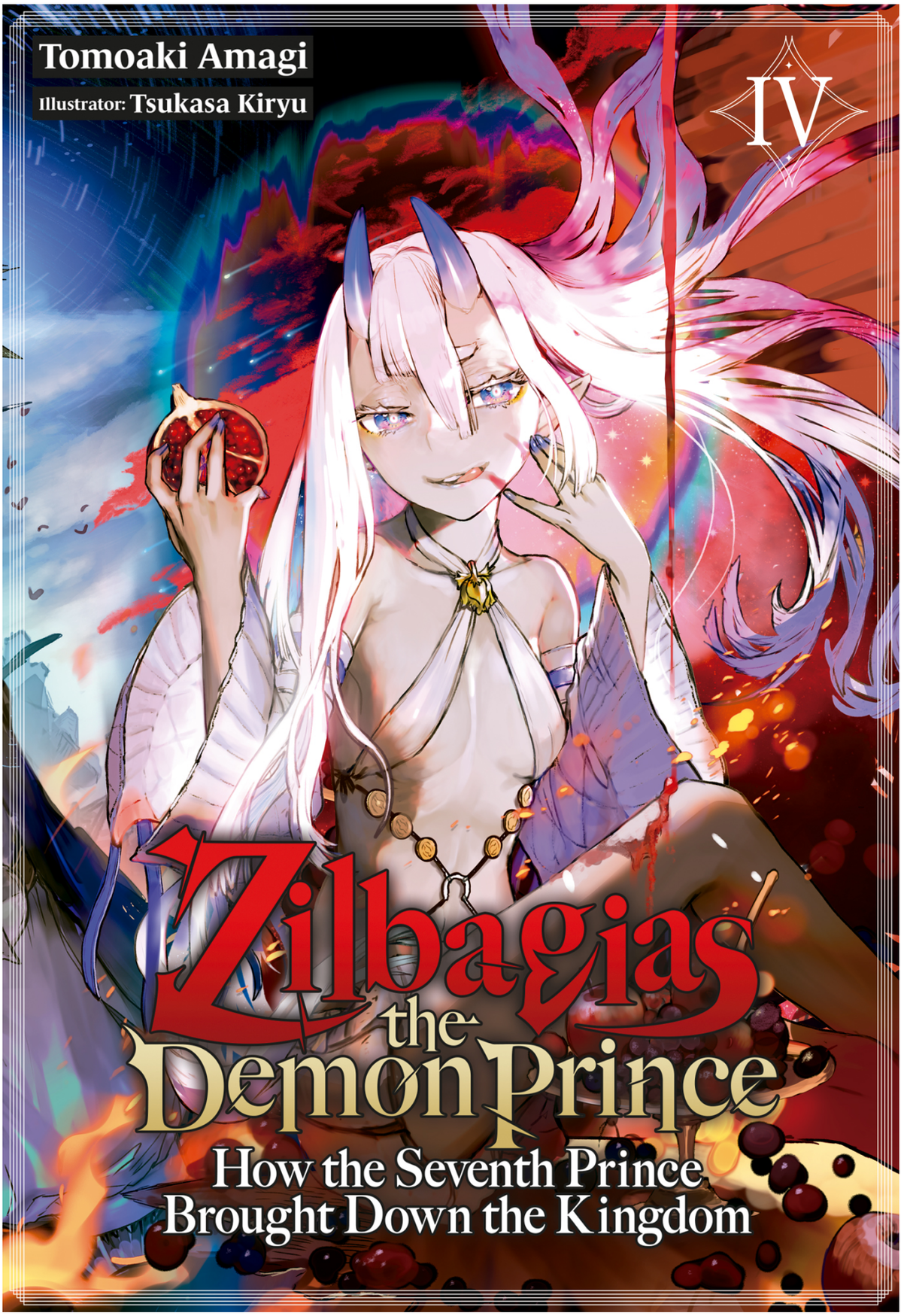
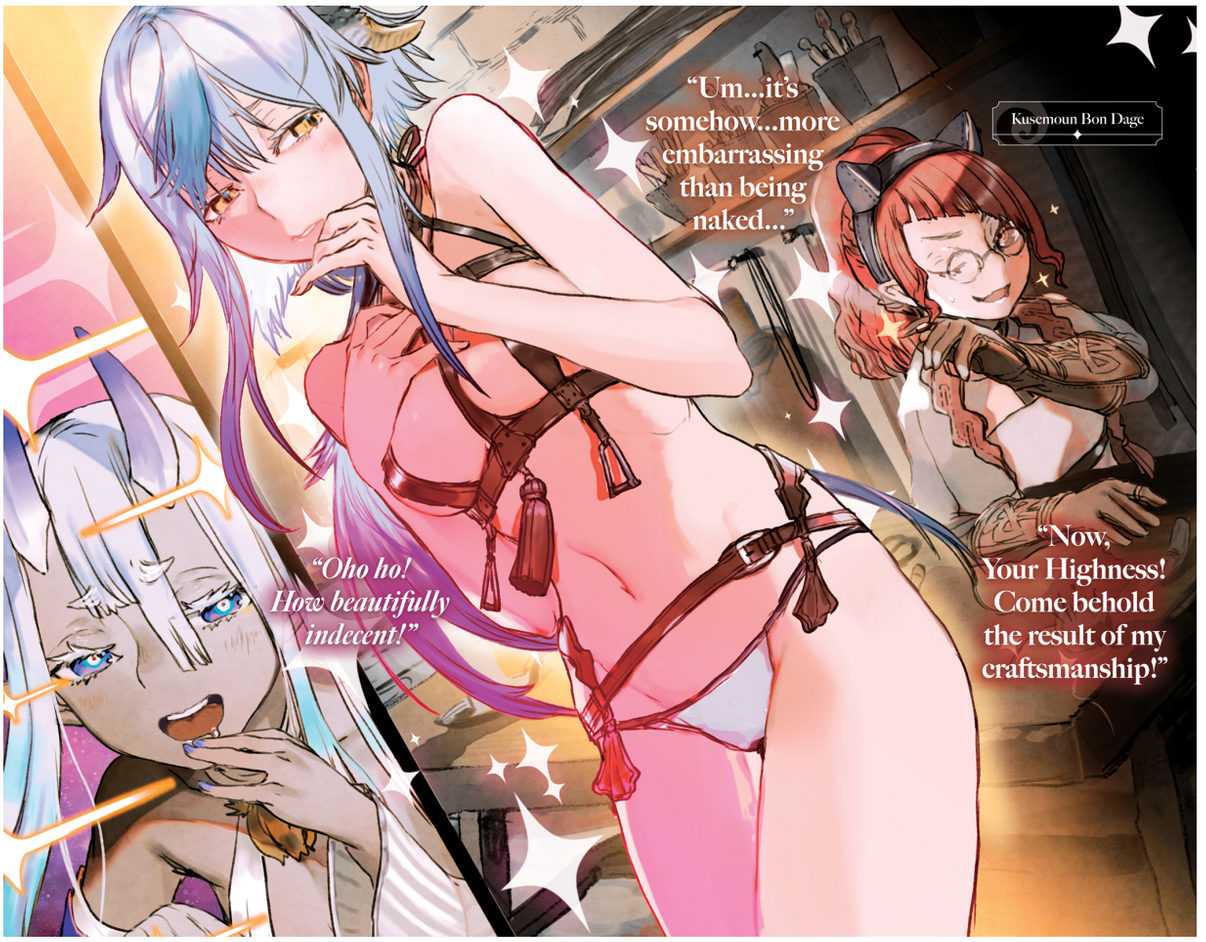

Tomoaki Amagi
Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu
IV
Zilbagias the Demon Prince
How the Seventh Prince Brought Down the Kingdom


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Gordogias Orgi
“Enter!!!”
Daiagias Gigamunt
Zilbagias Rage
Rubifya Rivarel


The Naked Men's
Frozen Hell Festival
had finally commenced!


"Um...it's somehow...more embarrassing than being naked..."
Kusemoun Bon Dage
"Now, Your Highness! Come behold the result of my craftsmanship!"
"Oho ho! How beautifully indecent!"

Character Introductions

Zilbagias the Demon Prince: How the Seventh Prince Brought Down the Kingdom



Layla

Daughter of the late king of the white dragons, Faravgi. Fond of Zilbagias.



Antendeixis

Acting as a Devil of Constraint but is actually the Devil God of Taboo.



Zilbagias Rage

In his previous life, the hero Alexander. Made a pact with Devil God Ante.



Gordogias Orgi

The second Demon King. Inherited the lance **Soul Eater** from his predecessor.



Pratifya Rage

Zilbagias's mother. Made a pact with Sophia.



Liliana

A high elf puppy. Bark bark.



Daiagias Gigamunt

Third Demon Prince. A womanizer.



Rubifya Rivarel

Second Demon Princess. Greedy and aggressive.



Aiogias Vernas

First Demon Prince. A perfectionist.



Topazia Corvut

Sixth Demon Princess. Nicknamed "Sleeping Beauty."



Spinezia Sauroe

Fifth Demon Princess. Nicknamed the "Glutton."



Emergias Izanis

Fourth Demon Prince. Burned down Alex's village.



Seiranite Rage

The younger twin,
who gets carried away.
Made a pact with a Devil of Strength.



Okkenite Rage

The older twin,
who is polite and careful.
Made a pact with a Devil of Analysis.



Albaoryl Rage

Rare among demons,
he desires to help the weak and
less fortunate.



Kusemoun Bon Dage

A dwarf of questionable ethics.
More skilled at leatherwork than
metalwork.



Libidine

A Devil of Lust.
Made a pact with
Daiagias.



Kuviltal Rage

One of Zilbagias's subordinates.
Skilled at magic that creates
stone pillars.



Charlotte Vidwa

A priestess of the Holy Church.
Close to the late hero
Leonardo.



Claire

Alex's childhood friend.
Turned into an undead by
Enma.



Enma

A high-ranking undead—a lich.
Plans to turn all of humanity
into undead.



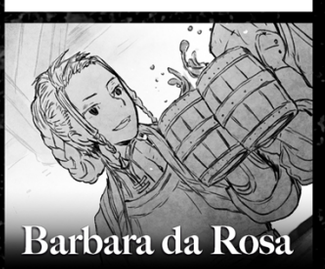
Dogasin

An old beastfolk Fistmaster of
the Wise Wolf Clan.
Fondly nicknamed "Old Master."



Hessel

A greatsword-wielding
Swordmaster.
One of Alex's comrades.



Barbara da Rosa

A female Swordmaster.
One of Alex's comrades.
Nicknamed the "Unicorn Swordmaster."

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Prologue

After about a day of riding in the carriage, we finally made it back to the castle. Even though I had only been away for a month, it felt like years. The trip back was quite pleasant since I got to relax with Layla and Liliana. Honestly, the ride with Prati on the way there had been really stressful.

"Perhaps she no longer feels the need to be so concerned with hiding the way you surround yourself with women. Congratulations on your promotion," Ante said mockingly, to which I could only shrug. As much as I wanted to tell her to shut up, I was the only guy in my carriage.

Thanks to the board game my personal attendant Veene had brought with her, we were able to make the trip back without worrying about getting bored. Never mind the toll it had taken on my body, the battle with the hero in the Rage territory had left me emotionally exhausted. The distraction was more than welcome.

The game was pretty simple, the kind where you just rolled dice and then moved a piece around, so even Layla and Garunya could join in and have a lot of fun despite their lack of experience with these kinds of games. Well, if you could overlook the bloody and grotesque aspects that came from landing on each square due to the game's night elf author and their sensibilities, it was actually pretty fun.

I had to laugh when Liliana, who could do nothing but spit out the dice, ended up thrashing Veene with her comically good luck.

"It's kind of simple for a game made by night elves, isn't it?" I had asked.

Almost at the point of tears at the fate Liliana had subjected her to, Veene had replied, *"Most night elves are capable of manipulating the results of the dice. That makes cheating while preventing others from doing the same the main attraction,"* she had explained.

