you for the meal!"

"Daddy's smart! Watch me too! Thank you for the meal!"

“Good girl! Well done.”

Anima gently pet Marie’s head. She showed him a delighted smile, then excitedly looked at Luina.

“Mommy! Daddy’s amazing! He’s so strong! He went heave-ho and the bucket flied!”

“Wow, he must be really strong! I’m sure he’ll have no trouble carrying you!”

Marie’s astonished look quickly transformed into a radiant smile.

“Carry?! When?! I wanna be carried!”

“We’ll go after breakfast.”

“Yaaay!” she cheered while happily eating her salad.

Watching her eat only made Anima hungrier, but just as he was about to dig in, there was knocking on the door.

“Oh, we have a visitor,” Luina said.

“Is it Myuke?” Anima asked her.

“Myuke wouldn’t knock. Let me take a look.”

“I’ll go with you.”

There was no way a demon would have the decency to knock, but one could have been trying to break the door down. Anima had confirmed the day before that demons from his new world were exceptionally weak, so it wouldn’t have been strange if they didn’t have the power to blow open the door with a single strike.

He considered that possibility while he and Luina made their way to the door, the knocking continuing until she opened it.

“Ah, Luina! Thank goodness you’re safe!”

An older man smiled at her as she opened the door. Between his strikingly good build, his expensive-looking attire, his well-kept amber hair, and the deep crimson earring twinkling in his right ear, it was obvious that he was a man of high status.

“Lord Merkalt…” Luina’s entire body stiffened the moment she spotted him.

“No need for formalities. Please, call me Malshan,” he said with a smile, not taking his eyes off Luina. “Are you okay? Were you hurt? I heard they spotted goblins in the forest, so I came as quickly as I could.”

“We did run into a goblin, but none of us got injured.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, but there’s no guarantee you’ll be so lucky next time. Are you not worried what could happen to the children if another goblin were to venture out here?”

His honeyed words had a sinister undertone. He was clearly trying to fan the flames of terror, but it had no effect on Luina whatsoever.

“I have no reason to be worried; not with Anima by my side.”

Malshan furrowed his brows.

“Who is this ‘Anima’?”

“Him.”

Luina stepped to the side. Malshan glanced at Anima as if he’d only just realized someone else had been standing there, then disregarded the other man’s existence once more, returning his attention to Luina as he continued speaking.

“How long do you think you’ll be able to afford that Hunter? If you marry me, you’ll have the strongest Hunters in the land protecting you and the children!”

He couldn’t hide his evil words behind a smile. He looked down on Luina for not having the money and status he had.

“Thank you for your concern, but I didn’t hire him. Besides, I’ve told you before that I will never leave this house behind.”

“But wouldn’t it be better for you and the children to leave this frugal life behind and live with me in my mansion? Should you become my wife, I’ll take care of the children as well, of course! They’ll lead lives of glamour and luxury! The same goes for you, Luina! Just say the word and I’ll buy you any clothes, any cosmetics, any jewelry! Anything you so much as lay your eyes on!”

“I wouldn’t want to trouble you with all that.”

“What must I do to make you my wife?” he asked, his eyes twitching at Luina’s flat-out rejection. Though he was trying to act collected, his voice was filled with frustration.

“I believe that there must be a more suitable partner for you out there, Lord Merkalt. Please, forget about me. I wish you luck in finding that special someone.”

Her words caused Malshan to tremble with rage.

“What’s wrong with—”

Anima slammed the door on him. Just witnessing their exchange was enough for him to understand that Malshan wasn’t going to budge. He couldn’t let someone like that disturb their harmony any longer.

“Let’s get back to breakfast,” he said.

Malshan, however, couldn’t have that, and threw open the door. He glared at Anima, his eyes burning with anger.

“Hey, don’t just barge into others’ homes uninvited.”

“Who do you think you’re speaking to, peasant?!”

Anima glared back at the arrogantly huffing Malshan.

“I don’t know who you are, but don’t you dare lay a finger on my wife.”

“W-Wait, what? Your… wife?”

“You heard me; Luina and I are married. Now scurry off, and don’t ever come back. You won’t leave unscathed if I catch you prowling around.”

Finished with intimidating him, Anima closed the door again.

“Daddy’ll beat him?”

“I will if he comes here again.”

“So strong!”

“You bet. Your daddy is the strongest in the world. I could defeat that wimp with a single strike.”

Marie’s eyes shone as Anima spoke with unshakable confidence, but Luina didn’t take it well.

“D-Don’t. Make sure to never attack Lord Merkalt. He’s a mercenary hired by the state itself.”

“A ‘mercenary’?”

“His duty is to fight the demons and keep the citizens safe. Attacking a mercenary is the same as declaring war on the country.”

Killing Malshan would weaken the country and turn its citizens against Anima. He would be hated and hunted by countless people, just like he was back in his world.

“Don’t worry, I won’t do anything that could inconvenience you.”

“I’m more worried about you…”

“About me?”

“Lord Merkalt is famous for holding the Crimson Dragon stone.”

“Is that strong?”

“‘Strong’ is putting it lightly,” Luina said with a timid nod. “Of all the familiars the Harbinger summoned, the Crimson Dragon was the most powerful—simply breaking through its scales cost dozens of lives. His strength doesn’t end at the stones he possesses, either; his talent in magic far surpasses mine. What am I saying? We’re not even comparable. There’s no one in this country who could topple him.”

A magic stone’s power was proportional to the power of the demon it had come from. The more mana its user poured into it, the more of the fallen demon’s power they could use. In other words, Malshan, one of the world’s best sorcerers, was about as powerful as a Crimson Dragon.

That being said, Anima had spent the last hundred years of his life fighting only the most powerful creatures from his world. Adding another to his list didn’t bother him at all, but he didn’t want to upset Luina.

“Don’t worry. I won’t pick a fight with him.”

Anima didn't want to resort to needless violence. All he wanted was a quiet, peaceful life with his wife and children.

"You promise? If anything happened to you, I…"

Just the thought of anything happening to Anima made her heart ache.

"I promise. The time it would take to fight that man would be better spent with you two."

Luina was relieved to hear the calm return to Anima's voice.

◆◆◆

Anima, keeping his head down so as not to draw attention to himself, walked through the bustling streets of Garaat's shopping district with his wife at his side and his daughter in his arms. His ears picked up nothing but lively chatter and happy giggles from people enjoying the beautiful day at the dozens of various shops; not a single scream was thrown his way yet.

"Can you see anyone running for their lives or frozen in terror?" Anima stopped and asked Luina.

His head was in full view. He'd had his trusty hood on when they'd left the house, but Marie had pulled it off halfway to the town. When he tried to put it back on, she took it as an invitation to play with him and pulled it back down. He'd been afraid of frightening her by violently pulling his hood up, so he'd let her enjoy the sweet taste of victory and kept his face revealed.

"No one is afraid of you," Luina assured him. "There's nothing for you to be worried about."

"No, there clearly is," Anima protested. "Like my horns… and my mean look…"

"You may look different than the people around you, but you're not scary. How could anyone be scared of your soft smile?"

"Wait, my smile?"

"Oh, yes. You've been smiling so brightly while you've been carrying Marie around. It's a smile only the kindest of people can wear—a smile I love dearly."

"Luina…"

He suddenly wanted to hug Luina, but he couldn't with Marie in his arms. He wasn't even sure if Luina would find hugging in public embarrassing, and there was the danger of hugging her too tightly. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, so he decided to start with holding her hand.

Flustered over his own thoughts, he turned towards Luina.

"Say, Luina…"

"What is it?"

"Don't you think it's, umm, cold today?"

"Huh? Well, I suppose it is. It's been getting warmer lately, but today is chillier than yesterday. Why? Are you cold?"

"No. My body is very resilient; I don't feel cold. But I can't let you be cold either, so I would at least like to keep your hands warm."

It was an incredibly roundabout way to ask, but Luina smiled in response.

"Oh my, would you look at that?! My hands have goosebumps all of a sudden! Do you think maybe you could warm them up, Anima?"

"L-Leave it to me!"

With great care, he took hold of Luina's hand. The tender warmth it radiated gently enveloped his soul.



“H-How is it? Do you feel warmer now?”

“I suppose I do, but I’d like to be a bit warmer.”

She answered him sweetly, like she was pampering him.

“‘A bit warmer’?”

Anima was lost. Holding both her hands would warm her up faster, but he couldn’t do that while holding Marie. He began searching desperately for what to do, when his own hand suddenly felt warmer than it ever had before. Luina had entwined her slender fingers with his.

“Holding hands like this will make me warmer.”

“I-I see.”

She was right; it was certainly warm. In fact, it was burning hot. He was practically spewing steam from his ears due to his nerves.

“Daddy, c’mon! Come! On!”

While the happy couple was busy talking, Marie, who must have grown bored, wrapped her arms around Anima’s neck and shouted into his ear. His heart was racing—in a pleasant way—while holding hands with Luina and in high spirits, he answered Marie with a joyful voice.

“All right, here we go!”

“Let’s go, Daddy! Let’s gooo!”

Hand in hand, they started walking again, but were quickly stopped.

“Well, I’ll be. If it isn’t Luina!” a well-built woman shouted in their direction. She was standing in front of a fruit stall, waving at them.

“Is she a friend of yours?” Anima asked.

“Yes. Most of the people here have known me since I was about Marie’s age. My parents brought me here a lot for shopping. Can we go over and say hello?”

“Of course we can.”

They approached the fruit stall.

“It’s nice to see you,” Luina said to the older woman as they approached the

stall. “It’s been a while.”

“It really has!” The woman let out a hearty laugh as Luina bowed. “I was getting worried; I haven’t seen you around lately at all. Are you eating well? Get any thinner and you’ll collapse, y’know. Wait right here! I’ll set you up with some beautiful fruits!”

“N-No, I couldn’t possibly accept all that!”

“What’s this about? Don’t be shy; you’re like a daughter to me! Now, tell me, what can I get for you?”

“Wooow! So red! That apple looks yummy!”

“You’ve got a good eye, little lady! My apples are always sweet and juicy! I’ll pack you a lot, so make sure you eat ’em—Well, what have we here?”

There was a curious glint in her eyes as they stopped on Anima, holding Marie in his arms. He began to grow nervous that she was afraid of him, but before his anxiety could take over, she flashed a cheeky smile.

“Oh, I see how it is! Finally caught yourself a man, did you?” Luina went as red as the apples on display at the stall. The lady was clearly puzzled by her silence. “W-Wait, don’t tell me you really did?! I was just joking, but… You there, how do you and Luina know each other?”

“I’m her husband.”

“Her husband? You got married?! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“We just got married yesterday…”

“Yesterday?! This calls for a celebration! Oh, but all I have is fruit. Okay, take everything you see here! You like your girls with some meat on them, don’t you? I’ll get Luina nice and plump for you!”

“Her plumpness is irrelevant. I fell in love with her gentle eyes.”

“Golly, did you hear that, Luina? He’s head over heels for you! How about you? Do you love him?”

“She was just telling me that she loves my smile.”

“Oh my, you two lovebirds! I can still remember teeny little Luina in her

daddy's arms, but you've already grown up to be a bride!"

"I'm sure she was an adorable little girl."

"Pl-Please stop… You're embarrassing me…"

"I'll let you in on a little secret, young man. She might be resisting, but deep down, she's happy to hear you say things like that. It's just how girls are."

"I see. I love you, Luina."

"You meanie…" Luina said, bashfully looking at the ground as a result of Anima putting the advice he'd just received into practice. Her off-handed remark hit him with the force of a thousand suns.

"D-Do you hate me now?!"

"I-I don't! I'm happy, really! It's just embarrassing. You'd be embarrassed if I said that to you, too."

"I would not," Anima sighed. "Try it. I promise you, I won't get embarrassed."

After fidgeting for a bit, she started talking in the tiniest of whispers.

"I love you, Anima…"

"Y-You don't say…"

"See! I told you it's embarrassing!"

"No, not at all."

"It is! Very much so! You should see your face! It's as red as a tomato!"

"It's still not as red as yours."

"Th-Then how about this?! I love you, my darling. You bring meaning to my life."

"…"

Anima could feel the blood rushing to his face, and his words stuck in his throat. It wasn't embarrassment he was feeling, but bashfulness. More than that, though, he felt happiness.

"See? You're even redder now!"

“Okay, I give up. Victory is yours.”

While Anima blissfully repeated Luina’s words in his mind, a man came out from the storage shed behind the stall. He was clearly confused to see the lady holding a big bag of fruits.

“Wh-What are you doing, woman?!” he yelled. “Are you selling all that?!”

“Selling it? Are you out of your mind? I’m giving it away!”

“‘G-Giving it away’?! You’re the one who’s out of their mind! You trying to make us go bankrupt?!”

“Now’s not the time to be stingy, old man! Our little Luina got married!”

“What?! Luina got married?!”

Hearing the man’s surprised shout, a number of women from the neighboring stalls made their way over.

“You got married, Luina?”

“I’m so happy for you!”

As news of Luina’s marriage spread through the shopping district, more and more people gathered around her and Anima. They weren’t scared of him; everyone was happy for them. They all congratulated the newlyweds and showered them with presents. From the fruit dealer to the butcher, the baker to the florist, the tailor to the shoemaker, they received gifts from several of the other vendors. Luina couldn’t do anything but stand in place, wearing a worried expression.

“I-I’m really grateful for your gifts,” she said, “but I can’t bring all this home!”

“Then I’ll lend you this!” someone proclaimed as they brought out a wagon.

It would have been rude to refuse such kindness, so Luina had no choice but to accept all their gifts.

“They sure do care about you,” Anima said as he piled the gifts onto the cart. He wanted to tell the whole world how incredible his wife was.

While appreciating the pure bliss he found himself in, by the time they’d finished packing all the gifts, the sky above them had been obstructed by thick,

dark clouds.

“It’s gotten rather cloudy, hasn’t it?” Luina noted.

“Let’s get home before it starts raining,” Anima suggested. “Marie, would you like to hold hands with Mommy on the way home, or would you rather sit on my arms?”

“Will you carry me?”

Anima smiled at Marie, who had been clinging to his leg.

“Of course I will. I love you, Marie. I’ll carry you whenever you want!”

“Me too! I love you too, Daddy!”

After petting Marie’s head, they set off, with Anima pulling the gift-filled cart behind him. He may have had more to carry, but being accepted by the townsfolk and receiving so many blessings made his steps felt lighter than ever before.

◆◆◆

“Hyah! Sho cold!”

Marie was enjoying being carried down the dirt road, muddy from the downpour that started soon after the clouds rolled in. They had hurried home to save the drying laundry, but the rain slowly began to let up, and by the time they got back to the house, it had completely stopped.

“All done?” Marie asked.

“Looks like it was just a passing shower,” Luina told her.

“I’m glad it stopped raining,” Anima said, “but the laundry is soaked. Are we just going to leave it hanging here?”

“I’ll wring everything out. If we leave it all hanging, it should be dry by evening.”

“Wringing them out all by yourself sounds difficult. Let me help you.”

“Could you bring the gifts inside instead? Leave the food in the kitchen, and put the rest in one of the free rooms.”

“Of course, but what should I do with the bread? It got all wet.”

“We can still use it for cooking. Ah, once you’re finished with the gifts, would you be so kind as to give Marie a bath? We don’t want her to catch a cold.”

“You don’t even have to ask. I’ll do anything for you.”

Carefully, one at a time, Anima began carrying everything inside. He wanted to make sure none of their precious wedding gifts got damaged.

“Go, Daddy! Go!”

“Just watch! Daddy will be done in a heartbeat!”

With Marie cheering him on from the side, he quickly carried all the gifts inside then took her to the dressing room.

“Ngh, rghhh… It won’t come off! It won’t come off!”

Marie stomped her feet. She’d had no problem getting undressed the day before, but her clothes were damp, so they must’ve been sticking to her.

“Here, let me help.” He tried to pull off Marie’s socks, which covered everything from her thighs down, but they refused to budge, instead letting out a tearing sound. They seemed to have gotten caught on something. “Huh? Wait, this isn’t a skirt?”

At first glance, it looked just like a skirt and socks, but taking a closer look revealed that they were a single piece, made like a normal pair of pants.

“Get it oooff! Hurryyy!”

“Okay, okay. Just calm down a little.”

After Marie calmed down, he managed to pull off her skirt-like pants. He wasn’t sure just how long her socks were, but they came off alongside the skirt. The socks in his own world were shorter, but they might have been a common occurrence in hers. Either way, he’d gotten a full grasp on the structure of that piece of clothing, so he finished taking off her bottoms.