"You haven't been cheating, have you?"

"I'm...not very good at it, so..."

So she had figured her experience with the game would be enough to make up for her lack of skill at cheating, only to be

trounced by her natural enemy, a high elf (who was a complete newbie to the game). Poor girl. Though really, seeing Veene on the verge of breaking down was the cutest I'd ever seen her. I *really* hated night elves, you know?

At the outskirts of the castle, the three Rage idiots Alba, Okke, and Seira disembarked from their carriage and looked up at the castle walls in awe.

"Whoa..."

"It's huge..."

"This is where the Demon King lives?"

Their jaws dropped at the sheer size of the castle. I mean, it *was* carved out of a mountain inhabited by dragons. It was probably the largest structure in the world.

"Oh, is this the first time you guys have seen it?" I asked.

"Well, yeah!"

"Small fry like us don't have much reason to visit."

"Even when we went out to battle, we just went straight to the front lines."

Looking at what they regarded as their new home caused their eyes to glimmer in excitement. Though I doubted there were rooms prepped and ready for them. For the time being, they'd probably be staying in lodgings in the city.

Actually, would they *ever* get spots in the castle? The more comfortable rooms within the castle were usually flooded by the rich and powerful. Even the break rooms for high-level servants and attendants were always packed. Heck, it was pretty unprecedented when Layla took one of Prati's guest rooms when she became my subordinate. Having a private room in the castle was actually the height of luxury, although my role as a prince had made me numb to the whole situation. So when it came to the three idiots...well, best not to rain on their parade for now. Besides, you couldn't see the castle if you were staying inside it. From a tourist perspective, staying in the city was probably a more impressive experience.

Speaking of rooms, that brought up another headache.

"Time to get off."

"Don't try anything."

Under the careful watch of night elf hunters, three human men disembarked from the livestock carriage.

With their instruments and wood carving tools in hand, they

looked up in utter amazement at the castle in front of them. Honestly, their reaction was a spitting image of the three idiots'. Never mind being stuck in the Rage territory, these men had barely been allowed to leave the slave quarters since they had been born. And after a day of traveling by carriage without any windows to get their bearings, they disembarked to be greeted with this sight. It was no wonder they were overwhelmed.

These three were the survivors of the hero's "army," former high-skilled slaves. My grandmother Gorilacia had made an agreement with the hero Leonardo, swearing that for each wound I suffered in the final trial, one slave would be permitted to live. As a result, these three had survived. But letting them live meant nothing more than sparing them from being culled. I wasn't so optimistic as to think the demons would just quietly care for these three, who had learned how to fight against demons and had gotten a taste of holy magic, until they reached the end of their natural lifespans. Especially not in the Rage territory, the greatest producer of human livestock in the kingdom.

Since Gorilacia had returned to her ancestral Dosrotos lands and I was going to be in the castle where I couldn't see them, some "accident" or "sudden illness" was sure to rear its ugly head. So, after claiming I had taken an interest in them, I had managed to bring them back with me.

"But what are you going to do with them?" Ante asked.

Yeah, that was kind of the problem. Getting three rooms for the idiots would already be difficult, but handling three humans? I didn't even want to begin to wrap my head around what challenges that would bring.

"*Woof?*" Liliana looked up at me from where she sat at my feet, tilting her head. It wasn't like I could keep them around in my room like pets as I did with her.

"Virossa, about those slaves."

"Sir. I would suggest we keep them in our prison for now," Virossa, the night elf Swordmaster, replied, immediately guessing my concerns.

Not that prison again! Though it wasn't like there were many other options.

"Such a wonderful place with never-ending screams," Ante giggled.

Staying there would really put a toll on them mentally.

“Is that a good idea? The prison has a rather, how should I say…heavy atmosphere?”

“True enough. That environment may be too much for those as weak as humans,” Virossa replied thoughtfully, looking over the slaves as he might cattle.

What’s that all about? You think you can look down on these guys? Men who only had a few weeks of training and still went up against a demon prince without backing down? You think you night elves could’ve put up even half as good a fight against me? Huh?!

“Are there any other options?” I asked, struggling to keep my anger in check as it boiled under the surface.

“Aside from the prison, I suppose they could be held in the camp for healing slaves.” But Virossa’s next words were like ice water on my building rage.

The “healing slaves.” Those kept as body doubles to be used with **Transposition**. The people that had been burned like fuel for my training every day until I freed Liliana.

I looked at the three survivors again. Still feeling overwhelmed by the castle, they had been left standing out in the open with no instructions. I could only imagine how uneasy they were.

The night elf prison would be awful for them, but the alternative? After they had gained some confidence and gotten a taste of what it meant to fight back, only to be forced to live alongside humans that were literally bred as livestock to be consumed by **Transposition**? It was just too…cruel.

The Devil God of Taboo began to chuckle.

“What a painful decision. No matter how much you wish to save them, your prayers go unanswered. On top of that, you lack the power to accomplish it yourself. Does anyone know that pain better than you?”

I had no reply.

“So do you condemn them to the prison, where day in and day out they must hear the cries and screams of captured Alliance soldiers? Or the camps, among livestock with no hope for the future who have long since accepted their fate? Either choice will be hell for them. However, they have no choice in the matter. They will have to endure whatever situation they are put in, unable to lend a hand to those suffering around them. They very well may come to regret the ‘good fortune’ of having their lives spared, forced to live out the remainder of their days as some prince’s pets. Surely they would

have preferred to meet their end alongside that hero and their comrades."

I had no answer for Ante's sadistic whispering.

Saving them may have just opened the door for them to receive even greater suffering. But still...! I couldn't just leave them as they were! True, they had grown and acquired qualities similar to soldiers', but they were still innocent civilians. The hero Leonardo had sacrificed his own life to save them.

I could hear my own teeth starting to grind, a sound that brought me back to my senses. I had unconsciously started tensing up, so I forced myself to relax. Putting one hand around Layla's waist and another on Liliana's head, I tried to give a casual response.

"Hmm. Suddenly throwing them into the slave camps could cause problems. I guess I'll have to ask the prison to take them for a bit."

"As you say." Virossa gave a small bow.

Ironically enough, that meant they would in fact be staying in the castle, technically. Of course there would be no windows, no freedom, and they'd be forced to listen to the agonized cries of their fellow humans day in and day out, so it was still a tragic result. I had to wonder how the three idiots would react if offered the same thing.

So anyway, it's me again, the demon prince Zilbagias. As usual, I was playing the shitty role of an enemy of humanity.

Chapter 1: The Nostalgic Castle

After returning to the castle, I had to make my rounds and inform people of my return. Much to my dismay, in the five years I'd spent living as a demon prince, I had unfortunately made some acquaintances. Leaving carrying my baggage into the castle to the servants—while silently thankful that I had been born royalty—I headed to my first stop, the night elf quarters.

"Welcome home, Your Highness."

I was greeted by none other than the ever so suspicious Sidar, wearing his usual fake smile. By utilizing his connection to me and the extra healing quota it granted him, he was in the process of solidifying his position as a leader in night elf society. The more influential he became there, the more influential *I* became there thanks to our relationship, so it wasn't a half bad deal for a prince.

But as a hero? Nah, I wasn't going to think about that. Adamas at my hip was already starting to get riled up at the mere thought.

Liliana gave a pitiful whine, clinging to me tightly as we visited the night elf quarters for the first time in a long while. I felt quite bad for her, to be honest. This place was the source of a lot of deep trauma for her, yet I dragged her back here time after time.

"Trauma so deep that she decided remaining a puppy was more favorable than returning to being a person."

I'll never forgive those night elves...! That said, we never would have been reunited in the first place if they had decided to just kill her instead of torturing her for years...dammit.

"Good girl. You're okay, don't worry." As I held her in my arms and rubbed her head, Liliana's trembling calmed slightly...but only very slightly.

"I am...thrilled to see the two of you still get along so well," Sidar said quite brazenly as he wrung his hands, but he couldn't hide the look in his eyes as if he were watching someone be swarmed by slugs.

"But of course. I've given my all to taking care of her." Careful not to hit her with my horns, I rubbed my face against hers. That

caused Sidar and the other nearby steel-faced night elves to visibly cringe. It took a lot to not burst out laughing at that.

"O-Of course…but I have heard there is also that white dragon girl in your care."

"I'm not sure I appreciate you bringing up talk of other women, Sidar."

"My deepest apologies." Sidar bowed his head slightly. *I know people have been calling me the second coming of Daiagias, but that doesn't mean I like having it brought up around me!*

"So, has anything changed while I was gone?"

"Nothing particularly worthy of mention, Your Highness. The closest thing I suppose would be that the Holy Church's reinforcements have arrived to bolster the defenses of Deftelos. But there have been no major developments on the front lines. The war remains in a state of deadlock. I imagine the Alliance forces are making quick work of what little food they have left." Sidar gave a sadistic grin. It had started getting pretty cold recently. Winter was just around the corner.

"I see. Perfect." I nodded, taking the honey-laden milk tea Veene offered me with a nod.

"That being the case, we have received no wounded that would demand your immediate attention."

Damn. So I didn't have to bring Liliana at all. That just made me feel even worse. But the "special healing quota" she personally provided me was what made Liliana so valuable.

Outside of my use of the healing miracle she provided me, there were no other demons who would be willing to take wounds personally from a lesser race to heal them.

Heavily wounded night elves that otherwise would have been left to die were being saved. In exchange for all the power and authority Sidar was able to gain thanks to his monopoly on access to that special healing quota, I got to save Liliana.

"So happy endings for everyone."

Exactly! As long as you ignored all the fatal wounds and deadly illnesses I had to take on myself because of it!

However, I couldn't forget the fact that like Virossa, the other night elves I healed were contracted to operate as my personal soldiers for anywhere between years to decades. It certainly didn't hurt to have more pawns at my disposal, and having direct access to the night elf information network spread throughout the Alliance was huge. As a hero, that information meant more

to me than any amount of money. As much as it pained me to save the lives of night elves—the same people who took my mother from me and caused so much chaos in the Alliance—it was also true that while they were working for me, they were kept from working in the field, where they'd do even more damage.

"How was the Rage territory?" Sidar asked. "I heard you made quite a name for yourself on your arrival."

"News travels fast, huh?" I smiled wryly at Sidar's insinuation. He was likely talking about the duel at the welcome banquet during which I broke off a piece of Germadios's horn. "Father told me to show them how strong I was, but not to break their horns. But it seems I misjudged my strength a bit."

"I see..."

"But only the tiniest tip of his horn came off, so I'm sure father won't be too upset."

Sidar only continued to smile, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. If he were foolish enough to share his opinions on how the Demon King carried out his duties, he never would have climbed the ranks of night elf society to begin with. While being a quite dull reaction, it was the objectively correct one to make.

"Speaking of the Rage territory, Virossa or Veene may have already told you, but..."

As I tried to change topics, I caught Sidar shooting a sidelong glance at Veene. Though his expression didn't change, his eyes all but shouted "no, I haven't heard anything," prompting a wave of panic to go through the otherwise stone-faced maid.

That was exactly why instead of even returning to my room, I had come here first. Veene had had no time at all to relay what had happened, so it was kinda unfair for her to be catching any flak, but I was going to have to take control of this situation before some weird conditions got put on it.

"Three high-skilled human slaves have come into my possession. I would like to ask if I could house them in the prison for a time."

"Oh, high-skilled slaves? May I ask how that came to pass?"

"My grandmother managed to arrange a fight between me and a hero that had been captured alive."

"Oh! So you were able to test yourself against holy magic already! Perhaps it is just my ignorance, but I have not heard of any such prior cases." In fact, in the entire history of the demonic

kingdom, I was probably the first to experience holy magic before reaching the battlefield.

"But a single hero wasn't enough of a threat to warrant the fight. So some slaves that were marked for culling were gathered together, and the hero trained them a bit."

"What an incredible luxury…" Sidar murmured as I explained what had happened. The fifty-odd slaves that had perished in that training could have saved hundreds of lives if used correctly for **Transposition**.