“Hands in the air; let me take your top off. Who can cheer for Daddy?”

“Meee!” He pulled off her top as well. Stark naked, Marie excitedly opened the door to the bathroom and invited Anima inside. “Daddy, Daddy! Come

quick!”

“Give me a second.”

His answer felt a bit soulless. Taking off Marie clothes had been more exhausting than the time he’d fought an army of hundred all alone, but he quickly took off his clothes and entered the bathroom with her. He expected the bath water to have completely cooled off—it didn’t get changed every day, so it was the same water from the day prior—but it felt reasonably warm when he tested it with his hand.

“How’s the water?” Luina asked through the window. She seemed to have warmed the bath before taking care of the laundry.

“A little more and it’ll be perfect!”

“Okay, then I’ll keep the flame up for a little bit longer.”

“Daddy! Up! Up!” Marie jumped at Anima. Avoiding the danger of her hitting herself on the side of the bath, Anima quickly caught her and raised her up to the window. She pushed her face against it and stared at Luina. “Mommy, come! Bath!”

“Me? Do you not like bathing with Daddy?”

“I want both!”

Luina seemed troubled by Marie’s request. They may have been married, but they’d only met recently. Even having held hands earlier wasn’t remotely comparable to seeing each other naked. It wouldn’t have been strange for her to be embarrassed about undressing in front of Anima. As such, he had a proposal.

“Marie is right; we can’t have you catch a cold. I’ll close my eyes and cover my ears, so don’t worry. Get in.”

“You don’t have to do that. Closing your eyes and covering your ears would make it seem like I hate you, but I don’t. I love you, and there’s nothing embarrassing about getting naked in front of the person you love.”

“Luina…”

“Mommy, come!”

“Hop into the bath, Marie. I don’t want you to catch a cold. I’ll be there in a minute.”

After urging the frolicking little girl on to get into the bath, Luina walked away from the window. Anima got into the warm water with Marie and they waited restlessly for Luina’s arrival.

“Hampfwh!”

Bored of just sitting in the tub, Marie started swinging her legs. For someone of Anima’s size, the tub didn’t feel overly large, but little Marie must have felt like she was in the ocean.

“Sorry for the wait!”

While Anima was busy looking out for Marie, Luina, completely naked, entered the bathroom. Her arms and legs were relatively thin, but she had wide hips and beautiful, full breasts.

“P-Please don’t ogle me so much…”

“Sorry. You’re just so beautiful, I couldn’t help myself.”

“There you go again… Why are you always complimenting me?”

“Because I love you, and I really do think you’re beautiful.”

“S-See? You’re complimenting me again. Now I have to compliment you, or it will seem like I don’t love you. I find you attractive as well; your muscles are incredible.”

“Your big breasts are incredible too.”

Anima returned the praise, to which Luina immediately hid her breasts. He simply wanted to compliment her looks without any hidden meanings, but he only made the situation much more awkward than it should have been.

“Anima… You lecher!”

“I-I’m not! I didn’t mean it like that, I swear!”

“I know. Don’t worry, I believe you.” Luina chuckled at his desperate denial as she picked up a bucket, filled it with bathwater, and poured it on herself. “Isn’t this a bit too hot?!”

“Is it? It doesn’t feel that hot to me.”

Due to his high resistance against… pretty much everything, his opinion on the matter didn’t count for much. If Luina said the water was too hot, she probably was right.

“Ah, oops! I spaced out and totally forgot to extinguish the flame!”

“Why were you spaced out?”

“Because I was nervous about getting into the bath with you…”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“I-It wasn’t your fault. Let’s take a bath together every day from now on, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm, I’m sure. We’re married, after all. Besides, Marie loves taking baths with every—”

Luina suddenly cut herself off.

“It’sh a bit… too hot…”

Marie laid her head down at the edge of the tub with her tongue out.

“Marie?”

“M-Marie?! Are you okay?!”

Anima hurriedly stood up to help her.

“Hyah!”

As her eyes floated over Anima’s waist, Luina’s face flushed and she collapsed on the spot.

“L-Luina?! Are you okay? Marie! Marie, answer me!”

With his daughter and his wife having both turned bright red, Anima was more panicked than he’d ever been before.

◆◆◆

Listening to the raindrops tap against the window of a villa in Garaat, Malshan

made himself comfortable on a sofa, then glared at the man in front of him.

“I wish I could offer you something more extravagant, Sir.”

To his dismay, the owner of the house, Krain, brownnosed him while serving him a cup of high-quality tea in a beautiful porcelain cup.

“Not like I expect anything from you.”

Malshan was one of the few people who could speak to Krain, the richest man in the city after the Scarlett family’s downfall, in such a rude, arrogant manner.

Krain had the entire Hunters’ Guild—along with all the Hunters in the city—under his thumb. He not only had incredible wealth, but almost unrivaled power as well. He could easily bar anyone who went against his will from hiring Hunters, which was akin to a death sentence in Garaat, a town unable to efficiently scout and destroy demon habitats. Not even the mayor himself could afford to disobey him.

However, his wealth and influence paled in comparison to that of Malshan, the head of the Merkalt family, who could easily afford to maintain a grandiose mansion in the royal capital. Krain had only climbed to his current position as a result of keeping himself on Malshan’s good side. He was fully aware of what would happen if he were to enrage Malshan, so he had no choice but to continue to lick his boots.

“May I ask what brought you here today, Sir?”

His timid question triggered a menacing glint in Malshan’s eyes.

“Do you take me for some sort of fool?”

“W-With all due respect, Sir, I don’t quite understand—”

“Don’t play games with me. I know you lied in your report. What I don’t know is why, even with full knowledge of my plans, the idea to do such a thing would so much as cross your mind.”

All the blood drained from his face the moment Malshan touched the crimson stone embedded in his earring.

“I-I didn’t lie!” Krain pleaded. “Just as I stated in my report last night, I sowed the seeds of fear in Lady Luina!”

The night before, Malshan had received Krain's report through a magic stone used for contacting others. He'd had no reason to doubt the report, as Krain didn't have the guts to lie to him, which was exactly why, the next morning, he'd confidently stridden up to Luina's house with the intention of making her an offer she couldn't refuse.

"Luina married a white-haired man called Anima."

"Wh-What? She married that man?"

"So you did know about it, you cretin!"

"N-Not at all! I had no idea about the marriage; I-I merely saw him through the eyes of my summoned goblin! That man suddenly appeared after a bright, red flash and pulverized the goblin with a single strike!"

Malshan furrowed his brow.

"He 'suddenly appeared'?"

"E-Exactly so! I don't believe there were any flaws in my plan. I made all the necessary preparations and ensured there wouldn't be Hunters nearby, but I couldn't possibly have accounted for a man appearing out of thin air! Even so, I firmly believe that Luina felt true terror before he showed up, so I fulfilled my duty, Lord Malshan!"

Krain was desperately trying to save his own skin, but Malshan wasn't listening to his paltry excuses.

I see, he thought. *She used the Harbinger stone in her desperation.*

The Merkalt and Scarlett families had a long history; they were on good terms for centuries. After the Harbinger crisis three hundred years prior, in order to protect the world from such a disaster ever occurring again, the Scarletts took possession of the Harbinger stone while the Merkalts took the Crimson Dragon stone.

Malshan, however, was not happy with what his ancestors had agreed to. Theirs was the more useful of the two magic stones, but the Scarletts' was much more valuable. The Crimson Dragon stone may have held unrivaled power, but the Harbinger stone was able to summon a permanent familiar; he

couldn’t accept that, despite having lost their nobility, they held a more valuable stone than he did.

The Scarletts were heralded as heroes, as the great family who felled the horrendous Harbinger. Even Luina’s father, born over two centuries after the incident, was treated as a savior, and his passing on the battlefield only boosted their reputation.

Malshan was bitter about their possession of the world’s most valuable magic stone, as well as their spotless, unshakable reputation. As such, he wanted the Harbinger stone for himself. With the stone in his hands, he could carve his family’s name into history as legendary heroes.

His plan was simple: summon a familiar and order it to die by his sword. In doing so, he would be seen as the savior of the world and showered with as much praise as the Scarletts were, if not more.

It would have been child’s play to rob them of the stone, but he couldn’t be accused of theft if he wanted to be known as a hero. Assassinating Luina was out of the question as well; if anyone learned that he was behind such a heinous act, half the world would turn against him. His only option was to marry the girl and take the stone for himself through peaceful means, but he’d hit a roadblock.

When he’d proposed for the first time three years prior, Luina’s father had rejected him on the basis that Luina was too young to marry. The following year, her mother had rejected him on the basis that Luina was to choose her future husband for herself, and the year after that, Luina had rejected him on the basis that she was busy raising the children and didn’t want his servants to attend to them.

Malshan hated children—especially orphans, who he viewed as outright foul and filthy—but Luina cared for them more than anything else. If she was afraid that her precious children could die at any moment, she’d be on the lookout for a powerful man who could protect them, and it just so happened that there was no one more powerful than him.

With that plan in mind, he decided to have one of his pawns, Krain, devise an attack. A slimy, greedy coward such as Krain, who was too afraid to fight

demons as a Hunter and wanted to gain money and power with as little effort as possible, was perfect for the job, and everything seemed to have gone according to plan. Until, that is, Malshan had presented himself to Luina as the perfect marriage candidate only to learn that she was already married.

After turning Malshan down countless times, she'd had the audacity to marry some nobody. In the face of such humiliation, intolerable to someone such as him, he made his way to Krain's house in order to hand down a punishment befitting his lies.

Things had changed after hearing the report, however. Malshan needed more information about a certain something, meaning Krain was still valuable to him. Finding a new, trustworthy pawn would have been a waste.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," Krain said timidly. "May I ask what will happen to me now?"

"You failed your task; Luina is not afraid of the demons," Malshan replied, and Krain went whiter than a ghost. "That said, I must acknowledge that your failure was the result of unforeseen circumstances. I must also applaud your ability to carry out your attack without being spotted by anyone. That is no easy feat, and as such, I will give you an opportunity to redeem yourself."

"You… will?"

"Indeed. Your reward will be plentiful—much more than I offered for your last mission. That is, of course, assuming you don't fail yet again."

"U-Understood!"

Malshan made sure that Krain, who was nodding feebly, clearly understood that he had failed his mission. Someone with a strong sense of justice would get in the way of his plan to become the most highly respected person in all the land; a spineless pawn was the perfect tool for disposing of such obstacles. He provided his pawns with all the money, magic stones, and other resources they needed to carry out their duties, and they were more than happy to do so in pursuit of the hefty rewards he offered.

Yet two years earlier, when he'd ordered one of his pawns to kill the head of the Scarlett family, they refused. It didn't matter if they'd found killing a living

hero dishonorable or if they were afraid of being killed themselves instead, the only thing that mattered was that a puppet went against its master. A puppeteer had no use for a faulty puppet, and the one to dispose of that puppet was his then-brand-new plaything, Krain. Having been on the other side, Krain knew firsthand the cruel fate that awaited those who betrayed Malshan.

“Wh-What do I have to do, Sir?” Krain watched nervously as Malshan reached into his pocket, but that nervousness was quickly replaced by greed when Malshan tossed a necklace with a jet-black magic stone pendant onto the table in between them. “Th-That stone is—!”



Inexperienced eyes would never have been able to discern the exact type of magic stone with a single glance, but Krain was nothing if not experienced. He had a fondness for extremely rare and valuable stones, and the one presented to him was just that.

“I’ll provide you with this magic stone in order to fulfill your new duty. Use it wisely, and dispose of the white-haired man named Anima.”

After hearing the dreadful order, the glint in Krain’s eyes faded. A bead of cold sweat rolled down his cheek and he raised his eyes.

“W-With all due respect, Sir, that man brushed off my goblin’s surprise attack as if it were nothing. His assassination may not go as smoothly as Lord Scarlett’s…”

“That is precisely why I have provided you with that magic stone.”

“C-Certainly, using that magic stone would make killing him trivial, but doing so in public would no doubt get me sent to prison for life.”

“Then your task is simple: be smart, and don’t get caught.”

“B-But, Sir…”

Malshan glared at the fidgeting Krain.

“Know your place! You’ve gotten a bit ahead of yourself, wouldn’t you say? I hope you haven’t forgotten who it was that turned your sorry life around and gave you enough money and power to last a lifetime!”

“N-Not at all! I will make good use of the precious magic stone you’ve so kindly bestowed upon me and kill Anima!”

Krain answered him in a strong voice, trying to overcome his fear, but Malshan would have preferred that he failed his task. In order to become a hero passed down through history, he needed Anima to go on a rampage before putting an end to him.

That was the case if Anima were powerful, at least. If the familiar summoned by the mighty Harbinger stone were to fall to a spineless coward like Krain, getting his hands on the stone was clearly not worth the trouble. At the same time, Krain’s failure would prove Anima’s strength, in which case Malshan had

to get his hands on the Harbinger stone as quickly as possible.

The only people who knew about the existence of the stone were the descendants of the families who had taken part in the fight against them three centuries prior. Consequently, Krain didn't know about it, but ordering a magic stone collector to retrieve it for him would be like asking a street rat to return a stolen loaf of bread.

"You have one week to carry out your duty. If you don't report your success within that time frame, I'll consider you a defector. Be sure you remember that."

By the time Malshan finished his business and left the house, the rain had completely let up.

Chapter Three: The Demon Lord Makes a Fortune

“Luina, I’m done.”

In the early afternoon a week after appearing before Luina, who was currently harvesting crops with Marie’s help, Anima went outside to report that he had finished filling the water tank in the kitchen.

The three of them were wearing matching straw hats they’d received as gifts from one of the vendors in Garaat. Anima had crossed the Desert of Perish unguarded, so the sunlight couldn’t do any harm to him, but he felt like wearing matching clothes would bring them closer together. The horns on his head made if feel more like the hat was thrown on than actually being worn, but that didn’t change the sense of belonging it gave him.

“Thank you, Anima. That’s very helpful.”

“I’m glad to be of help. Is there anything else I can do for you? I’ll have any physical labor done in the blink of an eye!”

He wanted to help her any way he could. Taking care of the physical labor surely lessened the burden on her body, made obvious by the noticeable change in her complexion. When they’d first met, Luina had been awfully pale, but her face was regaining its color little by little. The amount of food they’d received as presents helped too, of course, but Anima prided himself on lessening the burden on her body and helping her become healthier.

“You’ve been working a lot lately. You helped us repair the roof, made the house sparkling clean, and fixed the broken fence, so go and get some well-deserved rest.”

“Well, I couldn’t let it stay broken.” Seeing the destroyed fence must’ve reminded her of the terrible attack. Anima had wanted to bolster the house’s defenses with his spells so Luina could feel safe, but the house was made of wood, so his spells didn’t work on it. “Anyway, you don’t have to worry about me. Let me help you with something. Ah, I know! You must be tired after all that harvesting! Should I rub your shoulders? Are you thirsty?”

“You spoil me.”

“D-Does it bother you?”

“No, not at all. I’m happy to have married such a kind man.”

Luina’s gentle smile warmed his heart.

“That’s good to hear. I’m happy as long as you’re happy.”

“I’m happy as long as you’re happy as well. I’ll try to cook something super yummy again as my way of thanking you for all your hard work!”

“You always cook something yummy. I can’t wait for dinner.”

“Daddy, are you hungry?” Marie asked while playing in the mud.

“Mm-hmm, I sure am!”

“Lemme help!” She scooped up a bit of mud and began kneading it together. From the looks of it, she was making a mud pie. “’Kay! Dinny’s ready!”

“Is this… Did you make this for me?”

“Uh-huh! Good job, Daddy!”

Marie’s brilliant, ear-to-ear smile was too cute for Anima to take.

“Luina, look! Marie… Marie made me dinner!”

“That’s wonderful!”

“It… It really is. I’m so happy.” Anima had dreamt of the day when Marie would grow up and have a delicious feast waiting for him at home, but he didn’t expect that day to come so soon. “Can I dig in?”

“You gotta say thank you, ’member?”

“Thank you for dinny!”

Moved to tears, Anima brought the mud pie to his mouth.

“Wait, you shouldn’t—!”

Luina frantically tried to say something, but Anima took a big bite of it and fervently gulped it down before she could finish.

“Is it nummy?”

“It is! You’re an incredible cook, Marie!”

“I’ll make s’more!”

Driven by Anima’s praise, Marie immediately jumped into making more mud pies. While he was excitedly waiting for seconds, Luina leaned in and whispered to him.

“Umm, Anima… Normally, you’d just *pretend* to eat it. Didn’t it make your stomach hurt?”

“I don’t feel pain. My body is used to this sort of thing.”

“Is that a reason to have eaten it, though…?”

Luina was thoroughly confused, but Anima knew that mud pies weren’t edible. Marie had gone out of her way to help her hungry daddy, though; she’d dirtied her hands and made the best pie she could just to make him happy. In his eyes, that more than qualified it as a proper meal. Because of the gentle love and care she put into it, he found even a pie made of nothing but mud tasty.

“More’s ready! Daddy, here comes the cabbage!”

His little daughter was trying to feed him. Such a gentle, adorable gesture sent him over the moon with joy.

“Ahhhnmh…”

When he opened his mouth, Marie stuffed the whole pie into it, sending Luina into a panic.

“Can you breathe?”

“Ah cin bwfhh!” Anima answered her with a smile. The pie was too big to eat in a single bite, but it wasn’t big enough to make him choke. He simply stuffed the whole thing into his cheeks. There were a couple small pebbles mixed into the pie, so he crunched on them for a while, then gulped it all down and stood up. “Okay! My tummy is full, so it’s time to do some more work! Should I bring in the laundry?”

Luina had hung it out to dry in the morning, so it should have been ready to fold and put away. The weather was clear all day, so there was no reason for

any of it to be still wet.

“No, I’ll take care of it. I’m sure you’re tired.”

“Not at all. Besides, I’ve watched you do it before.”

Luina always took responsibility for doing the laundry. Anima offered his help every time, but she told him to do something else every time. However, Luina must have been tired from a long day of work at the field. Her hands were all dirty, making it impossible for her to collect the laundry, so it was the perfect chance for Anima to learn how to do a new chore and lessen the burden on her even further.

“B-But…”

“I’m telling you, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of the laundry, so take this chance to get some rest.” He went over and picked up the basket from under the clothesline, then started taking the clothes off and putting them into the basket, but his hands stopped after taking the first piece off the line. “Th-This is…”

The soft, smooth fabric in his hands was none other than a pair of panties. He glanced at Luina, only to see her bury her beet red face in her hands and sway her body around, trying to rid herself of the embarrassment. He finally understood why she tried to keep him from doing the laundry.

“I-I mean, we bathe together every day, and I see your underwear in the dressing room all the time. There’s no reason to be sheepish about it!”

He tried to defuse the situation, but it completely backfired on him; Luina was getting even redder.

“You meanie!”

Luina dragged herself over to the clothesline and plucked a large pair of underwear off it. It was a pair of Anima’s underwear that he’d gotten as a wedding gift from the tailor. Luina stretched it out in front of his eyes with a smug look on her face.

“E-Embarrassing, isn’t it?!”

She seemed to have been upset about him unintentionally embarrassing her.

Her cute little plot for revenge put a smile on his face, and seeing his underwear made him feel grateful.

“Thank you.”

“Wh-Why are you thanking me?”

“For always washing my underwear.” In his old world, Anima was treated as the scum of the earth. Not a single soul would willingly touch his underwear. Not only did Luina touch it, though, she even washed it after he’d worn it all day. That simple act was enough to have his heart overflowing with gratitude. “Isn’t it embarrassing for you to touch my underwear, though?”

“Well… It is…”

“You don’t have to force yourself. Let me wash my own underwear from now on. I wouldn’t want you to soil your hands with it.”

“I-I’m not soiling them! I would never consider my beloved husband’s underwear dirty. I’ll keep washing it for you.”

“Luina…”

Tears welled up in Anima’s eyes. Luckily, he had a piece of cloth in his hand, which he promptly used to wipe those tears.

“Kyah! Anima, th-that’s my—!”

“S-Sorry. That was careless of me.”

Anima handed Luina her underwear back, who bashfully threw it into the basket.

“I got s’more!” Marie ran up to them with a mud pie in her hands. Her newest creation was her magnum opus; the warm rays of the sun reflected off its polished edges. “Daddy, here comes the cabbage!”

“Ahhhnmh!”

“I’ll start cooking dinner, could you bring the laundry inside?”

“Shfuwe!”

After Luina left, Anima gulped down the mud pie and got back to gathering the laundry.

“Lemme help!” Marie chirped.

“Good girl, I appreciate it. But first, wash your hands.”

“I’ll make ’em sparkly!” Anima took her to the well and pulled up the bucket. She stuck her hands into the water and splashed around while washing them. “’Kay, all sparkly!”

“Good job!”

He pet her head, then picked her up so she would be able to reach the clothes.

“There!” Marie shouted, pointing toward some of the laundry “There!”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

After moving where she was pointing, she grabbed the swaying piece of clothing. It was a fluffy little pair of Marie’s underwear.

“Rghhh!” She tugged at it earnestly, but to no avail. “It won’t come off!”

“You have to take the clothespin off first. Here, let me show you.”

He took off the pin while holding onto Marie.

“It’s off! Daddy, it’s off!”

She proudly presented her underwear to Anima. He praised her, then she happily reached out toward the next piece of clothing on the line, taking clothes off the line one piece at a time until Anima finally put her down.

“Missed me, didn’t ya?!” A high-pitched voice washed over the field. “Fear not, for I have returned!”

Anima turned around in search of the source of that voice, and found a small girl standing outside the house. Her young face contained powerful, crimson eyes, her small body was covered with patched-up clothes, and her long red hair swayed in the wind. Looking smug, as if she owned the place, she set off toward the garden, but was taken aback the moment she spotted Anima.

“H-Hey. who are you?” she asked.

“I’m—”

“Aahhh! Myukeyyy!”

Marie cut Anima’s response short. She ran through the garden with a huge smile on her face and hugged the small girl, Myuke, with so much force that she knocked the straw hat off her own head.



“I’m home, Marie,” Myuke said as she gently pet Marie. “Did you miss me?”

“Hug! Hug!”

“There, there. Jeez, you’re so spoiled.”

Myuke must have been enjoying the attention she was getting. She joyfully tried to pick Marie up, but she didn’t have enough strength to hold her. Marie simply slipped out of her arms.

“…Whatcha starin’ at?” As Anima admired the sisters’ heartwarming reunion from afar, Myuke shot him an irritated glance. She let go of Marie, picked up the straw hat, and stared straight into his eyes. “So, who’re you?”

“I’m Anima.”

“As far as I’m aware, Luina doesn’t know anyone by that name. Are you here to kidnap Marie?! I’ll end your life if you even *try* to touch her!”

In an attempt to intimidate him, she thrust her right hand out. On her slender ring finger was a ring with a blue crystal embedded in it. Anima recognized it as a magic stone, even if he had no idea about its powers.

“What sort of magic stone is that?” he asked in an attempt to calm her down.

“The kind that can wipe you out in an instant!”

“Really? You must be strong.”

“You bet I am! I make a killing with this stone!” As she said that, she suddenly remembered something. “Ah, right! Tell me, Marie, where’s Luina? I want to tell her I’m back and give her the money.”

She presented the leather pouch hanging from her waist in a boastful manner. Marie looked at the bloated pouch in awe.

“Full! It’s so full! Wow, you’re so good!”

“You bet I’m good!” Myuke smugly puffed out her chest. “I’m your big sister, after all! I’ll keep making tons of money so you can eat delicious food every day!”

“You were working?”

Anima had been under the impression that she was at a friend's place or something, but in reality, she was out earning money for her family. From what he had heard from Luina, Myuke was only twelve years old; the fact that she was working at such a young age proved how much she loved them. She was obviously very kind, a quality Anima admired. He hoped that she would be quick to accept him as her new father, and that they could start their cozy family life together.

"That's right. I'm a Hunter, and a strong one at that! One wrong move and I'll blow you to smithereens!"

"Daddy's strong too! Super strong!"

"'Daddy'? Who's that?"

"Daddy, up!"

Myuke had been looking around in complete confusion while Marie ran over to Anima and hugged his leg, but that confusion quickly turned to panic. Seeing him pick Marie up made her tremble.

"H-Hang on a minute! A-Are you 'Daddy'?! What?! What the hell happened while I was gone?!"

"Daddy beat a scary monster!"

"What 'scary monster'?"

"A goblin."

"Seriously?! What are the Hunters doing, letting a demon wander all the way out here?! Did you get hurt?!"

"No."

"Not you! Marie, are you okay?! What about Luina?! Don't tell me she got killed by the goblin!"

As a proof of her endless love for her family, Myuke was frantic at the mere mention of possible danger. Anima hoped to be the subject of her worries in the future.

"Don't worry, neither of them is injured. I checked them thoroughly in the

bath.”

“Excuse me? Okay, wait. Why did you take a bath with Luina?!”

“Because I’m her husband.”

“Great, now I have more questions than answers!”

Just as she started to stomp around in frustration, someone walked up to them from the back entrance of the house.

“What’s all the ruckus? …Ah.”

Luina’s eyes flew open at the sight of Myuke. Slowly but surely, tears began rolling down her cheeks.

“Myuke!” Luina hugged her tightly. “I’m so happy you’re home! Are you hurt? Did you get into any danger? I was so worried about you!”

Anima had started to worry for Myuke’s well-being too. He’d come to realize that being a Hunter must have been a dangerous occupation. She prided herself on her strength, but Anima didn’t want to let such an adorable little girl face any danger.

There wasn’t much he could do about it, though. Based on their interaction, it seemed like that Myuke became a Hunter against Luina’s will, so it was unlikely that she would quit just because Anima said so. If she wouldn’t listen to Luina, there was no way she would listen to a ‘suspicious intruder’, and forcing her to quit would create a huge rift between them, which was out of the question.

“You’re such a worrywart. Anyway, I heard you were attacked by a goblin. Is that true?”

Luina let go of her and nodded.

“The day after you left, a goblin showed up late in the afternoon. Fortunately, Anima saved us.”

“Okay, if that’s true, then is it also true that you married Anima?”

Luina’s cheeks flushed.

“Yes. We’re married.”

“I didn’t hear anything about that!” Myuke cried, aghast. “Have you been

seeing each other behind my back?!”

“No, we met on the day of the goblin attack. Then, he proposed to me…”

“Don’t you mean ‘forced’?”

“No, he did nothing of the sort. I decided of my own free will to marry him. He’s a really kind person who loves children and cares for me. I felt like he’d be the perfect match for me.”

“I see… I-I guess you’re the right age to get married, so I can’t really complain… By the way, how much are you bringing in every month?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh?! Why aren’t you working?! Hey, why’s this guy such a deadbeat?!”

“You shouldn’t be so harsh on him. He helps a lot around the house!”

“But he isn’t making any money! I’m not working to support some bum! I take back everything I said; divorce him right away!”

“Fighting’s bad!”

“Exactly. Anima saved us.”

Being rebuked by both Marie and Luina, Myuke’s face went red. She glared at Anima, her eyes filled with rage and frustration.

“You’re crazy if you think I’d share a house with you.”

“That’s a shame… I’ll sleep in the garden, then.”

“Please don’t. I wouldn’t want you to catch a cold. Sleep in the bed like everyone else.”

“But as I understand it, Myuke would hate that.”

“That’s right! Never in a million years would I share a bed with you!”

Anima was dejected to learn just how much Myuke hated him, but he decided not to voice his concerns. If at all possible, he’d have preferred to spend his nights under the same roof, but the garden was close enough that it didn’t make a difference.

“Why can’t you be friends with Anima?”

“I won’t be friends with a freeloader!”

That statement gave Anima an idea.

“Would you be my friend if I made money?” he asked, prompting her to scan him from head to toe.

“You look strong,” she stated.

“I am.”

“Good. And you not working means you don’t have a Hunter license, right?”

“I don’t.”

He didn’t even know what a Hunter’s responsibilities entailed. From what he had gathered, it was a high risk, high reward job, but that was as far as his understanding went.

“Then come with me. I’ll take you to the Hunters’ Guild.”

“Where’s that?”

“In Garaat.”

“We goin’ on a trip?” Marie asked with twinkling eyes. She clearly wanted to join them.

“We are! Can you watch the house for us?”

“I wanna go too! Daddy, up!”

“Sorry, Marie. Could you help me with the chores today?”

“You won’t go?”

“She won’t, and leaving her alone would be sad, wouldn’t it? So could you please stay here with her?”

Marie nodded and squeezed Luina’s hand, who then gently pet her head, putting an adorable smile on her face.

“You seem to be on top of your dad game despite being a bum.”

“Will you call me Daddy as well?”

“Not a chance. No matter how much like a father you may act, I’d never call a

freeloader ‘Daddy’.”

“I see. Then I’ll be sure to make a good living.”

“Paying for your food and room is the least you can do. Now then, let’s get going.”

As Myuke turned around and prepared to set off, Anima put his straw hat on her head, to which she turned around in surprise.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

“The sun’s strong today.”

“Worrywart.”

“Of course I worry about you! You’re my precious little daughter. I don’t care how much you despise me; I’ll always love you.”

“And you’re my beloved husband.” Luina stretched out her arm and put a straw hat on Anima’s head before looking into his eyes. “Anima, please protect Myuke.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let her get so much as a scratch.”

Luina smiled after hearing Anima’s confident words. The first time she ever spoke about Myuke, she had looked incredibly anxious. Now that Myuke had come home, though, her first reaction was to tearfully embrace her. It was easy to see that Luina didn’t want Myuke to work. At least, not as a Hunter.

The fact that Myuke was a strong-willed, independent girl was also abundantly clear. There were countless other avenues to establish an income, so it was a mystery why Myuke had chosen to be a Hunter, but that was beside the point. For as long as she put herself in harm’s way, it was Anima’s duty to protect her.

“All right, let’s go. We’ll be back before dinner!”

“Take care!”

“Bye-bye!”

While his youngest daughter and wife waved goodbye, Anima set off with Myuke for Garaat.

◆◆◆

Relaxing on a sofa at a bar in Garaat, Krain was enjoying the enamoring aroma of the group of women tending to his every need. They all wore alluring clothes, their breasts almost completely uncovered, yet he had something completely different on his mind: if he wasn't able to dispose of Anima by midnight, he would have to face Malshan's wrath. Failing his mission was not an option—not if he wanted to keep his wealth, his status, and his life.

I have to sneak into Luina's house. There's no other way.

Doing so would give him a chance to fight Anima. The goblin hadn't even been able to scratch him, but Krain was certain that the magic stone Malshan had given him would make the fight trivial.

Unfortunately, however, there were other factors he had to consider, the biggest of which being that killing Anima would land him in a heap of trouble. He could sweep assault and rape allegations under the rug with ease, but he couldn't talk his way out of having used that magic stone. The capital's best Hunters would surely be notified of someone using such a monster for murder, and they would sniff him out and capture him.

Such a fate could have been avoided by leaving no witnesses, and while he had the liberty to dispose of the children, he couldn't lay a finger on Luina. She was supposed to become Malshan's wife; Malshan would no doubt have his head if any harm came to her. Instead, he decided to fabricate a reason he could give the authorities to justify murdering Anima in cold blood.

If I can bait him into going on a frenzy, I can write off using the stone as necessary to subjugate a violent criminal. Killing him would simply be an "accident".

In order for his plan to work, he would need at least one eyewitness who could corroborate his story. Simply put, he needed Anima to go on a rampage in a well-populated area—an area like the middle of Garaat.

He already had the bait to enrage Anima at the ready; all he had to do was wait for his arrival. Much to his dismay, however, Anima was nowhere to be found. With the deadline approaching at an alarming rate, a cold drop of sweat rolled down his cheek.

“How about a refill, sweetie?” The girl sitting next to him leaned on his shoulder and whispered into his ear with a sweet, soft voice.

“Do not speak to me!”

“I-I’m sorry!” She trembled in fear as Krain kicked the table.

“I told you not to speak!”

“I-Is everything okay, Lord Krain?”

The manager came rushing out in a panic while Krain lifted the girl’s chin with his finger.

“This girl is an eyesore. Fire her this instant.”

“B-But—”

“You dare talk back to me? Do you have any idea who I am?!”

“M-My deepest apologies, Sir. You, get out of here. Quickly.”

“B-But I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Get out of my sight! Now!” Upon Krain’s enraged shout, the girl stormed out of the bar in tears. “Dammit!”

Normally, he would calm down after such an outburst, but the seething rage clouding his mind kept eating away at him. In such a confused state, he’d stand no chance against Anima. He had to do something about it, so he let his eyes drift over the shocked women present in the bar, stopping at the one with the largest breasts.

“You. Come with me.”

The woman whose arm he grabbed looked at the manager for help, who, after a moment of hesitation, nervously opened her mouth.

“M-May I ask why you’re taking her with you?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

“W-With all due respect, Sir, we don’t provide such a service…”

“Then I’ll pay you a full gold piece after the fact! Are you still against coming with me?”