If pushed to its extreme, a single slave could be used to heal several people who had each distinctively lost one of their four limbs; the life of one slave could be used to save four from grave injuries. And if you acted quickly enough before they died from blood loss, you could keep using them to heal internal injuries or head wounds. Getting the most efficiency out of a single slave was like a puzzle, one that clearly demonstrated the mastery of each individual Rage family healer.

"What a wicked curse that is…" Ante chuckled.

There was nothing funny about it.

So, dozens of those slaves had been murdered for the sake of my training. Sidar could hardly believe the huge expenditure of resources. I very much agreed with him.

"I cannot say I do. Though they weren't used to heal any number of demons, they did fuel your powers. That seems like a far more efficient use."

While there was some truth to that, that wasn't the problem here! But I needed to calm down. Losing my cool here wouldn't solve anything.

"So I ended up taking three of the survivors into my care since my grandmother promised they'd be allowed to live."

"I see. If you have come to that decision, then there is no room for me to argue. I will gladly receive them. However, while I beg you to understand this is merely a personal opinion…if your grandmother guaranteed their lives, should taking care of them not be her responsibility?"

It was hard to argue with that.

"My visit to the Rage territory was my first time meeting her." I made no attempt to hide my bitter expression. "I guess you could say she's an old-fashioned demon. She's not the type that leaves you with confidence that she could take care of a dog or a cat."

“Aha, I see,” Sidar responded with a strange expression. With all the time I had spent around night elves as of late, I was starting to pick up on their mannerisms a bit. In this case, his expression seemed to say he found something secretly funny. “Well…I suppose among demons, there has been no culture of keeping pets in the first place,” Sidar said.

Yeah, dating back to their days of poverty in their “sacred ground,” anything with four legs was just a meal in the making for them!

“Exactly. In that respect, I have quite a bit more experience taking care of pets.”

Liliana whined.

“Very well. So, how shall we care for them? I imagine at the bare minimum maintaining their good health is expected.”

If I wasn’t careful here, they would probably leave them almost at death’s door.

“One of the three is a performer. I’ve taken quite a liking to his music, so I would like him to maintain his skills. The other two were craftsmen, I think? Right, Veene?” I threw the question to Veene, pretending I had forgotten. After all, a demon prince remembering so many details about some human slaves would be out of the ordinary. But in truth, I had engraved each of their names deep in my heart. The musician Vigo, the carpenter Dirilo, and the instrument maker Organo.

“Yes, Your Highness! One is a carpenter, the other a maker of instruments.” And in a very quiet voice, “I think.”

Though their expressions didn’t change, the shock and disappointment from the other maids lining the wall was palpable. Sidar continued to smile brightly, while Veene started to tremble. *Almost forgot those two are related.*

“To land a position as a personal maid to a demon prince is quite remarkable for her.”

Well…she’s got her issues, but when it comes to magic and unarmed combat, she’s among the best of the maids. Honestly, she’s less my maid and more like a bodyguard.

“I suppose she was the first to spring into action to protect you from Faravgi’s attack.”

That’s probably why people trust her so much.

“Oh? It almost sounds like you share that sentiment yourself.”

Shut it. I hate night elves! All of them!

“Yeah, a musician and two craftsmen. They won’t need

anything like time to walk around, but I'd appreciate it if they had the freedom to keep their skills sharp. They should have brought the tools they'll need with them."

"Craftsmen, is it? Very well."

I could tell what Sidar was thinking. As a demon prince, I could get anything a slave was capable of making at the snap of a finger. That meant there was no real need to keep slaves around to make things. But just leaving them in the prison with nothing to do would drive them crazy. They needed something to focus on, just like how I had had the board game to occupy my time on the trip back to the castle.

"Shall the three of them be kept isolated, or would you prefer they be kept together?"

"I'll leave that up to you. Whichever is the least burden on you. I'm sure the number of solitary cells available is limited."

"From a perspective of preventing unrest, having them isolated would be best…but I will check how many such cells are free."

"Good. At worst, I don't mind if you use the royal suite."

The deepest room in the prison, where Liliana had been kept for years. Apparently they had left it unoccupied so that I could have my "fun" with Liliana whenever I wished. It was hardly a place I'd ever choose to visit though, so I had no idea what condition the room was in currently. Aside from its location, it was a pretty big place with good drainage and ventilation, so it would serve fairly well as accommodations for three people.

"That room is being kept for you to use at your leisure…" Sidar smiled.

No thanks. Seriously, I don't need it.

But in any case, arrangements for the slaves' lodgings had been taken care of, at least for the immediate future. Being forced to live in a prison, and in the Demon King's castle of all places, made it seem like they were being treated as criminals. But if you were to ask if the arrangement was any worse than being kept in the slave camps…I'd have a hard time answering.

As much as I wanted to provide something better for them, there was no option at the present. I felt bad for them, but I'd have to ask them to bear with it for now.

With no healing to take care of, after finishing our tea we said our goodbyes. I had earned enough of a reputation here that the passersby bowed deeply as I walked by with Liliana in my arms.

And while they showed me respect, they still kept their distance. In sharp contrast, the night elf children were brimming with curiosity, following us as we went. Though I called them children, they were older than I was, probably around ten years old.

"It's the prince!"

"The healer guy!"

"He's got the dog with him."

"Hey, don't be rude!"

Veene turned to scold them like an older sister.

"Let them be," I stopped her, letting the kids swarm around us as we walked.

While I longed for the day when all the night elves would be wiped out, I couldn't help but feel like these children had yet to be sullied by the cruel and sadistic values of their parents. They were still innocent.

But I had no environment to offer them a better upbringing. It was outside of my current capabilities. Defeating the Demon King and bringing down his kingdom were my top priorities. Even accomplishing that much was no guarantee. At the very least, I could hardly expect the current night elves to change their beliefs. After all, their highest goal was still the extermination of all forest elves.

And if those were your supposed goals and principles, you had no room to complain about your own kind getting wiped out, right?

"That sounds like it may be dangerously applicable to yourself."

It's a bit late for that. I never would've turned out like this if the demons weren't so hell-bent on wiping out humanity. That's why I made this contract with you in the first place, Ante.

No matter what anyone said, I was a hero. Even if I was now a demon, I was a hero fighting for humanity. That meant I would eliminate any threat to humanity's survival. If these children were to grow up into ordinary night elves...I wouldn't show them any mercy.

Despite Liliana's warmth in my arms, my heart felt cold as ice.

"Let's say you accomplish your goal of bringing down the demonic kingdom. And, on the morning after, these children are still children and swear revenge against you. What will you do then?"

I'll accept their challenge, of course. They have that right.

The Devil God chuckled. *"I suppose that's good enough. For now."*

I had never once considered visiting the night elf quarters a good experience. Every single time I ventured there it resulted in various unpleasantries like these thoughts. I doubted that would change anytime soon. Not until I thoroughly destroyed this nest of the denizens of the dark.

†††

After taking Liliana back to my room, I headed to the depths beneath the castle. Couldn't they come up with a better solution to getting down here than this horrendous staircase? I was bored to death every time I had to get down there.

"Well, considering its usual occupants are already dead, I doubt there are many complaints."

Yeah…I think that's part of the problem.

"Ziiiiiiiil! I missed yoooouuuu!"

In that underworld palace, as I made my way through the heavy iron doors, I was greeted with an alarming level of excitement as the lich Enma came charging to see me…decked out from head to toe in ostentatious pink.

"H-Hi, I'm back."

"Welcome home!" Her face was lit by an extraordinary smile, so bright it felt like it deserved to be preserved in a picture frame. Trailing close behind her was Claire, all but sighing. I couldn't help but think that meant this smile had been specifically crafted just for today.

Claire eventually waved as well. "Hey, welcome back, Mr. Prince."

"Thanks," I responded with the same casual attitude she showed. But while my face looked undisturbed, it felt like someone was strangling my heart with a tight cord.

If my childhood friend had been allowed to grow up, this was exactly how she would have looked. Every time I laid eyes on her, my weathered, fading memories of my childhood would burst with vibrancy…

The gap between that past and my present always threatened to make my knees buckle.

"That was the longest month of my life!" Meanwhile Enma was writhing in her own personal agony. That bizarre reaction

brought me back to reality.

Claire sighed. “Probably because you put his return on your calendar and were counting down the days one by one.” The passiveness present in her face couldn’t disguise the coldness in her eyes. “Didn’t you say something recently about how your sense of time has been dulled by eternal life? Like how ‘a year passes by in a flash!’ or something?”

“Hey, no need for any of that!” With lightning quick reflexes, Enma dashed over to smack Claire for her comment, but just as quickly Claire dodged out of the way. *Wow, no way can I underestimate these two. Their physical abilities are incredible.*

I had last met them shortly before leaving for the Rage territory. There was a large number of corpses to deal with on the front lines, so Enma had been sent off to handle them; turning the dead bodies into undead so they could walk away was a pretty handy way of accomplishing that. Since that had taken so much of her time, I hadn’t been able to see her when I left the castle for the Rage territory.

“So, how was your trip?”

“Well…let’s just say a lot happened.”

I was ushered to her reception room where I was bombarded by all kinds of tea before I even had a chance to refuse. As I took a sip, I was puzzled over where to start.

“I heard you’ve been breaking horns again.”

“Guh—” I choked on my tea. The last thing I expected was for that to be brought up here. *So after a month, even rumors like that reach all the way down here to Enma?* “Not a full break, just a bit off the end. How much did you hear?”

“Oh, nothing at all. There’s just some rumors throughout the castle that ‘Hornbreaker Zilbagias was at it again,’” she replied with her usual pasted-on smile.

“I see…” So that’s how it was playing out here. “It wasn’t that big of a deal. At my welcome banquet, some guy tried to insult me by throwing wine on my face.”

“Wow. He must be quite bold to try that with a prince,” Claire said as she brought in some snacks, her face shifting from surprise to something of a scowl. I imagined she didn’t have the kind of taken aback expression that would make sense in this situation at the ready.

Though Enma’s creations were exceptionally lifelike, as her title of “Dollmaker” implied, they nevertheless had an

unshakable artificiality to them. In particular, it seemed they had a difficult time controlling their expressions. As a solution, they had a set number of expressions they could switch to on the fly as the situation demanded. To put it another way, if they hadn't prepared an expression beforehand, they couldn't use it.

"I can't imagine you taking treatment like that sitting down," Enma replied, an ineffable smile still on her face. *Does she not have an expression that's a bit more…reserved?*

"Even if she did, I cannot imagine her of all people showing anything but this smile."

True enough.

"What caught even me by surprise was how much it irked me that he did it with everyone watching. But back then everyone had been looking down on me, so it ended up being a good opportunity to vent my frustrations."

"By the way, who was it that you fought?" Enma asked.

"Count Germadios. Some eighty-year-old dude with more arrogance than the two of us put together."

"You just send people of higher rank flying like it's nothing, huh?" Claire commented.

"Their fault for losing," I replied seriously, like a good savage. Back in the Alliance, no royal title would have protected me from the major fallout of incidents like that, but here in the demonic kingdom your rank was a representation of your strength. Winning and losing was all that mattered. In other words, people would just look at it as me being too strong for my title of viscount, or Germadios being surprisingly weak for his title of count. And it didn't help that his horn had ended up damaged.

"You've been training tons, though. I can't imagine anyone in the castle below the rank of duke looking down on you," Enma said, propping her head up on her hand as her glassy eyes stared into mine. *Is she trying to get a gauge on how my magic has grown? I can't let my guard down for a second anywhere, can I?*

"It's kind of weird. You train so much every day, and even took down a leader of the dragons. How can they still underestimate you?" Claire added, refilling my cup.

"Apparently because most people think the stories of my exploits have been thoroughly embellished."

"Ah…" the two undead responded as one.

"But I guess I should be thankful to Germadios. After we fought, it was smooth sailing from there. Though apparently that

scared off a lot of people that were thinking about becoming my subordinates."