“S-Stop…” the girl whispered.

Krain usually reveled in his sadistic nature when he felt women’s disgusted stares piercing him, but his rage overshadowed any semblance of pleasure.

“Stop? Why? You seriously think you’re worth more than a gold coin? Huh? Listen here: you’d better watch your mouth. The girls who dare to reject me tend to mysteriously end up getting beaten to a pulp in the middle of the night.”

The woman trembled in fear hearing Krain’s menacing threats.

She slowly got up from the sofa without fighting back, when a bald man stormed into the building.

“Krain!” he, one of Krain’s underlings, shouted.

“What do you want?”

“Well…”

The man whispered into Krain’s ear, causing a grin to blossom on his face.

“Good,” Krain said. “He’s finally here.”

“Indeed. He’s currently with the Hunter who returned earlier today.”

In the nick of time, luck found its way to Krain. With his mood turned around, he looked at his subordinate.

“Get me all the booze and all the girls! We’re throwing a party! Go ahead and pick a girl for yourself; otherwise you’ll be left hanging when the rest of my people arrive.”

“Understood!” The bald man looked through the bar with a lustful gaze.

“That girl is mine, though. I hope you’re not planning to escape, gorgeous. You know what will happen if you do.”

At the pale, terrified woman’s reluctant nod, Krain left the bar.

◆◆◆

Walking through a bustling district of Garaat, Anima noticed that the streets were dotted with a number of adult establishments where attractive women

were trying to lure in potential customers.

“Ooh, you’re quite the hottie, white hair! Why don’t we have some fun together? Come, I’ll show you inside.”

A scantily-clad girl wedged herself between Anima and Myuke, approaching him with a seductive smile—an unthinkable scenario in his original world. Her friendly demeanor made him happy, but he firmly stood his ground.

“I’m married. I would much sooner die than be unfaithful.”

“G-Goodness, is that so…?”

The girl was completely dumbfounded; she had probably never been rejected so bluntly before. Anima was starting to feel bad for her.

“What’re you dragging your feet for? We have places to be!” Myuke chided him before he could say anything else. Assuming that she was afraid of walking through the red-light district alone wasn’t far-fetched, and Anima couldn’t have his precious daughter feel unnerved, so he hurried to her side, only to be thanked with a doubtful glare. “You were flirting back there, weren’t you?”

“I don’t care for other women. I have Luina.”

“How about making some dough if you love her so much?”

“Don’t worry, I will. I’ll make enough that you can relax back at home without worrying about money.”

He didn’t know for sure, but it seemed like Hunters fought demons for money. The only demon he’d faced had been more fragile than a stick, but given how Luina had reacted to seeing Myuke, they clearly posed a threat. She was worried to death for her and had broken down in tears. Anima simply couldn’t allow his daughter to do something so dangerous.

“You make it sound simple, but making a living as a Hunter is no easy task. I gave it my all last week, and I basically made pocket change.”

“Really?” Anima glanced at her leather pouch, but she quickly moved her hand over it.

“Point is, making it as a Hunter is tough! I’m actually working as a Hunter, so you’d better believe me!”

“Oh, I see. Then please, pass on the secret teachings of Hunters to me, Master.”

Myuke’s lips twitched ever so slightly.

“Wh-What did you just say?”

“I asked for your expertise as a Hunter. You’re the only one I can ask, Master.”

“R-Right… ‘Master’, huh?” She suddenly put on a smug smile and placed her had proudly on her chest. “All right, listen up! I, your kind, dependable Master, will teach you the ropes! Everyone begins their journey as a one-star Hunter, but at that rank, you’re not allowed to work alone. In other words, if you want to make money, you’ll need me by your side!”

“I also want to stay by your side. I promised Luina I’d protect you.”

“I-I’m not so weak that I need a bodyguard! Then again, I don’t want to make Luina worry, so I’ll keep you company! By the way, what sort of magic stones do you use?”

“What do you mean?”

“If we’re gonna work together, it’s better if I understand what you’re capable of. I can see that you’re using a minotaur stone, but what else do you have up your sleeve?”

Anima’s horns were hidden by his straw hat, but Myuke had gotten a glimpse of them when he’d given her his hat. She believed that they were a byproduct of using a minotaur’s magic stone, but since she was someone he cared about, loved, and wanted to be accepted by, he had no reason to keep up that facade.

“I’ve had these horns since I was born.”

“Are you making me out to be stupid just because of my age?”

“Not at all. I was summoned from another world.”

“You have some nerve, playing pranks on your Master!” Myuke pouted.

The fact that she didn’t believe him proved that she didn’t know about the existence of the Harbinger stone. He probably needed to be careful about mentioning it in the future; a unique, one-of-a-kind magic stone would no

doubt attract some unwanted attention. One slip of the tongue could easily put a target on their backs, and yet despite that, Luina had chosen to share such valuable information with him.

To anyone else, she probably played off her pendant as a simple accessory. Keeping secrets from family was not to his liking, but he couldn't reveal something to Myuke that Luina had deliberately kept hidden from her.

"Anyway, I don't have any magic stones."

"I see… Well, not like it matters when you've got the strength to take on a goblin all by yourself. By the way, didn't the goblin drop a magic stone? Selling that would be a good start to covering your living expenses."

"It didn't. It exploded from the impact, so maybe the stone was destroyed along with it."

"Breaking a magic stone… Just how strong does that stone make you?!" Myuke said under her breath, completely astonished. As far as Anima had gathered, a minotaur stone enhanced its user's physical abilities, so it was in line with her suspicions.

"By the way," Anima began, "what kind of magic stone are you using?"

"Th-That's a… secret." Myuke glanced away awkwardly.

"Why are you keeping it a secret? Didn't you say it'd be better to know each other's strengths?"

"Don't talk back to your Master! I do things my own way!"

"I understand. I apologize for my rudeness."

"G-Good." She increased her pace while trying to shrug the topic off, before suddenly stopping in front of a stone building far taller than any other along the street. "We're here. This is the Hunters' Guild."

"What is the Hunters' Guild, exactly?"

Words gushed forth from Myuke like a waterfall. She loved it when Marie clung to her, so it was safe to assume that she enjoyed being relied on.

According to her, the Hunters' Guild was responsible for communicating to

Hunters the requests they or the country at large received. In order to make a killing, one had to take on difficult and dangerous requests, but one-star Hunters could only do simple jobs. For their own safety, they couldn't even accept jobs on their own. They could technically join high-ranking hunters on their quests, but they were viewed as nothing but dead weight, so that option only existed in theory. Therefore, one-star Hunters were almost always stuck with other one-star Hunters.

After climbing the ranks or being recognized by the state, one would earn the rank of eight-star Hunter and would gain access to the highest-paying contracts. In exchange for such wealth, however, eight-star Hunters were unable to turn down requests from the state. All in all, becoming an eight-star was an incredible honor, and was pursued by all beginners.

"So, if I've got this correct, once I become an eight-star Hunter, I can dispel all of Luina's worries."

"That's exactly why I'm aiming to become an eight-star Hunter," Myuke said, nodding in agreement. "But the climb isn't easy by any means. Plus, I don't think Luina would be thrilled if you became an eight-star."

"Why is that?"

"Because she'd be worried about you. Her father was an eight-star and had a contract with the state itself, but he passed away two years ago."

From what Anima had heard, her father had been killed by a demon, but he didn't know that he'd died fulfilling a contract as a high-ranked Hunter.

"Myuke, why are you working as a Hunter?"

"It's the fastest way to strike it rich."

"Is money really that important?"

Luina may have been broke, but she cared more about her family than material gains. She would never want one of her precious daughters to pull her out of poverty by risking their life, and it was unlikely that Myuke would overlook that.

"It is. If Luina had money, she could live the way she wants to. I'm sure you

know the house we live in is an orphanage.”

“I know that, yes.”

“Only Marie and I are there now, but lots more children used to live there too. Marco, Lui, Miiru, Leo, Koru, Karma, Kurara, Ema, Luna, Lion, Teo, Rose… But two years ago, when Luina’s father passed away, paying to keep the orphanage running got a lot harder. I’ve been living with Luina since I was six, but I’ve never seen her more heartbroken than she was back then.”

Luina loved Myuke and Marie to bits, and she probably loved the other children who’d lived there just as much. He didn’t even want to imagine the look in her eyes as her beloved children left one after the other, and Myuke probably felt the same way.

“That’s why I’m working hard to make money. If I don’t, then… maybe one day she’d have to watch Marie disappear from her life too.”

Myuke hated Anima because he was a freeloader. With one more mouth to feed, the cost of living a quiet, peaceful life drastically increased; he could become the catalyst for losing Marie.

That didn’t sit well with him, of course, but he also couldn’t allow Myuke to put her life on the line. If she still wanted to work as a Hunter, it was his duty to protect her from any danger.

“I’ll take care of the expenses,” he told her, “so make sure you stay with Luina and Marie.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m worried. It’s only natural for a father to protect his daughter. Even if you despise me, I’ll always be looking out for you.”

Anima looked at her with determination in his eyes, only to find that she had been staring at his face all along. After looking into each other’s eyes for a while, Myuke sighed exhaustedly.

“All right. I promise to stay with them if you can make enough. I don’t like making her worry either. But I’m still your Master until you become a proper Hunter! Don’t worry, you’ll be safe with me!”

“I’ll work hard and quickly become a proper Hunter.”

“Just make sure you don’t get hurt—safety first. Anyway, we should go inside. But first, do you have any money on you?”

“I don’t. Do I need money to take requests?”

“Only the very first time. You need to pay a registration fee to become a Hunter, but I’ll be nice and cover it for you. I hope you actually make some money so it doesn’t go to waste.”

“I would never waste your hard-earned money.”

In response to Anima’s strong nod, Myuke turned around and took a couple of coins from her leather pouch.

“Oh, if it isn’t the loser Myuke herself!”

“Come to mooch off someone again?”

Just as she pulled the coins out of her pouch, two men called out to her.

“Are they your friends?” Anima asked.

“Not in a million years,” she replied coldly, trying to keep him from getting involved. “Ignore them.”

“Don’t think I’ve seen you around before,” one of the men told Anima. “Did Myuke bring ya?”

“Run while you still can, compadre. This girl’s a loser—a parasite that leeches off high-ranked Hunters!”

Myuke hung her head. He couldn’t see her expression, but her ears were getting red.

“For real, she’s even worse than I heard she was! We partied up with her ’cause Krain asked us to, but she couldn’t even carry our gear! She doesn’t even make a good mule!”

“Right? I almost regret paying her that five copper! Actually, pay me back, will ya?”

“No!” Myuke quickly pulled the pouch away from the man as he reached his hand out toward her, but in doing so, it slipped from her hand. When it hit the

ground, countless pebbles and a handful of copper coins spilled from it. “Ah!”

With burning red cheeks and tears flowing from her eyes, she started picking the pebbles and coins up off the ground. Watching her do so, the men exploded with scornful laughter.

“Hey, what’s this?! You can’t use pebbles to pay, stupid!”

“You mean that good-for-nothing, ex-noble peasant didn’t even teach you *that*?!”

Myuke suddenly stood up, wiped her tears, and glared at them.

“Insult me all you want, but make you regret it if you say anything bad Luina again!”

“A one-star nobody like you has some nerve to go up against a four-star like me!”

“Big talk from someone who only has a splurting slime stone—”

“Eep!” Both men suddenly screamed in terror.

“You would dare speak ill of my family?”



Anima seethed with rage as he witnessed the men mocking the family he so deeply loved. He wanted to kill them where they stood, but he had to avoid resorting to violence. He wouldn't have hesitated if they'd been in a secluded place, but there were a number of onlookers around them; word of their brutal deaths by Anima's hand would no doubt spread like wildfire, leading to terrible rumors about him and an abundance of trouble for his family. He had to keep his rage in check to avoid making trouble for his family. He had to, but he couldn't stand to let them be degraded any longer.

"Apologize to Myuke or die by my hand; the choice is yours," he continued, the thick, overwhelming bloodlust in his eyes turning the men pale. Anima, waiting for their apology, hadn't laid a finger them, but not a word came from their panically flapping mouths. He took a deep breath. "I see, so you would choose death over a simple apology. Then I shall—"

"What's going on here?!"

Just as he clenched his first, someone angrily shouted at him. The brown-haired man the enraged voice belonged to pushed through the onlookers and approached the four. When he finally managed to reach them, the two men let out sighs of relief as if they'd just been dragged back from death's door.

"You won't believe this, Krain! This man threatened us!"

"He almost killed us!"

"Oh, is that so?" Krain sneered as the two men snitched on Anima. "This white-haired bastard must be the scum that has been assaulting women under the veil of night!"

"Wha—?! Just what are you accusing him of?!"

"We've received reports of an ill-tempered man assaulting innocent citizens on the empty streets at night! As a Hunter, it is my responsibility to uphold peace and safety in this town!"

Krain spoke theatrically, as if he were the main character of some drama, while Myuke stood dumbfounded by the outlandish claims.

"H-Hold up! This must be a misunderstanding! He… Anima isn't like that!"

“Silence! I don’t want to hear another word from the daughter of a criminal! I, Krain, shall dispose of the filth threatening the peace of our precious town! I will teach you pain while keeping our innocent citizens safe! I’m so angry that I might end up accidentally killing you!”

He raised his voice even higher and touched the jet-black stone dangling from his neck, causing Myuke’s eyes to pop open with shock.

“I-Is that…?! Anima, run!”

“Why?”

“‘Why’?! Are you blind?! That stone is—”

Myuke fell silent as sand began to cover Krain’s body. Moments later, that sand expanded to the size of boulders. With his whole body covered in sturdy rocks, he had become a tall, magnificent statue.

“C-C’mon, we gotta run!”

Myuke grabbed his hand as she screamed. From the looks of it, both Myuke and the bystanders were liable to get caught up in the inevitable duel.

“Stand back, Myuke. I’ll show this man his place.”

“Y-You can’t win against that thing! He… Krain is using a golem stone! He’ll crush you!”

“Oh, wow. Thank you for worrying about Daddy, Myuke.”

“Why wouldn’t I be worried about you?! What else should I do when you’re up against a golem?!”

“I’m so happy. Your kind words have filled me with strength, so you have nothing to fear. I won’t be defeated.” He took off his hat and handed it to Myuke with a powerful smile. “Please hold on to my hat. I wouldn’t want it to get torn.”

“Wh-Who cares about your hat?! You’re out of your mind if you’re gonna fight a monster like that! Turn around and run al—”

Myuke was cut short by the humongous shadow stretching over them. She looked up, but her field of vision was filled with nothing but rocks. It was as if a

mountain were about to fall on her head, when in reality, it was the golem's foot; Krain was going to crush both Anima and her.

The leg slowly, steadily descended toward them—until Anima stopped it with one hand. His legs sunk into the ground under the unbelievable weight.

"…What?"

Terror appeared on the crouching Myuke's face as grains of sand trickled off the golem's foot and gracefully danced around her in the air. As she began to realize what had just transpired, the terror was replaced by pure astonishment.

"N-No way… He stopped a golem's attack… Just how much mana do you need to have for such superhuman strength?"

In reality, Anima wasn't using magic; he was just insanely strong. Myuke, however, attributed the strength to take a golem's strike head-on to having a minotaur stone filled with vast amounts of mana.

"Myuke, get back."

"A-Are you running out of mana? Let me help! I won't let you be crushed here alone!"

Her legs were trembling, yet she bravely offered her help. She was under a mountain of pressure, yet she was trying to protect Anima. That gesture alone was enough to fill his heart with a fuzzy warmth.

"Don't worry. Daddy won't lose to this weakling."

"R-Really?"

"Really really. I fought some incredibly powerful enemies and defeated them without taking a single blow. Compared to them, this is practically a joke; I'd be surprised if he could even put a scratch me. So please, believe in Daddy!"

"O-Okay…"

"Good girl."

He smiled gently at Myuke as she stepped back to safety, then pushed back against the golem. Accompanied by a deep rumble, Krain toppled over, causing the ground in the vicinity to crack and the stone pavement to overturn, its

fragments scattering at high speed. The place Myuke had been crouching in moments earlier was buried under the debris.

As Krain struggled to get back on his feet, Anima jumped onto his abdomen and ever-so-gently kicked him in the gut with his toe. A moment later, small cracks ran through his stone armor before it completely shattered, falling from his body.

Buried under the rubble of his own creation, his arm, bent at an unnatural angle, was the only thing sticking out. Anima pulled on it, fishing Krain out from the remnants of his golem. After holding onto him for a moment, Anima tossed him aside like a piece of trash. He tried desperately to get up from the ground, but his struggle was for naught.