"Isn't that why you were there in the first place? Sounds like you ended up with things backward." Enma laughed.

"So, how was *your* trip?" I asked. It wasn't like I was interested in the slightest, but it was the best way to avoid the question.

Enma and Claire both shared an awkward chuckle, their faces turning expressionless.

"Day in and day out, the moment the sun was down, they had us working like horses…"

"Since, you know, we don't need to rest at all…"

"Call forth the soul, subdue it, make it into undead. Call forth the soul, subdue it, make it into undead. Again, and again, and again…"

"Beyond that it was just having the undead dig holes and line up inside them until sunrise."

"Then the sun did the dirty work and cleaned things up," Enma murmured, her tone playful…but I didn't miss the dark magic leaking from her.

This was Enma, the woman who worked day and night to conquer the sun (though I wished she wouldn't) so that she could turn all of humanity into undead and create a paradise for them (though I hoped she didn't). Despite her efforts against the sun, she had been forced to turn people into undead and watch as the sun's rays turned them into ash. Even the fathomless Enma couldn't come out from the other side of that unfazed.

"Oho ho! So they just reduce to ash in the sun. That means there's no need for any magic or fire fuel to dispose of the corpses. How convenient."

Ante was casually impressed. Well…I supposed she was right. Though it was common knowledge, the thought had never occurred to me since I never saw people clearing out corpses with **Necromancy**.

"So even a true master like yourself found it a challenge?"

"There were just so many, you know? One or two bodies is nothing. But we're talking tens of thousands here. Even I'll have some trouble with that." Enma gave a troubled smile. *So there were tens of thousands of victims this time…* "As you know, opening a dialogue with the soul is the basis of **Necromancy**. You call out the soul, negotiate or whatever to put it under your control, then give it a body. And you repeat that over and over. If you want a

hundred undead, you need to do it a hundred times."

"So you can't do dozens of them at a time?"

"Unlike Claire here, not all of them are very cooperative or open to being friendly."

Claire gave a small shrug at Enma's explanation, while I felt a sharp pang in my chest. No matter how many times I heard it, the story was always hard to swallow. That innocent, mischievous little girl had chosen of her own free will to join the army of the undead.

"Even if I just want them to be as weak and simplistic as possible so they'll just stand in the sunlight, I still need to carve out that uncooperative element from them. If they're especially resistant, I just gouge out their feelings altogether," Enma explained her forbidden magics like she was sharing a cake recipe. "Once you're good at it, it becomes a pretty quick process, but there's still only one of me, right? If I try to handle more than one at a time and end up damaging a soul's core, it won't be capable of becoming even the weakest of the undead." The soul would be destroyed.

"So you have to go one at a time, huh?" I said.

"Right. Or have someone else help you. That's why I had Claire tag along."

I had always assumed Enma could raise an army of the undead in the blink of an eye, but it seemed that would be difficult even for her.

"She mentioned it becoming a quicker procedure the better you get at it. How quickly is that, I wonder?"

Exactly. If she could do ten every second, that changed things a lot. Though of course high-level undead that could respond to and carry out orders would no doubt take a lot longer.

Well, actually...if you had a hundred people like Claire willing to work with you...

"So having others help, as she said?"

Yeah, exactly. From Enma's perspective, improving her combat capability hinged on acquiring more allies. And if you flipped the coin over, when she said not everyone is as cooperative as Claire was...that meant some of them *were*.

"So it's really repetitive work. Now I get why you don't like it," I nodded, stirring some milk into my tea with a spoon.

"Really? Do you have experience with boring work like that?" Claire delivered a straight jab from out of nowhere. That had me

at a loss for words for a moment.

"Like...copying text by hand? It's a real pain."

"Wow..."

"What do you mean, 'wow'?"

"That's such a prince-like thing to say. If that's the worst you've had it, that's quite impressive..."

Of course my past life was filled with tons of experiences like that, but I couldn't just share them willy-nilly, could I?

"Not really the kind of thing we can tease you about, now is it?" Enma said. "But as much as we were working hard, that's the kind of work we expect." She held her hands under her chin and gave a small shrug. It was quite the odd gesture. *What was that about? Was that supposed to be some kind of praying gesture or something?*

"She's...just trying to be cute, is she not?"

Trying to be cute? Like that? I had very little experience with girls even in my past life...but why would Enma be trying to look cute in front of me?

"It really is thankless work... I sure wish someone would recognize my efforts and praise me..." Enma continued.

Ah, now I get it. She was trying to draw sympathy out of me. That explained it. Enma's bodies made it pretty difficult to be expressive, so her gestures ended up looking strange and out of place.

"Okay. Good work, Enma. It was an important job that someone had to do. I'm glad to have someone reliable like you around who's willing to put in all that time to get the job done. It's really respectable." So I gave her as serious a praising as I could.

I wasn't lying, by the way. Perhaps I had exaggerated just a bit, but taking care of all those corpses was important work that someone had to deal with. Leaving those corpses around to rot could bring about all sorts of diseases, and while I'd be more than happy to see the Demon King's army be inflicted with illness, all it would take was one small change in wind direction for those losses to be borne by the Alliance instead.

And even though Enma was herself a count, she didn't just throw her subordinates like Claire into the trenches to do all the work. She got her hands dirty and did it herself. That was an attitude that I felt was worthy of respect.

However...she was still involved in manipulating souls, and still

planned on wiping out humanity. No matter how you sliced it, we were natural enemies. I'd love to give her a blast of holy magic and annihilate her on the spot, but until I knew all of the workings of her **Necromancy**, I couldn't be sure I'd succeed at taking her out. Acting recklessly wouldn't do me any good.

Enma, meanwhile, was totally over the moon at my praise. "Ah…I feel so rewarded…it's like I'm ascending to Heaven…"

"I'm glad to hear it." *Go ahead and ascend to Heaven, please.*

"But…just words are a bit unsatisfying, don't you think…?"

"Huh?"

"It would be so much nicer if you also…patted me on the head or something…" she mumbled, glancing up at me as she fidgeted nervously.

Oh? Wish granted, then. A chance to inspect her body up close? Never imagined Enma herself would give me the chance.

"Sure. Don't move." I immediately slid closer to her, not willing to let the opportunity pass me by. Enma gave a little squeak and tried to pull away, but unfortunately for her, there was a wall behind her. Stepping close, I immediately put a hand to her head—smooth, silky hair, under which was a firm skull and natural feeling skin. Such a faithful recreation was to be expected from the Dollmaker herself.

Enma started to panic, but my attention was elsewhere. I couldn't help but wonder what exactly was inside her head. I hadn't learned about the details of how to produce bodies yet, so I couldn't really guess. Since I would likely learn that knowledge in the future, I made sure to pay close attention now so I could recall it later when the time came. I doubted she had a normal brain inside her skull. The soul functioned as the center of thought for an undead, so she wouldn't need one. Judging by the way her magic flowed, maybe it was some kind of jewel used to store magical energy? If you wanted to extend the lifespan of the body, you'd need as many high-quality jewels as you could get your hands on.

"Y-Your…face…!"



Enma's glassy eyes were trembling as they looked up at me. *Oh, right. Almost slipped my mind that I'm supposed to be giving her praise or something.*

"Enma...good work. You did well," I said, stroking her head softly. *Seriously. You work way, way too hard. Whether in your contributions to the kingdom, or your work to conquer sunlight. But there's no need to keep working anymore. How about you just call it a day and disappear already?*

While stroking her hair, a thought occurred to me: This was the first time I had gotten so physically close to her. If I went all out with holy magic from this range...could I finish her off? That thought sprang to the back of my mind. You could call it something of a distraction.

Even if this Enma in front of me was nothing more than a puppet controlled from afar, it had to be connected to her consciousness. *If I go all out, maybe I can still get a considerable amount of damage through to her main body...*

But if I failed to fully kill her, I'd be put in quite the tough spot. There would be no way I could talk myself out of it and come up with an excuse for using holy magic, especially with Claire present.

"Could you not simply silence the girl the same way?"

I...suppose I could.

"N-No... No, stop!" Enma suddenly shoved me away.

A cold sweat formed on my back.

Crap, could she sense the hostility from me?! Dammit. I might have to pounce first while I still have an opening!

"It's too...too good...!" But Enma didn't do anything. She just stood against the wall shaking. Was something wrong with her body?

"Zil...your face...it's too good...!"

"My face? You think it looks good?"

"Oh, just, seeing you from so close really reminded me how good-looking you are or really how good-looking demons are in general right?!" she blurted out quickly. "It just reminded me of that! I meant nothing weird by it at all!"

"Sure." Either way, it didn't seem like my cover had been blown or anything. Thank goodness.

Turning around, I saw Claire watching us with a frown that seemed to be a mixture of exasperation and astonishment. *So she can make a face like that, huh?*

“What’s wrong, Claire?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought you guys are really…peaceful.”

Peaceful? How so? I’m sweating buckets here. I thought my life was over.

“I guess you were working hard too, weren’t you? Good job, Claire.”

“Ah. Yeah. Thank you,” she replied with an insincere smile, effectively close to being expressionless.

Which wasn’t all that much of a surprise. After all, the leftovers of our war had resulted in her being on cleanup duty. Being thanked by a demon prince, who was basically responsible for the work she had to do, probably wasn’t much cause for happiness.

“Enma seemed plenty happy.”

Yeah, but there’s definitely something wrong with her.

“Out of curiosity, how many of you went to clean up? Never mind meeting them, I’ve never seen any of your other partners,” I asked casually, returning to my seat. Thanks to Claire’s plain response, things had gotten a bit awkward. Here I was just trying to learn about Enma’s strength.

“We divide ourselves up between the different battlefronts,” Enma replied, sitting down beside me again as if nothing had happened. “Aside from Claire and me, two others went to the east front. Only one person was sent to the north front since little needed to be done. At the same time, four or five were needed on the southern front.”

“Wouldn’t it go faster if you sent more people?”

“Yes, but our people are spread thin doing things like maintenance on the skeleton horse carriages and so on.”

“Ah, I see. Speaking of which, I’m sure you aren’t personally making every skeleton horse and undead soldier in the kingdom, right? About how many people do you have? Basically the number of liches you have on hand, not the low-level undead.” Careful not to sound too interested, I tried pressing further.

“How many do we have again?” Enma hummed, counting on her fingers. “I guess about twenty? Wow. We really are pretty shorthanded.”

That was…a lot fewer than I’d expected. Assuming she was telling the truth.

“I must concur with your initial assessment, that number is far too small. She is almost certainly lying,” Ante interjected instantly.

“Think about it. Even your childhood friend has become one of her subordinates. That friend of yours, did she ever seem traitorous enough to betray humanity and gleefully join the Demon King’s army?”

Of course not.

“An ordinary village girl like her was drawn into the fold by Enma. Perhaps someone like you, as devoted as you were to the Church, might refuse her. The same probably goes for the Alliance soldiers who fell in battle. However…”

…If an ordinary person got caught up in the war by happenstance…

“It is not hard to imagine there are others out there like Enma who have come to hate the world as a whole. How many people have lost their lives due to the advance of the demonic kingdom? It’s a simple matter of probability at that point.”

The most suspicious part was why Enma would lie about it.

“What’s wrong, Zil?”

Enma tilted her head slightly, eyes wide and innocent—way, way too innocent. It felt too forced.

“Nothing, I was just surprised there were so few. You joined the demonic kingdom over a hundred years ago, right? I just figured you would have at least a hundred subordinates by now.”

“I wish it was that easy.” Enma sighed, unshaken by my question. “As I said before, Claire joined us about thirty years ago, and she’s one of the relatively young ones. There are only two younger than her. The truth of the matter is if I happen to find one or two promising candidates within a decade, I’m doing quite well for myself.”

So she says.

“Very suspicious…”

Seeing I wasn’t totally convinced, Enma continued. “To be honest with you, there are plenty of people who meet the two main criteria: a strong sense of self and powerful emotions. On top of that, if they have a strong spiritual core, the only thing in the way of making them into good necromancers is training. But those with such strong convictions often belong to the aristocracy or military of the Alliance, or, even worse, to that repulsive Holy Church. They aren’t likely to cooperate with us.”