“You… mon…ster…”

Krain was trying to crawl away, but Anima wasn’t a benevolent saint to let him go after what he’d done. He jumped in front of Krain, who screamed in fear and buried his face into the dirt.

“F-Forgive me! Spare me, please! Spare my life!”

Krain was begging for his life, and Anima would have been willing to let him go if he had been the only one in danger, but Krain actively tried to hurt Myuke. Such a grave offense would not be absolved even if he tore Krain apart limb from limb, but he couldn’t do that. Killing him on the spot would lay the groundwork for horrendous rumors. His rage would fade over time, but he would never live down exposing his family to harassment. Even so, letting him go unscathed didn’t feel right.

Trapped in that predicament, Anima finally came up with a solution. He put on a menacing look and opened his mouth.

“If you swear never to come near my family again, I’ll let you go.”

“I-I swear! I swear on my life!”

“Good, but not good enough. Words are one thing, but you have to prove your resolution.”

“Y-You want me to prove it? How?”

“Let’s see. I either tear your limbs off so you can never physically come near us again, or you give me that magic stone. Which will it be?”

“I-I’ll give you the stone!”

He hurriedly took his pendant off and threw it to Anima, who caught it and looked down at him.

“I’ll let you off the hook today, but don’t you dare show yourself before me or my family ever again. If you do… Well, I’m sure you know what will happen.”

All the blood drained from Krain’s face when Anima threatened him.

“U-Understood! I swear you’ll never see me again! In fact, I’ll leave town today!”

Krain crawled away on all fours while screaming in terror. He was to live the rest of his life in Anima’s shadow, terrified of the world around him.

While Krain scurried away, Anima approached the two men who had caused the incident. They were afraid for their lives; their faces were completely pale, but they didn’t try to run.

“P-Please forgive us!”

“We were just following Krain’s orders!”

They begged for their lives before Anima could get a word out.

“His orders?”

“Y-Yeah! He ordered us to provoke a white-haired man!”

They had been trying to rile him up by insulting Myuke, meaning that Krain knew doing so would push him over the edge.

They see me as a family man… Anima often worried about being a proper husband and father, but his deep love for his family being so blatant showed that he was doing just fine. The question that remained was why Krain had tried to get under his skin, but unfortunately, he wasn’t around to confirm any suspicions Anima had. He couldn’t have gotten too far, but at the same time, Anima really didn’t want to see that sleazeball’s face ever again. *Guess he was jealous of me because I married her or something.*

The incident with Malshan the week before proved just how popular Luina was with men; it was an unavoidable consequence of her marriage to Anima that some of them would feel jealous.

“Don’t show yourselves before me ever again.”

The two men scurried off after receiving Anima’s off-handed warning. Just as he was about to make his way back to Myuke to see if she was okay, someone called out to him.

“Thanks, Ani! That was amazing!”

The man’s cheerful voice was followed by a celebration from the rest of the onlookers.

“That damned Krain was acting all high and mighty just because he was strong!”

“I’ve lived here all my life, but I’ve never seen a man as crooked and rotten as him!”

“I’m all giddy now that you gave him a beatdown!”

“The bastard actually threatened my little girl! You know what? Visit my store one of these days; I’ll treat you to something!”

Anima had had to resort to violence to protect Myuke, and though he’d held back, he had been prepared to shoulder the burden of terrifying the locals. The one thing he hadn’t expected was for them to cheer in gratitude.

Krain seemed to have made many enemies in the town, and as such, his defeat bolstered Anima’s reputation instead of destroying it. There was something much more important than celebrating his newfound success, though.

“Are you okay?” he asked Myuke.

“I-I’m fine,” she replied, “but are *you* okay? Did you get hurt?”

“That weakling could never hurt me. I’m just happy you’re safe.”

Myuke glanced at him as he let out a sigh of relief.

“Why do you care about me so much after all the horrible things I said to

you?”

“I don’t think you said anything unreasonable. In truth, I was a bit of a freeloader. Besides, you’re my daughter. Isn’t it only natural that I care about you?” With a warm smile, he showed her the pendant with the jet-black magic stone. “Do you think we can sell this?”

“We’ll have to go to the magic stone specialist, but are you sure you don’t wanna keep it?”

“I’m strong enough even without this.”

“Can’t argue with that. Follow me.”

With Myuke in the lead, they set off to find the magic stone specialist.

◆◆◆

“We’re here,” Myuke said. “This is the magic stone specialist.”

“I expected it to be a bit more imposing.” Anima replied bluntly upon arriving at the small, run-down store.

Magic stones played an important role in the world, from spicing up the dullness of everyday life to being efficient, highly lethal weapons in the right hands. He had expected a store dealing with such a precious resource to be a bit more extravagant, but compared to the Hunters’ Guild it was like a shack.

“This is the closest specialist to the Guild, but there are a number of other stores around town. I can take you to another one if you want.”

“Can I sell the stone here?”

“Sure can! They’ll be begging for you to sell it to them! A golem stone isn’t something you can find at the store any day of the week. Golems are super rare, and beating one is really tough.”

“You really know your trade. Just what I would expect from you, Master.”

“Th-That’s just common knowledge! C-C’mon, we’re going inside!”

Hiding her embarrassment, Myuke hurried into the shop, with Anima following after her.

The interior of the shop was decorated with twinkling, glamorous ornaments.

There were display cases filled with rings, necklaces, and other accessories, each one inlaid with various crystals. Dazzled by the sparkling magic stones, they made their way to the counter.

“Welcome. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking to sell this.”

Anima tossed the pendant onto the counter. Upon seeing the jet-black magic stone, the merchant’s eyes popped wide open.

“W-Would this happen to be a golem stone? Where did you get this?!”

“I looted it after a battle. How much are you willing to pay for it?”

“Please wait just a moment!” He rushed to the back of the store, returning with a fat leather pouch mere moments later. He was surely trying to seal the deal before Anima changed his mind. “I’m terribly sorry for the shameful display, but our gold reserves seem to have run out. Would you possibly settle for three hundred silver?”

“Three hundred silver?!” Myuke cried out in shock.

“Is that a good offer?”

“It’s perfect! Like, a family of four can live off of that for three whole years and not have to work a single day!”

“‘A family of four’? Are you counting me as well?”

“D-Duh!” she snorted. “I can’t call you a freeloader now that you made three hundred silver!”

“Does that mean you’ll call me ‘Daddy’ from now on?”

He expected a positive answer, but Myuke’s gradually flushing face was not a good sign.

“W-Well, I guess I will… But I’m not doing it because you made some money!”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because you protected me.”

“I love you, Myuke, and I’ll always be here to protect you. You can always rely

on me.”

Anima gently pet the nervously fidgeting girl through her straw hat, to which she nodded nervously.

“B-But don’t forget, I’m the boss when it comes to work!”

“I know. You’re a tremendous help, Master.”

“G-Good. That’s what I like to hear.”

Myuke flashed him a delightful smile, and they left the store.

“This is for you,” Anima said, handing the bulging money pouch to the surprised Myuke.

“Why?”

“You want to keep up appearances around Marie, don’t you?”

After staring into Anima’s eyes for a moment, she nodded.

“Yeah. To make up for the things I lack.”

“What sorts of things do you think you lack?”

“Well, I’m not as strong as you are, and I can’t do chores as neatly as Luina. Marie has no reason to respect me.”

Earning Marie’s adoration was the most important thing in the world to Myuke. In order to do that, she filled her pouch with pebbles to make it look like it was full of money, yet even that wasn’t enough to get Marie to stop fawning over Anima. Thinking that her beloved little sister was being stolen from her, she viewed Anima as an enemy.

“You don’t have to put on airs around Marie; she holds you very dear. Just the other day, she asked when you were coming home with tears in her eyes.”

“Really?”

“Really really. So make sure to spend a lot of time playing with her when we get home, especially since money won’t be an issue for a while. Or would you rather work instead?”

“No, let’s go home,” she replied, shaking her head. “The sun is almost down

and I’m hungry. I wanna eat and take a nice, warm bath!”

“Me too. Would you like to take a bath together?”

“No way! What are you thinking?! I’m twelve! Jeez!” Anima dejectedly hung his head at her prompt rejection. “B-But I’ll wash your back.”

That one line was enough to pull Anima back from the depths of despair. Myuke didn’t outright hate him, she was simply embarrassed.

“I’m so happy to hear that. Thank you.”

With a relieved smile, Anima handed her the money pouch. After taking it, she stared right into his eyes.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, smiling even brighter. “Shall we go? Luina and Marie are waiting for us.”

He stretched his hand out toward Myuke, who happily linked her tiny hand with his. Like that, they made their way home under the setting sun.

“Ah! Mommy! Daddy and Myukey are back!”

“Welcome home!”

Seeing them arrive home hand in hand, Luina couldn’t help but show them a warm smile.

◆◆◆

That same evening, Krain was mindlessly dashing through a moonlit field at superhuman speed. He’d used a centaur stone to strengthen his muscles, allowing him to reach speeds impossible for normal humans. He had left Garaat behind much earlier, but he couldn’t let his guard down; relief was a luxury he couldn’t afford at such a critical time. He had to cross the river that marked the border of the neighboring country. If not, he was as good as dead.

And so, he ran. Not from Anima, but from Malshan. Killing Anima in broad daylight would have put a target on his back, so he’d devised a plan: By using his love for his family to anger him, then falsely accusing him of horrible crimes, he would paint himself as the hero of the city.

The tables were turned on him, however. He had failed his mission, and Malshan's wrath was imminent, so he ran. Leaving everything behind—save for some powerful magic stones and a hundred gold—he set off under the cover of night.

A hundred gold was more than enough to allow Krain to lead a life of luxury. The only trouble was that with Malshan after him, he had to lay low. Arriving at the next big city and buying a mansion would no doubt raise suspicion, leading his worst enemy right to his doorstep. He had no choice but to retire and lead a reserved life, and it was all Anima's fault.

You just wait, bastard! I'll make you pay for this!

His rage toward Anima was beginning to overpower his fear of Malshan. The swelling anger wouldn't subside until he had his revenge, but he had seen firsthand how powerful Anima was. He was at least on par with Malshan—facing him head-on was akin to walking into a den of demons without a weapon—but Krain didn't have to kill Anima to take revenge.

"I'll destroy everything that's dear to him! Mark my words, I'll kill those brats, have my way with Luina, and get my sweet revenge!"

If there was one thing he'd learned over the past week, it was that Anima was a family man through and through. Killing the girls and violating Luina would shatter him.

Imagining Anima's face as it warped with despair and anguish, Krain's rage began to subside, only to once again be replaced with dread at the thought of Malshan's wrath. He dashed through the plains while violently shaking his head.

"Malshan is a pushover!" he screamed into the quiet night, attempting to combat his fear. "He's a coward who pushed his job on me the moment he sensed danger! I'm much stronger than that fool!"

"Shall we put that to the test?"

The cold, emotionless voice stopped him dead in his tracks. He timidly looked up at the sky, where a horrible crimson beast was gazing down at him.

As if it had risen from a sea of blood, its crimson scales shimmered under the dazzling moonlight. The flaps of its wide wings pummeled Krain with an

ominous breeze, while its snake-like head twisted and turned in a hypnotic manner.

The scales that covered the monster's face prevented Krain from discerning any particular expressions, but he was painfully aware of its true identity. One creature was feared more than any other for its destructive might, and only one magic stone existed belonging to that creature, the Crimson Dragon.

"L-Lord Malshan…" He could barely squeeze those words out of his mouth—in fact, he could barely even stand. It was as if his enhanced muscles had instantly atrophied. "Wh-Why are you…"

As he finally managed to string together a few words, Malshan slowly landed and continued in his chilling tone.

"I've been watching you. To be more precise, I was watching Anima during your little 'fight'."

"Y-You were watching?"

If Malshan had taken to the skies inside the town, he would surely have seen Krain run away with his tail between his legs. Krain couldn't talk his way out of the predicament he found himself in, meaning he had only one option left: Malshan had to die right then and there.

Such a feat was easier said than done, though. Krain knew stood no chance of winning a head-to-head fight. He had to focus on lowering Malshan's guard.

"I ordered you to kill Anima, but you turned and fled. How foolish. Tell me, are you aware of the fate I sentence traitors to?"

He knew full well what that fate entailed. Malshan lived by the mantra of "do or die", so Krain had prepared himself for the possibility that Malshan would try to kill him. That was why he had taken extra time to collect his most precious magic stones—ones that would help him survive, and ones that would aid in his escape. He wore a ring on each of his ten fingers, each bearing one such stone.

"W-With all due respect, Sir, I may have failed this mission, but does one failure invalidate everything I did for you over the years?!"

"You did a lot. You killed honest, innocent people at my behest, for my sake.

That’s exactly why you have to die. You are an obstacle in my path to becoming a hero.”

Malshan said his parting words. The Crimson Dragon’s attack was rather eye-catching, so he had patiently waited for Krain to arrive at a secluded area.

Krain, however, had no intention of merely rolling over. He was going to kill Malshan and take the Crimson Dragon stone for himself.

“Really? I have to die here?” He poured all his mana into the stone sitting on his right middle finger. It was a hellhound stone, able to produce the very fires of hell. “You fool! You’re the one who will drop dead!”

Suddenly, a trail of black flames erupted from Krain’s right hand. It snaked through the field toward Malshan, charring everything in its path.

“You should know better, Malshan! This will be your final lesson to never let your guard down around me!”

Krain erupted with laughter as he watched the flames creep up on Malshan and burn him alive. The Crimson Dragon’s scales were revered as one of the toughest materials in the world, unable to be damaged by simple swords or arrows; only the most skilled and prepared could scratch them.

Tough as they may have been, however, they were nothing more than armor. No armor could protect the wearer against the heat of hellfire. It would only take moments for Malshan scream in agony as his skin melted, his boiling blood spewed out onto the cold ground only to be vaporized, and he burned to death.

At least, that was how it played out in Krain’s head.

“Insolent whelp.”

A fierce gust of wind extinguished the raging flames. With the tiniest flap of his wings, Malshan blew away the spell Krain had used all of his power to conjure.

“Th-There’s no way… Wh-Why aren’t you dead…?”

“Foolish child. Did you truly think your puny flames could hurt me?”

“Why aren’t you dead?!”

Krain couldn’t believe his eyes. They might have been blown away, but he had seen the flames eating away at his scales for a good five seconds or so. The heat of the blazing hellfire should definitely have damaged him in some way, yet Malshan stood there as if it had never happened.

“The essence of the Crimson Dragon lies in its toughness. By replicating its powers, I have become the Crimson Dragon of legend, inheriting all its resistances. Nothing you do can damage me, not even the fires of hell.”

Tired of the farce, Malshan raised both his arms above his head. As he did, a ball of flame, large enough to swallow a person whole appeared above his head.

Like a small sun, it banished the night around itself. Light crackling could be heard as the grass and plants surrounding him went up in flames. A torrid, suffocating blast of wind carried Krain’s terrified scream into the dead of the night.

“Crimson Dragons may be praised for their toughness, but their destructive power is not to be underestimated. Be grateful, for your life shall be snuffed out by the flames of a fabled beast, said to have rained death and destruction upon the lands.”

Malshan lowered his arms, sending the ball of fire barreling toward Krain. It seemed as though his body would be crushed by the gigantic, scorching ball, but it swallowed him instead, and he vanished from the world without a trace.

Chapter Four: The Demon Lord Wants to Spoil His Family

Making sure not to disturb the two little girls sleeping in the bed with them, Luina gently woke Anima up and asked him to help out with the laundry. Myuke had returned home and reunited with her family the day before, so they no longer had to worry about leaving Marie alone. Waking up next to her beloved sister, she was unlikely to run off in search of Mommy and Daddy.

Anima quietly left the room so as not to wake his two slumbering princesses, made his way to the garden, and drew water from the well. Once he'd done that, he crouched down next to Luina to help her carefully sort the laundry. He spotted a pair of Luina's underwear in the pile, but he decided not to touch it; he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"How about we wash each other's underwear today?"

Focused on the laundry, Luina's proposal caught him completely off-guard.

"You'll let me wash your underwear?"

After a tiny nod, she averted her gaze toward the ground.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you yesterday. What sort of wife screams when her husband touches her underwear? I'm such a failure…"

"D-Don't say that! You're the woman of my dreams!"

"Thank you, I'm happy to hear that," she said, smiling because of his words of encouragement. "I really, truly love you, so I want to try acting more like a couple."

"Is washing each other's underwear something a couple would do?"