“Ah.” That made sense.

Also you’re the repulsive one here, not the Church.

“So what about those with strong feelings? There should be

plenty of them around."

"True, but in those cases they have often suffered a lot of damage to their personality," Enma said, lifting her hands in a defeated gesture. *Wait, she isn't trying to say she* doesn't *have a damaged personality, is she...?* "My dream is to create a peaceful paradise for the dead. People with no spirit of cooperation or who lash out at everyone around them aren't super helpful to that end, you know? Especially since we'll have to deal with them for such a long time."

"True enough. Having people like that around for such a long time would probably cause plenty of problems."

"Exactly. In the end, interpersonal relationships are the most important thing. I wouldn't want to spend my time with people like that even if it killed me." A biting condemnation, considering who it came from.

"By the way, you said those were the two main criteria. What are the others?"

"They can't have a strong penchant for violence, as I mentioned. But they also need to have a certain measure of intelligence, and a strong sense of curiosity. Those characteristics are necessary for becoming a skilled necromancer. On that note, I suppose it's also important to have an affinity for dark magic. Those with light or fire affinities would only suffer as undead. Besides that, they also have to be willing to cooperate with my vision."

And Claire met all of those criteria.

"I see," I said, leaning back in my chair with a nod. They needed a strong soul, aptitude for magic, a cooperative personality, and the ability to empathize with Enma's ideals. With all of those criteria, that more than explained why she had so few subordinates, right?

Not in the least.

"Twenty is still far too low."

I would have to concede miles to accept her standards were that strict. Alternatively, maybe there was some other exceptionally dangerous reason I had yet to uncover. In the end, it all really boiled down to "Enma had to like them." If you were willing to overlook their personalities, it should have been really easy to get more necromancers. Even those with a tendency to attack others could be used like disposable weapons.

Ultimately what I had learned today was that Enma was trying

to hide her strength. To a demon prince, that would have been a cause for great concern. But to a hero…any sign of smoldering embers beneath the demonic kingdom was a bright ray of hope.

"It sounds like your paradise is still a long way off, then," I said with an ironic smile.

"I feel very much the same way," she answered, mirroring my expression with a shrug. "Luckily for me, I have all the time in the world. Slow and steady is no problem for me."

After that our conversation turned to more trivial matters. For example, about how she had managed to survive up to five seconds in the sunlight now. Okay, maybe calling it trivial was selling it short. She had already gained a few seconds since the last time we talked!

As much as I was happy to delve into all the secrets of **Necromancy** (to arm myself against them), there was a limit to how much tea I could drink. So once I had fully bloated myself with it, I took my leave.

"There were lots of good corpses on the front lines! We also got some nice strong souls from the Holy Church and the forest elves, so next time we'll have lots to study!"

As I took my leave, we had scheduled plans for my next lesson.

"We've been playing it safe up until now with pretty harmless souls. Now we're going to get to work on those quite dangerous to us—souls with light and fire affinities. My original plan for this lesson was to do it with Faravgi's soul. But in any case, you'll need to learn how to defend yourself from souls with light and holy affinities."

Magic to defend against souls. Those casually tacked on words struck terror into my heart.

I definitely, *definitely* couldn't act recklessly around her, even if I saw an opening. I had to be *absolutely* sure that I could kill her completely!

"Okay. I'm really looking forward to it," I had said with a smile after we made our plans.

All the while wondering…did it count as a lie if I was being sarcastic?

†††

After spending much more time in Enma's palace than I expected, I had one final task to attend to. With my now quite bloated belly, I made my way to the king's palace.

"Upon returning from a long trip, is it not fairly rude to visit the king last?" Ante asked.

This is the demonic kingdom. Manners like that don't matter here.

And besides, he was always swamped with work. Word probably hadn't reached him yet that I was back.

"Welcome, and welcome home, Lord Zilbagias." At my arrival, I was greeted by a familiar face—the goat-headed Stegnos, the Devil of Thirst.

"It's been a while, Stegnos. Is my father in?"

"He is currently preoccupied with his duties, but I believe it is almost time for a break."

"As I thought."

In response to my serious nod, Stegnos gave a small smile. "Allow me to guide you." He took me to the king's office, a routine we were all too familiar with.

"Oh, you're back, Zilbagias!"

The Demon King, Gordogias Orgi. He had a full, thick, blond mane-like beard, and two sinister horns. His face married both intellect and wild savagery. This walking disaster, the strongest demon on the continent...was buried in the mountains of paperwork on his desk. And there he was, leaning back in his chair while sipping his usual cup of milk tea.

"It has been a while, father."

You're looking just as lively as you were a month ago. And here I was hoping that one of these days you would work yourself to death. I guess even the strongest on the continent can go toe to toe against office work!

"I believe I told you not to break any more horns." And immediately he struck, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Well...um...that was more his fault..."

As I stumbled over my words in a fluster, the Demon King's stern expression eventually broke. "I'm joking. Prati sent a letter informing me of what happened. We'll just leave it as an unavoidable accident." He chuckled, motioning for me to sit. "Would you like a drink?" He lifted a teacup.

"No... I uh, I'm already quite...full."

"Ha, I can tell you've received a warm reception. Watch out for poison though."

“Yes sir,” I replied, rubbing the poison detecting ring on my right hand.

“So, how was Prati’s homeland?”

I paused for a moment. “Do you mind if I set a soundproof barrier?”

“Not at all.”

With a clap of my hands, I deployed the barrier. Now we should be safe.

“It was far more cultured than I expected.”

The bluntness of my observation earned a laugh from the king. I continued telling him all about my time in the Rage territory: how the Rage family was surprisingly mellow, how my grandmother’s family was anything but ordinary, about my visit to the human farm, about how I found retainers and all the training we went through, and on and on. Meanwhile the king kicked back, only responding with the occasional comment and question.

“I see. It sounds like you’ve had a rewarding experience.”

“Yes, it was—” Vivid images of my battle with the hero and his militia flashed into my mind. “A lot happened.” I gave a small sigh while, at the same time, the king looked at me with something akin to a fatherly smile.

Quit looking at me like that.

“By the way, father. There is something I would like your opinion on…or maybe more accurately, a favor I would like to ask.” Deciding it was about time, I straightened up. This visit wasn’t about deepening our bond as father and son.

“Hmm. Very well, let’s hear it.” Noticing my change in attitude, the king also sat up straight, his face turning serious. After wetting my lips, I got straight to the point.

“Would it be possible to borrow some land from you? Something that’s under your direct control, in a rather hard to reach place.”

If possible, one only reachable by dragon, far from any settlements.

“I…don’t follow. What exactly do you want?” The request left him a bit confused as it probably sounded like nothing more than a child begging, “Daddy, give me some land!”

“I am thinking about setting up a research laboratory for **Necromancy** somewhere outside the castle.”

“Oh?”

I double-checked that the soundproof barrier was still working. “Father, do Enma’s undead regularly interact with demons?”

“No. In fact, as far as I am aware, the only one with any semblance of familiarity with them is you.” He shook his head, looking to the devil butler by the wall for confirmation.

“Even outside of demons, I have no recollection of them making contact with any of the other races.” Stegnos also shook his head.

“I see. When I visited Enma earlier, somehow rumors had reached her that I had broken someone’s horn again. I guess we really can’t underestimate her.”

The king’s eyebrows lifted at that. “Who told her?” was the first thought that had come to mind when I had heard that from her. Demons in general despised undead with any form of intelligence. It was pretty hard to believe that there was anyone else like me who’d sit down, have tea, and chitchat with Enma. And yet she had still managed to catch rumors from them.

“So she has ears in the castle. And you want to practice **Necromancy** somewhere outside of her knowledge. But why do you need to go so far?”

And this was where things got serious. My objective was to have a place to research not only **Necromancy**—but also holy magic. My current means of doing so was by sending everyone away—under the assumption I was having some “alone time” with Liliana or Layla—but that wasn’t a good solution for extended periods of time. Plus, I couldn’t do anything potentially dangerous in fear of being seen by one of the servants. Going to Prati for help felt like it was going to be more trouble than it was worth.

On top of that, I needed a chance to study how I could overcome the defenses against holy magic that Enma was going to teach me. Obviously I couldn’t do anything fancy with holy magic while I was in the castle itself.

To be frank, I was really looking for my own “castle.” And Enma had provided me with the perfect excuse to try and justify it to the king.

I continued quietly. “Enma has been teaching me everything she knows without restraint. But that also feels like it’s a show of the confidence she has in her abilities. The more I learn from her, the more dangerous I realize she is. As it stands, if she were to

one day become my enemy, I have no idea how I'd deal with her."

That was mostly my honest feelings. If I had been a true denizen of the dark without access to holy magic, I would have no idea how I'd beat her.

"Is she that much of a threat? I can always use my fire," the king asked, scratching at his beard.

"As I am sure you are aware, Enma has numerous bodies. Even if she is out walking around, there is no guarantee that what we see is her true self."

"Indeed." He nodded.

"I imagine she keeps her true body locked safely away deep underground. In the numerous times I've visited her, I have been unable to pinpoint the location as of yet."

"But even if it is just a puppet, her consciousness is still within, is it not? Surely curses would still be effective on her."

"I thought the same initially. But apparently she even has techniques to defend against holy magic."

"Ah..."

"Considering what I have learned from Enma so far, I can't imagine that defense is anything less than rock-solid. And by going on that assumption, curses are likely ineffective against her as well. Your fire magic could of course annihilate her in an instant physically...but there is no telling if that would do any damage to her soul."

The Demon King's absurd firepower would no doubt be incredibly effective against her, but all it would take was a mere moment to swap bodies to keep going. Buying that tiny sliver of time was all she needed.

"She can switch between bodies, so there will be no end to it."

"I see..." The king nodded again, but he still didn't seem greatly convinced of the issue's graveness. Alternatively, he may have thought I just underestimated his abilities.

Not that I could blame him. He was literally the strongest person on the continent. His magic made him closer to a natural phenomenon than a living being. No matter how skilled Enma was as a necromancer, stopping a storm or standing against an erupting volcano was outside her ability. That must have been how he felt hearing my story.

But that was fine. If that was the attitude he was going to take...

"By the way, have you heard Enma has been researching a

way to make herself resistant to sunlight?"

"Ah, I suppose you did mention that to me before. If I recall, you two first met in the gardens while she was testing an experiment."

Man, good memory.

"I've had some practice with **Necromancy** myself. The first undead I made was just an insect, and the moment it touched sunlight it melted like candy, turning to ash in an instant." That was what happened normally to undead. "However, when I first met Enma, she stood directly in the sunlight. Her whole body started to smoke, then eventually it burst into flame and was reduced to ash."

The king chuckled. "What a strange woman. But it's pretty impressive she can still walk around like nothing happened after that."

Oh, so I guess there's no need for an explanation.

"Exactly. She is still perfectly fine," I repeated.

The king's laughter suddenly died, his face turning grave. It seemed like he had finally put the pieces together. The Demon King was the strongest being on the continent. But even his immense power couldn't compare to that of the sun itself. And Enma, destroyed by the light of that sun, still walked around as if nothing had happened.

"When I visited Enma today, she was very happy to share with me that she could now survive five seconds." Five seconds in *sunlight*. "Five seconds, father. She can switch bodies in no more than the blink of an eye."

To be perfectly honest, the Demon King's fire had magical properties as a curse that the sun didn't have, so they weren't exactly the same. But she was out there fighting against the *sun*, the ultimate symbol of the gods of light. It was far too optimistic to think that ordinary fire would be enough to get rid of her. She almost certainly had something up her sleeve to deal with that as well.

The Demon King's expression turned severe. It seemed he was starting to reconsider.

"Also, when I first met her, she could only last two seconds. In only a few months she has extended that time quite a bit."

Do you get it, Demon King? Do you understand how scary that is? Heck, I was terrified when she first told me that. Enma's lifespan has no limit. She can keep growing forever. It's only a few seconds now,

but what about in ten years? How about twenty? A hundred? Who could possibly say she'll never be capable of surviving indefinitely in sunlight? If I wasn't a hero, if I was a true demon prince, I would be terrified at that prospect.

She was already a monster beyond our control. If she were to be freed from the restraints she was under now…

"I understand," the king finally said, closing his eyes and leaning back with a long sigh. "I never imagined… After receiving my father's spear, I never imagined I'd feel this way again," he muttered to himself while staring at the obsidian spear leaning up against the wall. For the briefest of instants, the man before me wasn't the Demon King, the strongest being on the continent—he was just Gordogias Orgi, an ordinary demon. "Perhaps my strength has made me complacent. Pride is the greatest enemy; I know that all too well. Despite knowing all of that, it took you pointing out that threat when all the evidence was right in front of my eyes. Thank you for your warning, Zilbagias."

"Think nothing of it…"

You're still way more terrifying than she is.

Listening seriously to his youngest son pointing out something that he missed, admitting his mistake and correcting himself? How many leaders in the world were even capable of going to such lengths? Especially for someone like the Demon King who could deal with any enemy like he would a mere insect. It seemed Demon King Gordogias was wise enough to even correctly judge himself. That was great for the demonic kingdom, but awful for me.

You're a king! Try acting arrogant for once! Being so full of yourself that you lose sight of what's logical would help me out a whole lot!

"Though, you were the one who corrected him," Ante commented.

Yeah well, in this case, he's more useful to me this way.

Frustratingly, if the Demon King was too proud to listen to reason, I wouldn't be able to talk to him like this in the first place. It was unfortunately a pick your poison kind of situation.

"As much as I've played up her abilities, there is a chance I'm overthinking things."

I also didn't want him to fully reject the undead immediately. That was an ember I wanted to wait to burst into flame when the time came. So I'd need to offer a counterpoint to my initial claims

as well.

"After all, the sun..." *Shines on everyone*, I stopped myself from saying. A demon couldn't go around repeating human proverbs. That was close. "The sun is always shining, but you could also view it as the sun not having its sights set on any one person. With your ability to focus your curse on a single target, you may be able to break through her defenses and incinerate even her soul. I think that's fully within the realm of possibility."

"That was how I felt about it. But that could just be the pride talking."

This guy really took that correction to heart, huh?

"From a rational perspective, I don't think Enma has any motive to rebel against us. But if rationality were to be abandoned, there is no telling what she may do."

"True. Right now we have a mutually beneficial relationship, but..."

Mutually beneficial? Are you sure about that? To me it just looks like the demons are entirely dependent on her.

The kingdom's transportation network was built on the back of skeletal horses; the technology used to make the carriages more comfortable relied on undead. Construction efforts that didn't require the Corvut family's magic were apparently all carried out by undead, working tirelessly through the night. That wasn't accounting for the undead's role with a great deal of the farmwork. And there was the disposal of corpses on the battlefield that I had just talked with Enma about. Without Enma's help, these would be tasks that required tremendous manpower. That manpower would need food and supplies, which would require even more manpower to transport.

"The demons really are fully dependent on her," Ante commented.

The prosperity of the demonic kingdom was being propped up from the shadows by the undead. *Funny of you to bring up being wary of your pride when you turn around and call a relationship like that "mutually beneficial," huh?* If I was a proper demon prince, I'd probably point that out. But the demonic kingdom having a blind spot to exploit worked for me.

"To be honest, at this stage, I am not especially worried," I started again, keeping all those thoughts to myself. "Your fire magic is a powerful deterrent, so even if Enma was thinking of trying something, I doubt it would amount to any sort of action.

At least, not during your reign.”

That caused the king to make a bitter expression. I was basically implying that if the demonic kingdom continued to thrive, Enma’s efforts would have played a role. No matter how good relations were with Enma now, the possibility of relations breaking down later or Enma getting too proud herself remained. If that happened with a Demon King incapable of fire magic on the throne… If the Demon King’s Lance was inherited by someone who wasn’t capable of defeating the undead…

Enma might give in to temptation.

For example, the current first prince, Aiogias. Though he was seen as one of the front-runners for the throne, as a member of the Vernas family, he specialized in ice magic. So of course he couldn’t use fire. Ice magic was convenient and powerful, but it wasn’t all that effective against undead. It could freeze their physical bodies, but it couldn’t do much to their souls.

In that respect, Aiogias’s closest competition in Rubifya the Pyroclast from the Rivarel family that specialized in fire magic, was like a gift from the heavens. In regards to keeping the undead in check, Rubifya was a much better candidate. Her capabilities as a leader, however, were not something I was privy to.

“At any rate,” I continued as the king scratched at his beard, “joining hands with Enma seems like the correct route. But I felt as though it would serve us well to develop a way to bypass her defenses against spiritual attacks, or a means to destroy her soul before she even has a chance to switch bodies.”

Playing nice and using that monster was fine and dandy, as long as you had a way to put that monster down. That was the point I was trying to get across. It was the kind of logic I knew a demon would love.

“You have a point.” The king nodded. “Your concerns are warranted, and I see the need for research into the matter. And, at the present, I guess the demon with the greatest knowledge of **Necromancy**…is you. And considering the topic at hand, it will need to be carried out with the utmost secrecy.”

Using his arm, the king propped his head up on the desk. “You said you were looking for a remote location. What did you have in mind?”

Got him!

I almost wanted to do a celebratory little dance. It took

everything I had not to smile from ear to ear.

I did it! I got my own castle! A place with some privacy away from Prati and the servants! The possibilities felt endless. From making preparations to get Liliana out of the kingdom, to researching holy magic's fighting capabilities against the Demon King and Enma, to hiding my own magical items…

"Well…first of all, ideally a place where entry is difficult for others." Doing my best to keep my exultation under wraps, I pretended to think hard on the question. "I will probably travel there on dragonback, so the location being completely isolated is no problem. In fact, that would probably be for the best."

"By dragon? Can you trust them? I cannot imagine they will be quite fond of the undead."

"Ah, about that. I uh… I have my own dragon to use."

It took a moment for the king to catch my implication. "Surely you don't mean the daughter of that white dragon you killed?"

"I do."

What the hell is wrong with you?! the king's expression all but shouted. "You plan on riding her?! If you fall from any altitude, there will be no saving you!"

"Actually, I have already ridden her a number of times. High enough to touch the clouds."

The king was thunderstruck. His shock was understandable considering the lengths he went to never ride the back of a dragon to prevent them from rebelling.

Going to and from the Rage territory by carriage had reminded me how troublesome traveling by ground was in comparison to soaring in the skies on a dragon. The king barely left the castle, and though I was sure much of that was due to his responsibilities here, I couldn't help but wonder if the time constraints caused by having to travel by carriage also played a part.

"I am surprised Prati allowed that," he managed to squeeze out, still struggling with his disbelief.

"She was very much against it, but Gori…my grandmother has a Bloodline Magic that is capable of detecting hostility. She guaranteed that the dragon girl was no threat."

"Really…ah, I suppose she does have *Effusura*."

"Yes. And on top of that… Well, I've been cultivating a good relationship with her." That hint was more than enough for him to fill in the rest. His gaze seemed equal parts exasperation and

respect.

“I see. Very well. Anything else?”

“Right, back to the main topic. As for the lab itself, I don’t need that much space. Even a small hut would be fine. But since I will be experimenting with the creation and destruction of undead, more space will allow more freedom. I would also like to have space to store materials and books.”

The king nodded, pulling a map out from his desk. “There are a number of ruined fortresses in land directly under my control. They are basically all destroyed beyond the point of usefulness, but I could have one repaired personally and lend it to you in secret.” Indicating them on the map, he asked which I would prefer.

An instant decision using the king’s authority means not having to sweat the details like the budget! What a blessing! This is awesome!

“May I take a look at the map?”

“Of course.”

As I began to pore over the map, the king started to laugh.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just thought you are being quite thorough.”

“Huh?” I blurted out. *What? Did he somehow figure out my true intentions?*

The king chuckled. “As you said, I thought about what kind of deterrent the Demon King presents. Let’s say for example you were able to develop a magic that dealt with the undead without relying on fire magic. Whether you make those results public or not, if you have those measures in place, you can rule without having to worry about the undead.”

“Sure…” It was my turn to be confused. Having measures in place in advance would be a relief. That was obvious enough, but what was he getting at?

“People with your kind of foresight are rather rare, you know.”

“Well…I’m just thinking about the future of the kingdom, I guess?”

My evident confusion caused the king to be confused himself. “Wait, are you telling me that wasn’t your intention?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow…”

After another brief moment, the king began to roar with laughter. What was so funny?! I was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

Ante, what’s going on?!

“I cannot say I know…ah, wait. From the Demon King’s perspective…” Ante suddenly started to laugh as well. *“Aha ha ha ha ha, no wonder he’s laughing!”*

Quit laughing and explain it to me!

“In a way, it’s actually encouraging. You’ve really made my day, Zilbagias.” But before Ante could say anything, the king reached over and patted me on the shoulder with a big smile.

“I’m sorry, I still don’t get it.”

“No need to apologize. If anything, I should apologize for my assumptions. This is of course all hypothetical, Zilbagias. But my line of thinking was ‘this research would make it much easier for someone with pure dark magic, with experience in **Necromancy**, to rule over the undead should they become the next king.’”

Oh. Oh! Now I got it. From his point of view, me bringing up the issue with Enma and thinking up ways to deal with her made him think I was worrying in the event I became king one day!

At present I…or rather the Rage family as a whole had yet to swear allegiance to either the first prince or the second princess while also not having established a third faction of their own. Even though we were talking in private, the king was trying to avoid being more forthright out of consideration for that.

Honestly though, I didn’t care at all! It was way too early to be worried about that! And even if it wasn’t, I wasn’t interested in the first place! I couldn’t care less about becoming king! I had been desperate to figure out what he was getting at, but that was all?! I couldn’t help but feel exhausted. I seriously didn’t care…

“You were honestly just thinking about the good of the kingdom, weren’t you?” The king gave a hearty nod, as if deeply moved.

“Well…yes. I suppose I am always thinking about the kingdom. I imagine I spend more time thinking about it than most.” Of course, my intentions ran in a bit of a different direction than the king suspected.

“You mean the exact opposite.”

I was doing what I could to destroy the kingdom.

But as a demon prince, displaying zero interest in the throne wasn’t exactly praiseworthy. Though Prati had decided to keep our intentions a secret, it was pretty out of character for a demon to show so little ambition.

“I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“Ha ha! Even though it’s not the sort of thing you need to be careful about.”

The king let out another roaring laugh.

So with that out of the way, I looked over the map again, and decided to take a small fortress that was about twenty minutes south of the castle by dragonback. At the same time, I was unofficially appointed to a new position.

From today I was the seventh demon prince, viscount Zilbagias Rage, head of the Royal Necromancy Research Laboratory! (At five years old!)

†††

A **Necromancy** laboratory, my new base. In a way, it was my secret hideout. I was getting way more pumped up than I probably should be!

“We’ll be free to do whatever we like!”

Exactly! This and that and everything in-between!

Though just thinking about doing heretical experiments and stuff on souls was kinda heavy!

I took a moment to sigh as I had to remember one thing—I was a hero. It didn’t matter what anyone said, that fact remained true. If I didn’t remind myself of that from time to time, it felt like I would lose sight of who I was.

Anway, back to the fortress in question. It wasn’t like I’d be ready to head there in a day or two. The king was putting plans in motion so the Corvut family could handle the repairs, which meant it would take at least a week before it was actually usable. Once the repairs were done, I’d move in as if I didn’t have a clue any repairs had taken place. The Corvut family was aligned with Rubifya’s faction, so I needed to make sure I didn’t give people the impression I was connected to them in any way.

That said, there was sure to be some speculation as to why the king decided to suddenly have this random fortress repaired. But that speculation was much safer than me hiring them personally.