"Definitely." She nodded vehemently. "We couldn't bear washing each other's underwear if we didn't love each other. Do you not like the idea?"

"What wouldn't I like about it? I'll pour all my gratitude into washing your underwear!"

"I'll gratefully wash yours as well! Thank you for always looking out for the

girls.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you for the delicious meals you work tirelessly to put on the table every day.”

They sorted the laundry while continuing their delightful chit-chat. When they were done, Luina, wearing a warm smile, stretched out in front of the laundry as it gently swayed on the clothesline.

“Thank you so much! We finished in a heartbeat!”

“I’m glad I could help. I want to keep helping you with the chores every day from now on.”

“I appreciate it, but don’t push yourself too hard! I wouldn’t want you to collapse.”

“You have nothing to worry about; I’m confident in my stamina. Even if something were to happen, a single glance at your wonderful smile cure anything that ails me.”

“I also feel great when I’m with you, so, umm… Ah, I know! Why don’t we make breakfast together?”

“You want me to cook?”

“Yes! I want to cook with you!”

Excited as she always was, Luina grabbed Anima’s hand. He was unbelievably strong, yet he could never shake off Luina’s hold.

Just like that, she brought him to the kitchen. When he stepped on the wooden floor, sparkling save for a few stray stains, the first things he noticed were the stone stove with a number of empty pots neatly organized on it and the long, clean shelves filled with a number of spotless pieces of tableware and other unfamiliar kitchen tools.

It wasn’t as though he had never been in a kitchen before, but he had never actually used one. As the wonder faded, a much more sinister realization dawned upon him: if he made a mistake, his lovely wife and adorable children could get sick. The simple thought that such a thing could happen made him more nervous than any life-or-death fight he’d ever taken part in.

“Are you sure about this?”

Anima’s inexperience would only get in Luina’s way. Physical labor was his forte, while the more sophisticated chores were Luina’s area of expertise. Whatever she decided to make would probably come out better if she cooked alone rather than with Anima helping her, but even so, she was dead set on the idea of making breakfast with him.

“I want to cook with you!”

“But what if I ruin your delicious meal?”

“It’s okay, I’ll be here to help. You know, cooking is a way to show your love. A meal made with love will always taste good.”

“‘Made with love’, huh…”

That explained why Marie’s mud pies had been so tasty. She had made put all her love for Anima into making them, which made even soggy dirt delicious.

“I’m sure Myuke and Marie would be happy to taste your cooking too! They’ll warm up to you even more!”

“You really think so?” Anima was getting excited. If he could pull off cooking a delicious meal, it would put smiles on his little daughters’ faces. He could already hear them saying, “Daddy, it’s super yummy!” as they ate. “What do you need me to do?”

Seeing the excitement light up in his eyes, Luina smiled tenderly.

“Could you slice the apples? I’ll peel the skins later.” The bread and meat they’d received as wedding presents had run out fairly quickly, but they still had a mountain of various fruits at their disposal. Luina had been making a lot of light breakfasts using them, and her laying four apples down on the table and grabbing a knife meant that trend was going to continue. “Do you know how to properly hold a knife?”

Anima nodded hesitantly. He was, of course, physically able to hold a knife, but he wasn’t sure if there were any special techniques he needed to use for cooking. Noticing his inner turmoil, Luina shuffled behind him with a warm smile.

“You have to hold it like this.” She gingerly wrapped her arms around him and gently grabbed his hand, guiding it toward the handle of the knife and helping him grip it. “Are you left-handed?”

“Yes, I am.”

Her soft hands on top of his had Anima’s heart aflutter, but the softness squeezing against his back had it threatening to leap out of his chest. He and Luina took baths together every day, so seeing her full, beautiful breasts was nothing new for him, but he had never touched them before. He loved every part of her, and her breasts were no exception. The sensation of them being pressed against his body sent his mind into overdrive.

Ready to give all of himself to her, the plump, tender feeling pulled away from his back. Luina scooted next to him and looked into his eyes.

“Does this bore you?”

She had given him some tips and tricks to help him learn, but he hadn’t caught a word of what she’d said.

“I’m sorry, would you please start from the beginning.”

“Of course, but that’s strange, coming from you. Are you tired? You seem to be a bit out of it today.”

“I’m not tired at all, it’s just… your breasts.”

“My breast—Ah!” Her cheeks grew as red as the apples Anima was learning to slice. “Umm, just so you know, I didn’t mean to do that, okay? I was focused on teaching you, and…”

“I know, and I really appreciate your impromptu cooking lesson. I promise to become a great cook so we can make meals together every day!”

“That would be great! I’d love to cook with you every day!”

Luina put on a bright smile and stepped closer to Anima. The previous time had been unintentional, but as she stopped only inches away from him, it was obvious that was no longer the case. Her unusual assertiveness completely distracted Anima; he couldn’t even begin to focus on cooking.

“Why are you getting so close?”

“Do you not like it?”

She stared sweetly at him, wishing that they would stay together forever. It took all of his strength, but Anima managed to fight off his urge to hug her and simply shook his head.

“Why wouldn’t I? We’re married.”

“Yes, we are,” Luina said with a warm smile. “That’s why I want to be right next to you when we’re cooking.”

“Do couples usually snuggle up to cook?”

“They do.” She nodded confidently and began to share a story about her past. “I saw Mom and Dad cook like this when I was little. It made Mom so happy. My little girl mind was convinced that she was always smiling so beautifully because she loved cooking, but that wasn’t the reason.”

“What was, then?”

“She did enjoy cooking, but that smile was because she was next to her beloved husband, and because she loved making food for the most important people in her life.” Luina rested her head on Anima’s shoulder. “Today, I feel just like she must have felt back then.”

Anima jumped for joy—on the inside, at least; his feet remained firmly planted on the ground. He didn’t want to hurt Luina, after all.

“I’m so happy to have married you, Luina.”

“I’m happy too. Let’s make ours an even warmer, happier family.”

“Yeah.” There was no way Anima would decline an offer like that. “Let’s build a happy family.”

“Mm-hmm! Let’s!”

“…”

“…”

She looked at Anima silently, as if she were in a trance. While he was trying to decipher the meaning behind her gaze, small teardrops started to form in the corners of her eyes. Anima was starting to worry if she was coming down with a

fever.

“Are you feeling sick?” he asked.

“Huh? No, I’m not…”

“That’s good.”

He was relieved to hear that Luina wasn’t sick, but that meant something else must have hurt her—something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Regardless, as her husband, it was his duty to cheer her up. He looked at Luina, grinding his gears in an effort to come up with something, and got trapped by her teary gaze and flushed cheeks.

“Y-You know, there is one thing we haven’t done yet.” Her reddened face was clearly translated into her tone. “Something that’s very important for making our family that much happier.”

“What would that be?”

“Umm… Well…”

“Lay it on me! I’ll do anything to make you happy!”

“W-We haven’t, umm… kissed yet…”

“‘K-Kissed’, huh?”

Anima was dumbfounded. The possibility of kissing her had never even crossed his mind, but when he thought about it, sharing a kiss would make him the happiest man in the whole wide world. It would certainly make for a happier, healthier married life as well.

“Is it really okay if I kiss you?”

He looked straight into her eyes as he asked, which made her cheeks flush even more.

“Honestly, I’ve been hoping you would kiss me for a while now.”

“Y-You have?”

“Mm-hmm. I’ve been hinting at it all this week.”

“I’m sorry. I never realized…”

Given his nonexistent dating experience, it was no wonder he hadn't seen her give him any "come over here and kiss me" looks.

"You don't have to apologize. I like this inexperienced—or maybe dense—side of yours. So, umm… Would you kiss me?"

"It would be my pleasure." He placed his hands on her slender, delicate shoulders. "Are you… sure about this?"

"I-I'm sure. Please, go ahead…"

Luina closed her eyes and pursed her soft pink lips. Her long, beautiful eyelashes trembled ever so slightly, and her warm, sweet breath escaped her barely-open mouth. It was Anima's first time seeing her face so close up; examining her most minute features, he found her even more alluring than before.

Marveling at her beauty could wait, though. It was time for him to make his move, lest Luina faint on the spot—her face was so red that it wouldn't have surprised him to see steam erupt from her ears. In order to prevent that, he slowly inched his face closer to hers…

"I'm hungy!"

"Eep!"

Luina jumped in surprise as Marie came rushing into the kitchen. Peeking into the room from behind was Myuke, whose sleepy eyes popped wide open when she heard Luina's squeak.

"Wh-What was that scream?! Don't tell me you cut yourself!"

"N-No, I was just startled…"

"That's all? Ohhh, hehe, I get it." As she looked around the room, her eyes stopped on Luina's shoulders, which were still being held tightly by Anima. Her mouth curled into a mischievous smile as she dropped her shoulders and let out a small sigh. "Look at you two, raring to go first thing in the morning. Well, guess it's okay. I mean, you *are* married."

"Wh-What exactly is 'okay'?"

"Whatever, just get on with it. I'll wait outside with Marie."

“Seriously, what are you talking about?”

Myuke’s teasing made Luina want to cry.

The kiss is postponed.

She had been really excited about sharing a kiss with Anima, but that ship had clearly sailed. The embarrassment of kissing in front of their children might have caused her to pass out.

Anima was a bit bummed about it, but then he heard small footsteps pitter-pattering behind him. When he turned around, he saw Marie reaching up for an apple sitting on the cutting board. Just as her tiny fingers reached the apple and pulled it toward her, he noticed the knife sitting next to it.

“Look out!”

He immediately picked her up to get her away from the knife, and she dejectedly wriggled her arms and legs in response.

“Breakfast! Breakfast!”

“I know, you must be hungry. Is that it, Marie? Do you want that apple?”

He spoke calmly, but his heart was racing. A moment too late and Marie could’ve been seriously hurt. He had to make sure not to take his eyes off her even for a second.

“Are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

Spotting the knife next to the apple, Myuke managed to figure out what had happened and asked Marie in a worried tone.

“Don’t worry, she’s fine.”

She let out a relieved sigh.

“Thank goodness.”

“Sorry, Anima. I should have been paying more attention.”

Luina’s terrified, frozen expression only made Anima even more panicked.

“Y-You don’t have to apologize! Come on, cheer up! Marie will get scared if she sees you like this.”

Marie was incredibly perceptive of changes in the surrounding adults' moods. Seeing her mommy's horrified expression, tears began welling up in her eyes.

"Mommy, you hurt?"

She completely forgot about the apple she had desperately wanted for herself, and even about the fact that she was hungry. The only thing on her tiny mind was her mommy's safety. Appreciative of her feelings, Luina's frown was quickly replaced with a smile as she answered in a calm tone.

"Not at all; I'm fit as a fiddle! I'll finish your breakfast in a minute, so you two should go wash your faces. Anima, would you please draw water for them?"

"Leave it to me. I'll come back and help you with the breakfast once we're done."

"Thank you! Oh, and also…" Luina signaled with her hands for Anima to lean closer, which he did. "We'll get back to that kiss once the girls are in bed."

Her sweet, warm breath gently caressing his ear sent blood rushing to his cheeks.

◆◆◆

Finished with breakfast preparations, Anima made his way to the dining room. The table was filled with an assortment of fruits: grapes left on the bunch, bananas and oranges peeled for easy consumption, and apples sliced and peeled to resemble bunnies, one of Marie's favorite animals.

"Bun-buns!"

Marie excitedly picked up a slice and played around with it, making it hop around the table.

The chair that had been in a terrible state when Anima had first arrived had only gotten worse with time. He couldn't let the children sit on such a dangerous piece of furniture, but it probably would've snapped if he'd sat on it. The solution he'd come up with the day before was to simply squat in front of the table, but Luina had offered him a better idea: he would sit on one of the good chairs and Marie would sit on his lap.

"Do you like bun-buns?"

“Uh-huh! ’Cause, umm, they go hoppy-hop!”

“Do they, now? I had no idea!”

Myuke watched with a warm smile as Anima gently pet Marie’s head.

“You really love Marie, don’t you?”

“Of course. I love my family, and that includes you too, Myuke.”

“Yeah, yeah. I love you too.”

She waved her hands as if she didn’t think much of it, but the huge smile on her face didn’t lie. Anima’s smile, just as big and radiant as hers, didn’t either. Hearing that his adorable daughter loved him filled his heart with happiness. Being showered with love first thing in the morning meant that he was going to have the best day of his life.

“Sorry for the wait!” While Anima floated around on cloud nine, Luina brought cups of milk to the table for everyone. Seeing Marie happily playing around with the apple while sitting on Anima’s lap brought her to a warm smile. “Marie, do you like sitting on Daddy’s lap?”

“Yeah! I love Daddy!”

“Are you happy you have a Daddy?”

“Yeah! Daddy carries me sooo high! And his lap’s big and soft and comfy!”

“Ooh, really? That does sound very comfy!”

“Would you like to sit on my lap too, Luina?”

“I would like to try it sometime, but I’ll let Marie enjoy her special little spot while she still can. She won’t be able to sit on your lap forever.”

“Why can’t she?”

“As Marie gets bigger, your legs might start going numb. How about we go out and buy a chair for you?”

“You don’t need to do that. It would be a waste of money.”

“Not at all!” Luina was clearly serious about the chair. “You’re part of our family. I know how hard you two worked for that money, and I’d never want to

waste it, but buying a chair so a family member can sit at the dinner table isn't a waste by any stretch of the imagination."

There was absolutely no way for Anima to talk her out of it.

"I appreciate that you're thinking of me. I'll go buy a chair."

"We gonna go out? On a trip?"

While listening to the adults' conversation, Marie caught on to the possibility of a trip to the town and immediately got excited.

"Yep! We're all taking a trip into town today!"

"Yaaay! When?"

"We could go after breakfast, and have lunch while we're there! We should celebrate Myuke's return today!"

"I-It's fine, you don't have to do that for me."

The reason for Myuke's coyness was clear to Anima, despite his limited experience with women. She'd shown him the day before just how deeply she cared for her family. If she didn't, she wouldn't have willingly put her life on the line as a Hunter.

She worked her tail off, bravely weathering all the cuts and bruises she suffered to provide a peaceful, carefree life to her precious little sister Marie, who was just starting to grasp the world around her, and Luina, who was putting her heart and soul into running the orphanage she grew up in.

Devoting herself to her family was admirable, but as her father, Anima couldn't let her put herself down for the family. He wanted to pamper her until that selflessness disappeared.

"Myuke, don't worry about the money. I promise that I'll make enough to provide for the family, so tell us, what would you like to eat?"

Myuke was taken aback by the gentleness and warmth of Anima's proposal.

"Are you letting me choose?"

"Naturally. Right, Luina?"

"Yep! It's your homecoming party, after all!"

Tensing up a bit from the pressure of Anima's and Luina's warm smiles, Myuke thought for a moment before sharing her decision in the tiniest of whispers.

"Cake… would be nice."

"Oh, that sounds lovely!" Luina chirped. "We'll find somewhere with good desserts for lunch!"

"I didn't mean that. I'd like to have your homemade cake."

"You want me to make one?"

Myuke immediately nodded.

"Remember when I turned eight, and everyone worked together to make me an apple cake? I wanna do that again."

She probably did long for a delicious cake, but more than that, she wanted to relive the fun they'd had as a family back then.

"Let's see… We don't have many eggs, and we're running low on flour as well, but we have more than enough apples. Okay. Let's bake you a cake!"

"Lemme help too!"

"I would like to help as well."

"I'll help out too. It was my idea in the first place."

The delighted smile on Myuke's face warmed Anima's soul.

"Then we should go buy the ingredients, come back, and bake the cake together! Hands up, who wants to come along?"

"Meee!"

Three hands shot into the air, along with three shouts. Everyone scarfed down their breakfast, then set off for Garaat to purchase ingredients.

◆◆◆

Above the forest at the edge of Garaat, Malshan spread his large, taloned wings wide, hovering as he looked down at the measly homes dotting the border of the city. The one he had his eye on was a shabby building surrounded

by a wooden fence—Luina's orphanage.

The day after his handling of Krain, he had one simple objective: to retrieve the Harbinger stone. He had been monitoring the house since the sun's first light had banished the darkness of the night, but there was no movement around the house besides Anima and Luina doing some work in the garden.

It would take nothing more than a simple fireball to blow them all away, but finding a tiny magic stone beneath the rubble would have been too tiresome, and if he spent too long there, someone was sure to see him.

With the death of Krain, the only person who knew about his sinister side, he had to be careful not to let himself be discovered. The option of killing any witnesses was always open, but staying hidden was a much preferable outcome.