“If curiosity gets the better of some individual that they scope things out for themselves, what do you intend to do with them?” Ante said teasingly.

Of course, there was only one answer to that question—

summary execution for revealing state secrets! Or, that's what I'd like to say, but realistically it would depend on who that individual was.

"Boring."

Agreed.

Once my research there actually kicked off, I might need to have another chat with the king. Considering the threat of undesirables paying me a visit, I'd have to avoid having anything truly "dangerous" lying around the lab. I couldn't get so arrogant that I slipped up.

Anyway, we could worry about all those fine details later.

After returning to the castle, one thing on my immediate to-do list was to get a riding harness made for Layla. Sure, I could've gotten her a standard issue saddle for riding dragons, but it would've been a pain in the ass lugging the straps, the seat, and the stirrups everywhere. A magical item of some sort sure would come in handy to make that part a lot easier.

So the next day, with the usual crew of Layla, Liliana, and Garunya in tow, I stopped by the dwarven forge.

"It is nice to see you again, Your Highness," the head of the demonic kingdom's dwarven forge Fisero gave me a stiff and formal greeting. This was the very craftsman who had made Syndikyos from Faravgi's scales for me.

"Long time no see. How's your arm?"

"It has never been better," he replied almost with a frown under his snow-white beard. His arm had been restored so nicely that it was hard to believe it had ever been missing as a result of a curse. "How have you been faring, Your Highness?" he asked in reply, though I knew my personal well-being wasn't of much interest to him.

"Well, up until yesterday, I was visiting my mother's homelands. It seemed like the perfect chance to test the limits of Syndikyos. After getting beaten, slashed, and stabbed all over, there isn't a scratch on it. I couldn't be any more impressed with your workmanship."

Fisero nodded, entirely unmoved by my lavish praise.

"Next spring I will be heading to the battlefield. That said, I have not forgotten our pact. I will make sure to keep it."

Fisero's expression darkened at that as he gave me a deep bow. I had sworn to Fisero that as long as I wore Syndikyos, I'd

never harm a dwarf. While that meant dwarves would be unharmed by my hand, the same couldn't be said for the rest of the Alliance on the battlefield, thus bringing about further bloodshed. Even though he was a captive here, I could only imagine the shame that brought him as a dwarven smith born in the Alliance.

"On that note, I've come today with another request," I said, intentionally speaking brightly to try and shift the mood. "I need something magic. It may sound a bit strange, but I figured a dwarven smith would be more than capable of it."

"Very well, let us hear it." Though his tone was casual, the pride in his profession that illuminated his expression wasn't lost on me. No dwarf in the world could turn down a request after being asked like that. I almost burst out laughing as the other dwarves stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to us.

Putting an arm around Layla's waist, I pulled her close. "Could you make me a magic harness that's easy to carry around so I can ride her?" As all the dwarves turned to look at Layla, I could feel her wince back a little.

"This girl…?" Fisero took a hard look at Layla's swept-back horns. He couldn't have missed the fact that she was a dragon in human form.

"Pleased to meet you. I am the white dragon, Layla."

"White…" Halfway through repeating her words, Fisero's mouth snapped shut, realization setting in.

"Yes, she is Faravgi's daughter," I added. The air in the sweltering, noisy forge immediately seemed to chill. Or maybe rather than chill, it would be more accurate to say it froze with fear. Hammers stopped mid-swing, materials slipped out of the hands of craftsmen and crashed to the floor.

Fisero was the one who had made Faravgi's scales into a set of armor. The collar Layla once wore had almost certainly been made by one of the dwarves here as well.

As he grew paler and shuffled back, Fisero started muttering some gibberish. It was the first time I'd seen him so shocked.

"What a reaction," Ante commented.

I expected a poor reaction like this from him, but he'd have to take Layla's measurements eventually, so it was bound to have happened at some point. Having Layla wait outside while we got the introductions out of the way wouldn't feel right. And wouldn't

it feel worse to explain the whole situation *then* bring Layla in?

"Don't worry about her. I'm sure you have your own opinions on the matter, but that's all our problem to work out."

"Um, so…maybe it's weird for me to say this, but please don't worry about it…" Layla added, as she tried to pull herself closer to me to show off our intimacy; halfway through she got embarrassed and turned red.

After another long pause, Fisero finally spoke again. "Ah. Right. A magic harness, you said?" Though it took him a minute, his professionalism as a craftsman eventually took over. Even so, his voice still trembled and he had to wipe away a waterfall of sweat from his forehead. "I presume you mean for riding her when she is in her dragon form?"

"Of course. When else would I ride her?"

"Ah, right. Of course." He used his sleeve to wipe away more sweat. It seemed as though there was more on the tip of his tongue as his eyes darted between the two of us. "And you intend to let him ride?"

"I already have a number of times, but it was basically by clinging to her back bare-handed. It wasn't a very relaxing experience. I figured a harness would make the riding much smoother."

"Y-You have? A number of times…?" I could see a wave of shock pass through not only Fisero but also all the other surrounding dwarves.

"Does that prince *want* to die…?"

"Poor thing. She's probably had her mind altered like that high elf…"

"Quiet! He'll hear you!"

Yeah, I did.

"*Woof!*" Liliana curled up at my feet, apparently bothered that Layla was getting all the attention. I guess I had been kind of ignoring her for a bit, so I started to stroke her hair as an apology.

Fisero looked at me aghast, as if he were face-to-face with a monster. "What specifications did you have in mind?" The fact his tone stayed totally professional was really a testament to his pride as a craftsman.

My request was for a harness that would fit Layla as a dragon, but was easy to get off and could be carried around while she

was in human form.

“Hmm. That would be quite challenging to do with anything made from metal.”

“Yeah, it would be far too heavy.”

“It wouldn’t be an issue in her dragon form, but in human form…”

A number of dwarves started to brainstorm around Fisero.

“If we used dragon materials it would be pretty light…”

“Quiet, you idiot!”

“She’ll kill you!”

I guess being discreet isn’t a dwarven specialty, huh?

“Their voices are almost comically loud.”

It wasn’t that surprising considering how loud the forge was, but still…

“I think it’ll have to be leather.”

“That seems like the best way for it to be easy to attach and detach as well as to carry it around.”

“But for something that complex…there’s only one person that can pull it off.”

After quite a lively discussion, “Your Highness, we have one craftsman who might be able to meet your specifications…” Fisero scowled.

“I expected nothing less from the dwarves.” But why did Fisero look so bitter?

“Though rare among dwarves, their skill set is more fit for leather than metal. I can guarantee you will receive a fantastic piece of equipment, but…”

“Is there a problem?”

“They can be a bit…strange. Is that okay?”

“I get called strange all the time. If he’s got the skill, then no complaints from me.”

Nodding with a “I suppose you’re right” under his breath—which was kind of annoying in its own way—Fisero turned to call the craftsman in question.

“I have come swiftly at your summons, my prince!” a bizarrely high-pitched voice rang out through the forge as a short, round woman dashed up to us.

“Wait, a woman?!” I was pretty shocked. All of the dwarves here were prisoners. That usually meant they had been taken captive on the battlefield. Because of that, the last thing I expected to see was a dwarven woman among them.

“Yes sir! I am the leatherworker, Kusemoun!” Snapping to a halt and giving a sharp bow, her breathing already ragged as she continued to slide closer. “I heard you are looking for someone to fashion leather for a lively young dragon! Is this the girl?! Ah, she’s adorable!”

Yep, she was definitely a weird one. This completely explained what Fisero was getting at earlier.

“Aha! So you want something easy to carry around, and convenient to use for flight whenever you wish! That certainly sounds like quite the challenge…” Hearing out my request, Kusemoun nodded vigorously. “But it shouldn’t be a problem for me!” she declared proudly. Though all her pride was hard to take seriously when she was shorter than me.

“I’m glad to hear it. How much will it cost me?” Dwarven craftsmen both wouldn’t and couldn’t produce anything for another person unless they received proper compensation. That was how their magic worked.

“Two conditions.” Kusemoun popped up two fingers. “One, my nephew lost one of his little toes, so please heal it!” *One toe, huh? That doesn’t sound so bad.* “The second…no matter what I make, under any circumstances, you can’t complain about it! Rather than a price, that’s really a condition you’ll need to accept if you want my work!”

Excuse me?

I was taken completely aback. I’d never heard something like that from a dwarf before. The other dwarves around us began to grimace.

The only dwarves that could accept work were those recognized as experts of their craft by the other dwarves around them. In other words, they were head and shoulders above any craftsmen of the other races. Paying the right price meant you could forget them matching your expectations—they almost always exceeded them. Both the holy sword Adamas and my scale armor Syndikyos were shining examples of that.

So Kusemoun saying I wasn’t allowed to complain about her work was totally unexpected. It was her way of saying she was going to make something I *would* complain about.

I flashed Fisero a skeptical look. In response, the master smith and head of the dwarves in the castle responded with a look of his own filled with unveiled embarrassment, as if some terrible

secret of his had been revealed.

"I can guarantee her skill. But...when it comes to clothing, her sense of style is quite peculiar. She absolutely will not budge when it comes to her tastes."

Her tastes...?

"My wares must draw out every ounce of beauty from those they adorn!" Kusemoun shouted angrily, hands waving. "But these hardheads can't keep up with my cutting-edge style! Yes, the work of a real professional should suit the demands of the customer, not their own personal preferences. But I am as much an artist as I am a craftsman! I create for my own sake!"

Flailing her tiny arms and legs as she gave her fervent speech, she suddenly seemed to come back to her senses, closing one eye and sticking out her tongue with a "tee-hee."

"So, since half of my work is for my own satisfaction, I charge very little for my services!"

Ah. That explains why it's so cheap even for a complicated request.

"Out of curiosity, what exactly did you have in mind...?" Since the main issue seemed to be her design preferences, having some examples to gauge would be nice...

"That is something I cannot know until I begin my work! Not even I know what I will produce! My hands do all the work on their own!"

I flashed another glance at Fisero. *Are you sure about this woman?*

"Again, I can guarantee her skill..." Fisero nodded...with a sigh. "When it comes to leatherwork and applying magic to it, she is divinely gifted. I do not believe there's any other individual in this forge more suited for your request than her. To match your needs, outside of her, you'd need to look for a Saintsmith from the Dwarven Federation..."

The title of Saintsmith was reserved for masters among masters; only a handful of dwarves who had utterly perfected their craft achieved the title. While dwarves could create literally once-in-a-lifetime works by trueforging, Saintsmiths could craft equipment on the same level as if they were ordinary items. And apparently when it came to leatherworking, Kusemoun was right up there. It was similar to being a Swordmaster, someone whose skill exceeded the realm of common sense. Now I was getting really curious!

“Okay, I’ll accept those conditions.” Getting such a high-level magical item in exchange for growing back one toe was an easy sell. With Fisero willingly giving his guarantee, I had no reason to worry about her skill. And if I really didn’t like the design, I could always just not use it. Though, I’d feel bad for Kusemoun.

So, after getting the healing quickly out of the way, Kusemoun immediately got to work.

“Oho! You’re so thin! And your legs are so long!” Kusemoun exclaimed, patting Layla all over while ogling her up and down. “Oh, you’re really going to shine! Ahhhhh, I feel like I’m going to boil over!”



Her eyes were glittering as she started to drool. *Is this girl really all there in the head?*

"I can guarantee her skill..." Fisero repeated.

You can't just hand-wave everything by saying that, Fisero!

Kusemoun gave a manic giggle. "Come now, little lady, let's get you measured up! I won't bite, come here!"

"O-Okay..." Glancing back at me with a forlorn look, Layla reluctantly let herself be pulled away.

"Out of curiosity, how old is Kusemoun?" I asked.

"Wait, are you interested in her?!" Fisero was stunned.

Of course not, you idiot! "I'm just wondering if she's actually an adult! I just want to make sure it's okay to leave her alone with Layla."

"A-Ah...yes, well...it is just that we have been given a promise from the king that we would be given as much independence as possible as long as we obeyed."