Witnesses aside, he also needed Anima alive. The way he would become a revered hero was by tricking Anima into going on a bloody rampage. Once he had buried several countries, Malshan would step in, the two would fight a life-or-death battle, and Malshan would emerge the hero.

He could have tried to sneak into the house to kill Luina and the two kids, but Anima had to live. If the two happened to meet, the battle that would ensue would no doubt demolish the house, which, of course, would make finding the stone like finding a needle in a haystack.

The other issue Malshan ran into was that he couldn't rely on the Crimson Dragon's power in broad daylight. His only chance at peacefully getting his hands on the stone was by intimidating Luina into handing it over, but Anima would never allow that to happen.

Anima had already proved that he was ready to attack at the first sign of a threat, and that he was no pushover. Being summoned by the Harbinger stone meant that he had the strength of the familiars it had summoned during its reign. He would have no trouble matching Malshan's strength; a battle between them would truly be toe-to-toe.

"I should be relieved that he can't use the full extent of his power."

If there was one thing Malshan had learned during his visit the week prior, it

was that Anima loved his family from the bottom of his heart. More than just the house, a no-holds-barred battle would probably mow down the surrounding forest, and maybe half the town as well. That would have caught Anima's precious family in the crossfire, however, hence his hands were tied. That gave Malshan an overwhelming advantage.

Regardless, that was simply the worst-case scenario. If at all possible, he wanted to avoid fighting. His plan was to take the children hostage, threaten Luina, and get his hands on the stone. And he had just the thing to threaten her with: the same flames that had wiped Krain from the face of the planet the night before.

Luina had never seen those flames firsthand, but as a descendant of the Scarlett family, she was bound to have heard about the terrifying power of the Crimson Dragons. A tiny flicker of his all-consuming flame would be enough to scare Luina into submission, and with the children in his clutches, Anima wouldn't allow himself to take any risks.

Once he had his hands on the stone, Luina and the children would have served their purpose. Luina was too beautiful to die, so he had planned to let her live—albeit chained up in a cellar under his mansion—but the children would be dealt with. They would become sacrifices to trigger Anima's wrath, which he planned to direct toward the citizens of Garaat.

"Hm?"

He suddenly furrowed his brow. Far below him, four figures had left the orphanage and set off on the road to Garaat.

Malshan couldn't help but smile at such a happy coincidence. There was no point in him taking the orphans as hostages if Anima and Luina were unaware that they were in his clutches, so the four of them leaving together gave him the perfect opportunity to put his plan into motion.

He wanted to get started immediately, but the time wasn't right. The sound of his wings flapping was incredibly loud, so approaching them could draw some unwanted attention. He would land somewhere farther away, sneak closer to their house through the woods, and wait for their return. Just imagining his plan in action filled him with excitement.

“At last… At last, I’ll become a hero!”

Despite having long surpassed the Scarletts in terms of finances and influence, the Merkalts always lived in their shadow. The decline of their family didn’t erode their fame in the slightest, and being regarded as inferior to a family that struggled to put food on their table disgusted him to no end. It was no exaggeration to say that it was the most insulting experience he’d ever had to live through, but he could never justify his frustration to the masses.

However, if he became a hero, he’d be the subject of praise from the world at large. The Merkalts would finally dethrone the Scarletts, and Malshan would go down in history as the savior of the world.

◆◆◆

The lively energy of Garaat was present even on Anima’s third visit, and though he and his family were in a different section of town in search of ingredients, his presence didn’t cause anyone to shriek in terror. They were having a quiet, peaceful stroll, yet something still made him uneasy.

He could feel glances being shot his way from every direction. Anywhere he went, people would bow slightly as they passed him, and his steps were followed by the joyful squeals and quiet chatter of women as they stared at him from a distance.

When did I become the town’s main attraction?

The people weren’t afraid of him, but he was clearly the center of attention. So much unwanted attention was going to ruin his first outing with every member of his family, something he’d wanted for a long time.

“You’re acting weird. Is everything okay?” Luina asked, worried after noticing Anima’s unrest. “We can take a break in the shade if you’re feeling unwell.”

“I’m fine. It’s everyone else that’s acting weird.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They’re all staring at me.”

“Of course they are! Did you forget what you did?!” Myuke asked after a small, tired sigh. Luina seemed to have caught on as well, and her worried

expression softened into a smile.

“What did I do?”

“You remember beating Krain to a pulp yesterday, don’tcha?! Listen, he’s a violent scumbag who treats girls like animals. Pretty much every woman in town despises him, if not all of them! What you did turned you into a hero, so don’t go getting all nervous and jerky! You have a lot to be proud of, so stand up straight and bask in your achievements!”

After praising Anima, she smacked him on the back to encourage him.

“Oh, I see.”

The highlight of the day had been Myuke calling him ‘Daddy’, but he had indeed defeated Krain, to which the surrounding crowd burst into cheers.

Learning the reason behind all the attention he was getting, Anima cheered up. He wasn’t used to being fawned over by hordes of people, but it wasn’t a bad feeling. Their glares weren’t malicious, so he didn’t have to worry about any potential harm coming to his family.

With his changed mindset, he was finally able to enjoy their family outing to the fullest. Walking around with his head held high, Myuke glared at him with doubt in her eyes.

“Don’t even think about fooling around with other women just because you got a little bit famous!”

“I won’t be fooling with anyone. I will always be faithful to Luina.”

“I’ll be forever faithful to you too,” she said as she happily snuggled closer to him.

Her sweet whisper turned Anima’s face a deep red.

“I’m the happiest man in the world.”

His whole life had changed when Luina had summoned him. He had earned the respect of the whole town, and was well on his way to creating a happy, warm family. Just thinking about it filled his heart with gratitude, which he expressed to her every day, but words were no longer enough. Since they were in town, he wanted to take the opportunity to do something special for her.

Thinking hard in hopes of coming up with an idea, his eyes suddenly caught something as they made their way to the furniture store. There was a beautiful dress displayed on a wooden doll in one of the storefronts.

“That’s it!” Anima had a revelation. He stopped in front of the store and turned toward Luina. “Luina, can we look around for some clothes?”

“Of course we can! I noticed the frays in your clothes, and while I could patch them up, we should take this chance to look for something new for you.”

“Not for me. I want to buy something for you.”

“For me?” The surprise from his statement froze her in place. “But I already own three dresses, and I got a lot of new, beautiful clothes as wedding gifts.”

“But you aren’t wearing them, are you?”

“That’s true. I need a special occasion to wear those, but such things don’t come around often, and they don’t seem very wash-friendly.”

Anima found it weird that she never wore the dresses she’d received as wedding gifts. He had assumed they didn’t fit, but she was simply hesitant to wear them when she did the chores.

“In that case, I’ll buy you some casual clothes. You won’t have to worry about wearing clothes like that around the house, right?”

“I agree with Daddy!” Myuke piped up. “You’ve been wearing that dress for ages; it must be getting tight!”

“‘Tight’?” Anima stared at her waist. Her complexion had drastically improved since they first met, but her figure hadn’t changed at all. He sometimes worried her small, fragile body would snap with a single hug. “She’s as thin as ever.”

“I’m talking about her chest!”

“Ah, I see now.”

“D-Don’t stare so much…”

“S-Sorry…”

He quickly averted his gaze, but Myuke was right. The bust of Luina’s dress seemed strained, as if it could burst open at any moment. That would no doubt

be a shockingly embarrassing experience for her, even if it happened at their home. Anima didn't want to imagine how she would feel if it happened in the garden, let alone on the busy streets of the town. He would rather not have other men feast their eyes on her bare chest.

"Luina, is that dress tight on you?"

"A little, yes."

"Then it's settled. We're buying you a new one," he said in a powerful tone, not allowing any arguments. Luina was suffering in her tight dress, and he wasn't the sort of man who would let his wife suffer, so he quickly set off toward the entrance of the clothing store.

◆◆◆

They entered the small, quiet, orderly store filled with colorful dresses. The clothes were neatly organized, with thought and care put into the placement of each one. Anima couldn't spot any articles of men's clothing, but there was a wide selection of women's clothes. Finding something for Luina would be simple.

"Whoaaa! Daddy, look! There's lots! Lotsa clothes! Whoaaaaa!"

Based on the way she excitedly ran around, looking at the various dresses on display, it must have been Marie's first time in a clothing store.

"Say, can I look around too?" Myuke asked timidly as she marveled at the vast display with stars in her eyes. Her clothes also had a couple of visible patches, though not as many as Luina's. She was too shy to admit it, but she clearly wanted a new dress for herself.

"Tell me if you find something nice. I'll buy it for you."

"R-Really?! Are you sure?"

Her eyes popped open in bewilderment, to which Anima answered with a gentle smile.

"It'd hurt more if you tried to be considerate around me. I love you, and I want to make you happy. You're my daughter, after all."

"Thank you, Daddy!"

Her astonished expression changed into an ear-to-ear smile. Seeing that delighted smile was more than worth the price of a new dress.

“Me too! I want one too!”

“Of course. I’d never leave you out, Marie.”

“Yaaay!”

“I think the children’s store is across the street,” Luina added.

“In that case, why don’t you take Marie over there and keep an eye on her, Myuke? Let me know if you come across anything you like.”

“Sure. C’mon, Marie!” She took Marie’s hand. “Stay with me, okay?”

“’Kaaay!”

They left for the kids’ clothing store after her cheerful answer.

“You’re becoming more and more like a father,” Luina told Anima.

“You think so?”

She nodded happily.

“You’ve always been great with Marie, but I thought things would be more difficult with Myuke. You know how kids are at her age. I was afraid she’d be scared of you, but you’re getting along just fine.”

Their relationship had gotten a rough start, but Anima was able to use the incident with Krain to patch things up. Since then, she’d started to wash his back, hold his hand, and most importantly, call him ‘Daddy’.

Anima had no experience with raising children, or dealing with them at all to begin with, but he swore to himself not to become like his womanizer father, who had disregarded his children in favor of playing around with women. With that mindset, Anima had managed to interact with the girls, but being a good father took more than simply talking with them. Luina’s positive feedback gave him confidence, though. It gave him hope that he was able to raise children.

Additionally, he knew that being a proper father was only part of the equation. He had to become a proper husband as well, which was exactly why he’d decided to express his gratitude by buying a new dress for his lovely wife.

Unfortunately, however, he had no experience with buying presents for women, or women's clothing in general. He wasn't sure if Luina would be happy if he picked something for her that he thought would look good on her.

"Welcome! How may I help you?"

As they stood before the sea of colorful dresses, seemingly troubled by the abundance of choices, a young woman called out to them. She seemed to be an employee, so Anima decided to turn to her for advice.

"We're looking for something that will fit her."

"Let's see… With such a beautiful face and great figure, anything would look good on her. Do you perhaps have something specific in mind?"

"Do you have anything in mind, Luina?"

"Hmmm… Something light that won't get in the way of chores would be nice, but if it's a gift from you, I'd rather have something nice to wear for outings."

"Then I think you'd like something between loungewear and outdoor clothes. May I pick some out that I think fit that description? Then the young lady can decide after trying them on."

"This might take a while…" Luina said as she glanced at Anima.

"That's fine. I'll go check on the girls, so take your time and choose whatever you like the most."

"Would you? Thanks!"

"We'll let you know when she's finished trying clothes on. Please feel free to rest on one of our chairs if you happen to come back earlier."

After Luina disappeared into the back of the store with the young woman, Anima went to check on the girls. He carefully slid between the clothes on display until he finally found his little angels. Doing exactly as she was told, Marie was clutching Myuke's hand, while Myuke stared into the distance, lost in thought.

"Did you find something you like?"

She timidly nodded.

“I did, but…”

“Which one?”

“This one…”

She sheepishly pointed at a light blueish sundress. The skirt was a bit short, but it was cute nonetheless.

“Then let’s buy it.”

“But it’s really expensive. We could all eat at a really nice restaurant with this money.”

Myuke didn’t want to pick the dress she liked since it was too expensive, so Anima reassured her that she didn’t have to be reserved around him.

“You know what? I’d love to see you wear this to a nice restaurant.”

“B-But then you’ll spend all your money on me!”

“You don’t have to worry about money.” He gently pet her head. “Seeing your smile is worth more than all the riches in the world, and I’m more than ready to pay any price to see it.”

“A-Are you sure it’s okay to buy this for me?”

“I will,” Anima replied with a bright smile, “but only if you put it on and show it to me when we get home.”

Her face lit up.

“Yeah! I will! I love you, Daddy! Thanks!”

Myuke tightly wrapped her arms around Anima, who couldn’t contain his happiness. With a big smile on his face, he turned toward Marie.

“And what about you, Marie? Did you find anything?”

“I finded something!”

“You finded something, huh? Where is it?”

“Here!” Marie pulled him towards the child section. “I want this!”

She pointed at a onesie with a cute animal pattern sewn into it. The long, fluffy sleeves would completely cover her arms and legs, maybe even extending

past her hands and feet, and the large hood with two long ears attached would keep her head warm.

“Daddy, Daddy! I know this! It’s bun-buns!”

“Really? Wow, you’re such a smart little girl!”

“Bun-buns hop lots! Hoppy-hop!”

She put her hands behind her head, and flailed them around, imitating bunny ears. Seeing that, Anima couldn’t help but smile even brighter.

The first time they had gotten into the bath together, Anima had noticed how thin she was. However, thanks to her recent diet of meat and fish, which she always happily nibbled on, she had put on some weight. Maybe it was only his imagination, but she seemed to have grown a bit taller, too. If she continued to grow the way she had been, it wouldn’t be long before she outgrew even the onesie.

That was all beside the point, though. If buying new clothes made Marie happy, he’d gladly do so every single day. Of course, the same was true for Myuke and Luina as well.

“All right, let’s buy it.”

“Good for you, Marie. He’s getting it for you!”

“Thank you, Daddy!”

“You’re very welcome. Should we go back and find Mommy? Ah, and don’t forget to bring your new bun-bun!”

Marie hugged her new animal onesie all the way back to the other store. After waiting for a short while, the young woman came out from the back of the store with a confident smile on her face.

“What do you think?”

She took a step back and stretched her arms out toward the small door as Luina slowly emerged from the back of the shop.

“…”

Anima was completely speechless. His plan was to tell her that she was

beautiful no matter what she wore, but he had been completely unprepared to behold such a sight.

She was wearing a loose, comfortable white shirt with a bold cut at the chest, complemented with a long, airy, deep crimson skirt.

“H-How do I look?”



Wearing her simple yet charming outfit that emphasized her body's strong points, she pinched the sides of her skirt and stared at Anima. He timidly nodded before he could squeeze any words out of himself.

"N-Nice. No, I mean great. It looks incredible on you. You truly are the most beautiful woman in the world. Yeah, you look amazing."

He managed to praise her. Kind of. It was never his objective, though; those words naturally flowed out of him when he saw her. Her cheeks flushed as her mouth curled up into a warm smile.

"Then I'd like to buy these. I'll be sure to take good care of them."

"Thank you, Luina."

"Why are you thanking me?" she asked, blinking confusedly.

"Because I've never seen anyone as adorable as you. I'll work hard to become the husband you deserve."

"You're already the best husband I could ever hope to have."

Those words filled Anima with a happiness he had never felt before.

◆◆◆

Following their pleasant little outing, Anima and his family cheerfully walked along the dirt road back to their house.

"Did you guys have fun today?"

Excited for a positive answer, he looked back at his family, and was greeted by Myuke's bright smile.

"Yep! It was super fun!"

Seeing his daughter's lovely, delighted expression, he couldn't contain his happiness either.

"I'm glad to hear that. Let's do it again sometime."

"I can't wait! I'll wear the dress you bought me next time we go out!"

She clutched the bag she got from the clothing store in one hand while holding Marie's hand with her other.

“I can’t wait to see you in that dress. Marie, will you show me your bun-bun pajamas after our bath too?”

“Mm-hmm! I’m gonna be a bun-bun!”

She happily swung her hands, one held by Myuke, the other by Luina. Anima was left out of the family hand-holding—instead, he carried a chair in his arms, but it was one Luina had picked specifically for him, so it didn’t bother him in the slightest. He couldn’t wait to sit on it while enjoying his lovely wife’s hearty dinner.

“Anima, thank you so much for everything today. I’ve never seen these two smile so much before.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you. Every single one of my days has been filled with happiness ever since we got married.”

“I feel the same way. There hasn’t been a dreary day since you stepped into our lives. The girls are happier than they’ve ever been, and I can’t thank you enough for proposing to me.”

“I want to thank you, too,” Myuke added in a serious tone.

“You don’t have to thank me for the dress. I want to make you happy.”

“I don’t mean that. I’m grateful for the dress, but I wanted to thank you for something else.”

“What, exactly?”

“I wanted to say this yesterday, but thank you for protecting Luina and Marie from the goblin. If you hadn’t shown up to help them, I… I would have been all alone again.”

Tears began streaming down her cheeks. If not for Anima, she would have come home to her worst nightmare. Simply thinking about the possibility of that tragedy cut deep into her soul.

“It’s okay,” Anima told her with a gentle smile. “I’ll never leave you all alone, and neither will Luina or Marie.”

He glanced at his precious family. He didn’t want his lovely daughter to cry, or his family to experience any kind of sadness; he never wanted them to stop

smiling. The family of his dreams was one filled not with hardship and tears, but with overwhelming happiness and big, beautiful smiles.

"I'll always be here to make sure you all can smile," he continued. "You'll never have to be afraid of anything ever again. I'll chase away anyone and anything that dares to threaten our happiness."

With a small chuckle, Myuke hurriedly wiped her tears.

"I believe you. We don't have to worry about anything as long as you're around. You totally pummeled that monster Krain with one hand, after all!"

"I'll make the best apple cake in the world for my strong, reliable husband!"

Anima's eyes twinkled with excitement upon being reminded of the evening's menu. He had forgotten about it during the fun of their trip, but they were all going to bake a cake together. He would be cooking with the family he loved so dearly, and would get to taste the love and care his enchanting wife and adorable girls would put into making the cake.

Their fun day on the town may have come to an end, but the warm embrace of his family waited for him at home. That wouldn't change the next day or even the day after that; his happiness would never subside as long as he had them in his life.

I'm the happiest man in the entire world!

Excited to bake with his family, Anima felt like he was walking on clouds. They soon spotted their house standing in the distance, and warmth filled his heart as he imagined them merrily baking together in the kitchen.

Suddenly, however, a crimson beast leaped out from behind the trees, stopping to spread its wide, majestic wings. Its whole body was covered in scales, the talons on its sturdy limbs shimmered ominously under the setting sun, and the long tail extending from its buttocks tapered into a sharp spike.



“Is that… a demon?!”

Hearing Luina’s shout, Anima turned to face the beast, which raised its scaly arms toward the sky and conjured a raging fireball. Direct contact with the suffocatingly hot air was enough to set the surrounding trees ablaze.

The demon gave off an aura of all-consuming bloodlust, but Anima took it head-on and clenched his fist.

“Luina, stand back.”

“N-No, stop! I told you, that’s—!”

“I know.”

Anima cut her off. The temperature was rising quickly, and the more she spoke, the more she had to breathe. The scorching air could hurt her throat, and he wouldn’t allow that. Regardless, Luina was too worried about her husband to back down.

“If you know, that’s more reason to back down! You’ll get hurt!”

“She’s right!” Myuke cried, supporting Luina. “Don’t think for even a second that that thing is on the same level as the golem!”

The golem was the one Anima had expected to be the stronger of the two, but it seemed like that distinction went to the demon standing before him.

“I won’t lose. I don’t care if it that thing is stronger than the golem, it’s still weaker than me.”

“I-I know you’re strong, but that’s—”

Luina went silent in the middle of her sentence. While they had been talking, the fireball had grown. It had become large enough to easily swallow a person whole.

“Daddy, it’s hot…”

Hearing Marie’s feeble complaint, Anima turned toward her wearing a gentle smile.

“Give me just a minute. I’ll beat that thing and splash you with some cool water from the well.”

After petting Marie's head, he glared at the demon. Realizing that Anima was ready to fight, the demon opened its mouth and spoke in a surprisingly solemn, calculating voice.

"Hand over the Harbinger stone if you value your children's lives!"

Anima closed the distance between himself and the creature in the blink of an eye and planted his foot into its side. The sheer force of the kick sent the beast flying deep into the forest, leaving countless felled trees in its wake.

"Daddy's so cool!" Marie cheered. "You beated the scary monster!"

"You bet! You'll never see that monster—that fire lizard ever again!"

There were huge beads of sweat rolling down her forehead, but Marie still applauded Anima's victory. Elated by her reaction, he looked to the others, only to find that both Luina and Myuke were trembling.

"Th-That's not it," Luina said hazily.

"No?"

Myuke timidly nodded at his question.

"Th-That definitely wasn't a fire lizard."

"Really?"

Anima tilted his head in confusion. That thing had definitely looked like a lizard, and he clearly remembered Luina mention fire lizards before. Her fire lizard stone was what she regularly used to create flame, which this creature had also done, so it had seemed like a perfect fit.

"Then what was it?"

"That was… Lord Merkalt."

"Merkalt…" Time froze momentarily. He remembered Luina warning him about that man. Merkalt was in direct contract with the state, someone Anima should never touch, as hurting him would turn the whole country against them. More importantly, he recalled that Merkalt's strength was unrivaled. No one should have been able to stand against his unique possession, the Crimson Dragon stone, but Anima had just defeated him. "Wait, isn't he supposed to be

incredibly powerful? What I just fought was anything but."

"No, you're just way too strong…"

He certainly had confidence in his own strength, but for someone who was said to be among the strongest in the world, the gap between them was almost disappointing. He had never thought that Merkalt would be so weak to collapse after a single kick. Luckily, he hadn't used all his strength, so there was a chance that Merkalt was still alive.

"I'll go check on him. Wait here."

Anima hurried into the forest, letting the destroyed trees guide him. He hadn't even kicked Malshan that hard, but the trail continued as far as the eye could see. After he'd wandered around for a while to no avail, he was about to give up his search, but something on the ground caught his eye.

"This is…"

Leaning down to pick it up, the object confirmed that the demon had indeed been Malshan. Anima once again looked into the distance, but Malshan was nowhere to be found, so he decided to give up the search and go back to his family.

"H-How is he?" Luina asked timidly, to which Anima simply shook his head.

"I couldn't find him."

"I see…"

"But I found this on the ground."

"Oh…"

She was at a loss for words as she realized that Anima had picked up Malshan's earring. His condition was unknown, but from the looks of it, his attack was enough to crush Malshan's scales and send the earring flying out of his ear. That, combined with the fact that Malshan absolutely loathed him, led Anima to one conclusion: if he was alive, he would no doubt turn the country against him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make us public enemy number one. B-But don't worry! I'll take full responsibility for everything. I promise that I'll protect you

from any harm, so please…”

—Please don’t hate me.

He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud. He would have fought the whole world if he’d had to, but with an entire country after them, the peaceful, quiet life they were used to would be no more. He had ruined his beloved family’s life in mere seconds; asking for forgiveness would have simply been selfish.

“I’m sure you hate me now…” Anima said in a shaky voice.

Luina walked up to him, gently held his hand, looked into his eyes, and flashed him a warm smile.

“I don’t hate you at all. You protected us.”

“I… did?”

“Yes. He was using the Crimson Dragon stone, and attacked us in hopes of getting this: The Harbinger stone.”

As Luina touched her pendant, Myuke squeaked in surprise.

“Wait, that was the Harbinger stone all along?! I didn’t even know that demon left behind a stone to begin with!” It was common knowledge that the Scarletts had defeated the Harbinger three centuries prior, but the existence of its magic stone and Luina’s possession of it were well-kept secrets. “But how did he know about it?”

“The Merkalts have been our family’s allies for a very long time. There are other families that know about the existence and the location of this stone as well, but I never thought any of them would try to seize it from me.”

“But isn’t he, like, super rich? Is this thing so powerful that someone who has everything a man could ever dream of would go after it?”

“It is. This stone can control Anima.”

“What does Daddy have to do with any of this?”

“I told you yesterday that I’m from another world. Luina summoned me here using that stone.”

“Wait, what?! You were summoned?!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. Do you hate me now?”

“Huh? Where’d that come from? Why would I hate you over that?!” Myuke immediately cleared up his concern. “I’m surprised, but you’re still my awesome Daddy who I wouldn’t trade for the world. The same goes for Marie as well. Right?”

“Uh-huh! I love you, Daddy!”

Feeling the overwhelming love of his children, Anima’s eyes began to water.

“Myuke… Marie… I love you two so much.”

“I love Myuke and Marie too, and there’s no way I would ever detest you for protecting my two little girls.”

Luina’s clear, powerful declaration returned hope to Anima’s heart.

“Then… can I stay by your side… as your husband?”

He gazed at Luina with a mix of anxiety and hope in his eyes, but his fears were slowly nullified by Luina’s warm, gentle smile.

“You can. I don’t even want to imagine a world where we aren’t together. I would like to stay by your side forever and ever.”

Her soothing words, flushed cheeks, and longing gaze said more than a million words could have ever hoped to. She was waiting, hoping for something. Anima had never been good with women, yet he knew exactly what she was yearning for.

“May I?”

No one was injured, but that didn’t change the fact that she had been attacked mere minutes ago, and the children were around them as well. She would have died of embarrassment if they’d kissed out in the open before, but things had changed.

“I love you, Anima. After our marriage, once we started doing chores together, I fell more in love with you each and every day. It may not be proper for a young woman to show such an indecent display in public, but I don’t care. I love you from the bottom of my heart, so…”

She closed her eyes. That sentence must've been too cliché for her to finish.

"I feel the same way. I've fallen even more in love with you than I did when we first met."

He gently lifted her chin, and with their beautiful children as witnesses, he kissed the tiny, fragile petals that were her lips for the very first time.

Epilogue: The Young Woman Wishes to Have the Demon Lord's Child

After a fulfilling day in the town, the happy family returned to their house to bake an apple cake. They made the dough and assembled the cake, then put it into the oven to bake, gathering in the dining room for a delicious cup of milk while they waited.

"Smells yummy!" Marie joyfully exclaimed, getting excited over the sweet aroma wafting in from the kitchen.

She was sitting across the table from Anima, who had made himself comfortable on his brand-new chair.

"It looked very tasty! I can't wait to see how it tastes."

"Can't wait!"

Marie excitedly repeated her mommy's words, but Myuke had been strangely quiet ever since they'd sat down.

"Is everything okay, Myuke? Is your stomach upset or something?" Anima asked, but Myuke simply shook her head and looked at Luina.

"You said the Harbinger stone can control Daddy, right?" she asked, clearly disturbed by that piece of information.

"You can't control him like a puppet, but you can give him orders by expending the mana collected in the stone. At least, that's what Dad told me."

Being only second-hand knowledge, she couldn't be completely sure, but as he had been summoned by the Harbinger stone, it was likely that one could use it to order him around.

"I don't want anyone to control Daddy! What about you? Don't you hate the idea of someone taking control of your husband, Mommy?"

"Of course I do! But I can't deplete the stone without giving him an order, and I'm not strong enough to destroy it."

"Daddy, destroy it."

Despite feeling the pressure of Myuke's grim glare, he shook his head.

"I would never destroy Luina's memento of her parents."

Luina had sold almost everything she'd inherited from her parents to keep the orphanage open. He couldn't bear to destroy one of her last remaining mementoes of them.

"I care about Daddy much more than some magic stone. The thought that someone could steal him from us using that stone makes me sick. I don't want Daddy to leave…"

She was desperately trying to hold back her tears, sniffling and rubbing her eyes. Seeing her big sister on the verge of a breakdown, Marie started to tear up as well. The precious memento of Luina's parents, the very stone that connected them, could destroy the peaceful, loving family they were all hoping to protect.

Destroying one of the last remnants of memories she had of her parents was not an option, but he couldn't let his family live in fear either. Therefore, he had only one option left.

"Luina. Give me orders until the stone runs out of power."

Luina's expression grew grim upon his proposal. She didn't seem to be a fan of the idea.

"I don't want to warp your will and turn you into something you aren't. Besides, this stone is to guarantee the future of this world. We have to fill it with power to ward off the threat constantly looming over our world: the resurgence of the catastrophe that almost wiped us out three centuries ago."

Her family had spent the past three hundred years tirelessly pouring their mana into that magic stone, generation after generation. It was the crystallization of her ancestors' feelings. Considering that, Luina must've felt guilty for using their precious treasure for her own sake, so Anima took extra heed to talk in the softest, most gentle tone he could.

"As long as I live, I'll protect this world. A menace threatening this world would also threaten you, Myuke, and Marie, after all." He smiled warmly at her. "We can leave restoring the stone's power to our offspring."

The moment he tried to ease the burden of self-deprecation with those words, Luina turned beet red.

“Oh, r-right… We’re married, aren’t we. Having children one day is only natural.”

“Well… Just tell me if you don’t want any. I’m okay with that too,” he said, but deep down, he wanted children.

He was already happier than he had ever been before, but having a child with his beloved wife would surely bring even more happiness to him, and his family.

“N-No, I wouldn’t particularly mind… or rather… I would be happy to have your child.”

“R-Really?”

She nodded bashfully, to which his face lit up with happiness. He hadn’t believed that the idea would be rejected, as they both loved each other, but he had never thought she would come right out and say she wanted to have his child.

“Well, Myuke has grown up to be an incredible big sister, and Marie is getting older too. We don’t have to worry about money anymore, and most important of all, I love you. I don’t think raising another child here would be an issue.”

She spoke quickly, trying to mask her embarrassment.

“Luina, I promise to properly raise our child. I’ll become the father all of you deserve.”

“You already are. Right, girls?”

After exchanging glances with Marie, Myuke nodded.

“I love you, Daddy! You’re strong and kind, and I’m really happy you married Mommy!”

“Me too! I love you too, Daddy!”

“Myuke… Marie… I’m so happy! I’ll make sure to be a good Daddy so our newborn will feel the same about me as well!”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” Luina chuckled. “We haven’t even done

anything yet. And, well…”

She cut her sentence short, but Anima could make a fairly educated guess as to what she had wanted to say. The same thing had crossed his mind as well: there was only a single bed in their house.

Even if they wanted children, they couldn’t take the first step toward that while Myuke and Marie were sleeping next to them. They might have been able to get away with it if it were only Marie, but Myuke was already twelve—she was old enough to know what was going on. That didn’t mean he couldn’t bring himself to shoo his beloved children away, though, let alone shut them out.

“I wouldn’t mind sleeping here. Like, I could push the chairs together to make a bed and sleep out here with Marie.”

“You don’t have to make suggestions!” Luina squirmed, her cheeks burning hot. She cleared her throat to collect herself, then looked at Anima. “We should come back to this topic later.”

“Mm-hmm, let’s do that.” Anima agreed, as they had more pressing matters to attend to than their future child. “Anyway, we have to empty that stone. Luina, I’ll do anything you ask of me. Please, give me an order.”

His voice was as gentle as a cold breeze in the summer heat. His feelings, his desire to release his beloved wife Luina from the guilt weighing down on her, seemed to have finally connected. Luina timidly nodded.

“Okay.” Still sitting on her chair, she turned toward him and gripped her pendant. As a slight pink once again painted her cheeks, she glanced at him. “Please, kiss me again.”

As the words left her lips, they traveled directly into Anima’s mind, where they transformed into a strong, irresistible order: *Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!*



His mind became hazy, and kissing her became the only thing he could focus on, so he did just that. The moment their lips touched, the voices in his head went silent.

“Umm…”

As he pulled his face back, he noticed that the dash of pink coloring her cheeks had invaded her whole face, including her ears. Fidgeting in her chair, she opened her mouth.

“I’m sorry… it didn’t drain completely…”

Seeing her longing gaze, Anima smiled.

“I won’t stop until it’s empty.”

“Then… Anima, please kiss me again.”

He did so with pleasure, but it only used up a sliver of the immense reserves of mana housed in the stone. Their solution: they kissed thirty more times in the quiet, peaceful dining room.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Nekomata Nuko.

Thank you for reading *Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord Fall in Love?!* It's a story about a lonely Demon Lord falling for a sweet town girl, about creating a peaceful family life. I hope you found their shenanigans enjoyable to read.

Now, I'd like to thank all the incredible people who helped make this book a reality:

First, I'd like to say thanks to my editor, as well as everyone working at HJ Bunko. I hope we can work together again. I'll work hard to write stories that meet your high standards.

To teffish, who took the time out of their busy schedule to draw the wonderful illustrations that make this book all the better, I can't thank you enough.

I'd also like to thank my proofreader, designer, and everyone else who helped make this book a reality. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And of course, my heartfelt thanks to you, my dear reader. Having you read and hopefully enjoy my book is the source of my happiness. If you had fun reading this book for even a second, I consider it a blessing. I hope we'll see each other again in the next volume. Until then.

A very hot day in 2018,

Nekomata Nuko.


Why Shouldn't a Detestable Demon Lord FALL IN LOVE?!
STORY:
Nekomata Nuko
ILLUSTRATION:
teffish
SOL PRESS