"Yeah, I'm not trying to take her from you. I'm no Daiagias. Besides, I've got my hands full as it is." Being called a womanizer was one thing, but being treated like some sex manic going on escapades throughout the castle? I couldn't let that fly. I patted Liliana's head, quite indignant.

By the way, I had asked out of pure curiosity. Sure, dwarves were a race with long lifespans, but she looked like a little girl in my eyes. Since they aged slowly and could easily live for around three hundred years, it was hard to tell their age at a glance.

The men grew thick bodies and heavy beards quite quickly, so they could appear rather old, but on closer inspection their skin could be surprisingly smooth. So when it came to dwarven women, who didn't grow facial hair at all, they tended to look very young.

"Kusemoun is...well, I believe she is over a hundred years old, but I could not tell you specifically."

"How old is she anyway? Around a hundred and ten, right?" the other dwarves around us began to mutter.

Okay, so she was at least a hundred years old. And yet compared to a human, she looked like a slightly round little girl. Maybe the dwarven men would look surprisingly baby-faced if you shaved them too. With that thought in mind I turned to look at Fisero, earning a scowl from him as he started shuffling away from me.

After a wait of a few dozen minutes…

Waiting around was boring, so I had started doing some swordspear drills to entertain the dwarves, when a sudden wave of magical energy erupted from the room Layla and Kusemoun had gone into—the surge of energy so great it had caused me to flinch.

"What the?!"

"*Woof?!*"

As Liliana and I made our exclamations of surprise, the dwarves started to groan. The door opened and Kusemoun popped her head out.

"It's finished!"

"What?! Already?!"

That was way too fast! I thought you were just going to measure her!

"Things just clicked, and before I knew it everything was finished!"

"Did you even measure her in her dragon form?"

"It's fitted with resizing magic, so it's not a problem!" Kusemoun pumped a fist with a proud look. "Now, Your Highness! Come behold the result of my craftsmanship! Your girlfriend is waiting!" she beckoned me over, giggling all the while.

It seemed my curiosity as to what she had crafted was equally matched by the other dwarves as they moved to follow.

"Ah, no other men allowed!" Kusemoun vehemently crossed her arms and stopped them.

Um…what?! So whatever she made isn't okay to be seen by other men?! I don't know about this…

"How is it, Layla?" I tentatively peeked into the room…

"Um…it's somehow…more embarrassing than being naked…" Slouched forward with her arms covering her chest, Layla was indeed nearly naked.

In sharp contrast to her pale skin, the gleaming black leather wrapped around her body. It was almost like a leather vest or maybe more like a…corset? I had never seen anything like it before, so it was hard to put into words.

Though hold on—it didn't cover *any* of the things it needed to! It was hardly clothing and more like a collection of belts! The way it wrapped around her chest was like it was specifically trying to

squeeze and accentuate her breasts…what the hell was this?!

What the hell is going on here?!

“Oho ho! How beautifully indecent!” Ante cried out in excitement.

“*Woof…*”

“Oh my…”

Stepping into the room shortly after me, Liliana and Garunya were both equally stunned. Even Liliana was bewildered by this design. And she thought she was a dog!

Kusemoun gave a proud grunt. “I think I did great work on this one!” And then she used her arm to wipe the sweat from her forehead, as if she had just accomplished some great feat. “Be amazed! Isn’t it wonderful?! The way the belts dig into her voluptuous body, squeezing and drawing out her curves! The way it emphasizes her bashfulness for all to see! Ah, I can’t get enough!” Kusemoun all but shouted, eyes halfway to bloodshot and spit flying everywhere.

And I wasn’t allowed to complain. The painfulness of that condition was only now starting to set in.

“Now then, allow me to introduce its functions!”

But…even with my reservations regarding its appearance, it was absolutely bursting with magic. I had to believe it was a great piece from a functional perspective. So in quiet surrender, I listened to her explanation.

“Now then, Layla! Let’s not be hiding things with our hands! Go on and show him your full beauty!”

With a soft whine, almost drowned out by Kusemoun’s ragged breathing, Layla slowly lowered her hands.

“Does it…look…good on me? It’s not too strange, is it…?” Never mind her face, her whole body was beet red with embarrassment. She looked at me with her golden eyes filled with tears…but I was frozen still, like I had been trapped in a spider’s web.

“It…looks…good.” If the choice was only between “good” and “bad,” then good was the obvious choice here. I had to admit it. There was a certain charm, a certain seductiveness, to it that made it all incredibly entrancing.

But this wasn’t the kind of crap girls should be wearing before they were even married! Even the outfits dancers wore in seedy

bars were more modest than this! Not that you could really call this an outfit. It was basically just a collection of leather straps.

"Is it, uh...uncomfortable? If so, you can take it off."

"No...it's not uncomfortable. I-It's not that I don't like it..." Layla squirmed, her breathing hot and heavy.

"What do you think? Wonderful, isn't it? Though it's strapped on tight, she can breathe perfectly fine and there's no pressure on the important blood vessels! Now, let me explain the functions!" Hopping excitedly at Layla's side, Kusemoun instructed her to lift her arms.

"O-Okay..."

"Yes, like that! Cross them behind your head...perfect! Now we can see it in all its glory!"

That's quite the grin you've got there, Kusemoun.

"What a sight. You certainly are a lucky boy."

Y-Yeah...

"I have named this masterpiece Konectus! To fit your request, it's light enough to be worn beneath her clothing at all times, making it exceptionally easy to carry around!"

With so little material used, no wonder it was light!

"As you can see, most of the design is focused around her upper body. I was careful to make sure the areas where her tail and wings will grow wouldn't be hindered upon her transformation!"

As she described the piece, Kusemoun ran a finger down the straps along Layla's body, drawing a stifled moan out of the dragon. The uncomfortable atmosphere made me wish I was anywhere but here.

"When you need to ride, it'll transform into a saddle and will fasten around her neck, chest, and waist so that even the rockiest of shaking won't loosen it. Now, please turn around!"

Layla spun around as instructed, revealing the back was basically entirely open.

"The joint at the back of her neck here will transform into a saddle when she takes on her dragon form! This ribbon will be the stirrups, and the choker will become the reins!"

It was clear she had thought through every single detail of the design. The straps running around her chest and waist were designed to secure everything in place to Layla's back. With so many connections, it looked quite stable.

"I've gone to great lengths to strengthen this leather. It'll take

something mighty powerful to put a dent in it! I've also placed magic on it so any attacks delivered to the harness will be taken by Layla instead!"

What?!

"So if someone tries to cut the leather, it'll cut Layla instead?!" *That's no better than some curse! What's even the point of that?!*

"For your safety," Kusemoun replied, entirely serious. "Of course I got Layla's permission before adding that feature."

"Yes...I asked her to include it," Layla said, glancing back at us. "I didn't want to risk something happening to the harness while we were in flight...and my scales will protect me from most cuts and stabs while in dragon form. So prioritizing your safety seemed much more important." Though she spoke hesitantly, her eyes shone with a determined light.

"Just for the record, if one of the straps is cut, the rest can still take the weight!" Kusemoun explained. "Though really, if something is powerful enough to penetrate the magic on this harness, Layla will probably get seriously injured too! If that happens, I highly recommend you either run away or land immediately! That's just my recommendation as a craftsman!"

"But won't the same thing happen while she's in human form?"

"Yes, very true! But this isn't armor you know! If you want something to protect her in human form, don't hesitate to stop by again!" she declared boldly. "But you know, something sturdy enough to protect her in human form would probably hinder her ability to transform. So I figured it would kind of defeat the purpose."

"Ah...yeah, you have a point." As frustrating as it was to admit.

Besides, rather than learning how to fight as a dragon, Layla's training had been centered around avoiding attacks to buy enough time so she could transform back into a dragon. Maybe asking for it to work as armor in addition to everything else was being silly.

"But wait, there's more! The truth is, Konectus isn't quite finished yet!" Kusemoun declared, waving her arms proudly. "I'm gonna need your help to complete it, Your Highness! Come give me a hand!"

"My help?"

Kusemoun giggled. "Come now, no need to be so guarded! All we need is one drop of your blood!" Her hand snapped up to

point at the choker around Layla's neck. "Just give us a bit of blood right here!"

A piece of equipment completed by giving it my blood...was definitely cursed, right? But it wasn't like I had much of a choice given she had created the thing. Using Adamas to make a small cut on my hand, I drew a little blood.

As I stepped closer, Layla lifted her head to reveal the choker. The belts dug into her skin, revealing her still red neck. The sight made me have stupid thoughts like what I might do if I were a vampire.

"Go on! You just need a little bit!"

As requested, I touched my blood to the choker. The harness immediately began to give off a deep red aura, sending a shudder through Layla.

"It's like I'm being wrapped in your arms...it's incredible..."

Then, within my mind, I heard a voice.

Wait, Layla?

"Huh? Dear...?"

We shared a look, our eyes blinking in shock.

"Ah, looks like it worked! This is the greatest feature of Konectus! Telepathic communication!" Kusemoun explained excitedly. "While the two of you are in physical contact, you can communicate with your thoughts! At high altitudes, the wind will make it incredibly difficult to communicate, I hear!"

Then...wait...we can hear—

"—each other's thoughts?"

And not just our thoughts either, but our feelings as well. Everything she felt was as clear as day to me. Both of our faces flushed red.

"Oho ho ho ho!" Kusemoun gave an odd chuckle as she licked her lips. A bit late, I pulled my hand away from the choker.

Seriously? Of all the things to add to the harness, you added something so absurd...

Considering how high we would be flying and how the wind made it almost impossible to hear, this was stupidly useful, but...seriously?!

Layla's emotions had felt so pleasant. Like I was sticking my feet in a bottomless hot spring, or into a deep ocean. But I could only worry about how she perceived my feelings...

"Now then! That is the masterpiece I have crafted for you today! I am sure I have met all of your expectations, but what do

you think?!” Kusemoun said, sounding more like a declaration than a question.

“Yeah…it’s really incredible.” At least from a functional perspective, I had no complaints.

“By the way, whether you consider it a drawback or not is up for debate, but this piece will only work specifically for you and Layla here! The adaptability when transforming will only work with Layla and the telepathy only properly functions between you two, unfortunately! I am afraid your children won’t be able to inherit it from you…” Kusemoun added with a filthy grin, causing our faces to flush again.

“I’d like to confirm how it looks in her dragon form too.”

“Oh, please do! We are unfortunately unable to leave the forge, so I will not be able to accompany you, but I am sure it will meet your every expectation! If there are any issues at all, please come back at any time!” she all but shouted as we took our leave from the dwarven forge.

We walked to the parade ground. Though she was back in her usual maid uniform, she was still walking with a tight grip on her skirt, head down and face flushed.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes…but…for some reason, it’s hard to relax…”

I completely got where she was coming from. Heck, I was feeling hot under the collar just remembering she was wearing *that* underneath her maid uniform. Not to mention it was winter.

Though it wasn’t crammed, there were still a large number of beastfolk and demons practicing on the parade ground. Layla gave a soft moan as her hand stopped over the ribbon to untie her clothes. As expected, she was a bit hesitant with so many eyes in the vicinity.

“I’ll stand in the way for you…” Having expected something like this, I’d borrowed a large cloak from the dwarves so I could act as her makeshift privacy screen. But just as I started to think we might have to give up on this harness anyway, I heard the soft sound of her clothes falling to the ground.

“I-I’m undressed now, so please stand back.” I could feel Layla starting to grow behind me.

“Oh, wow!” Turning around, I saw a gleaming silver-white dragon fully equipped with a perfectly fit Konectus. The harness stretched from her arms to around her chest and down below

her rib cage, fastened tight to a saddle at the base of the back of her neck.

"Then...um..."

"Please go ahead...dear."

Layla stayed low to the ground, looking up at me. I hopped up into the saddle.

"Ah..." As I took the reins in hand, the voice of Layla's embarrassment, burst of emotion, and unbridled excitement all poured into my mind. *"It's embarrassing, but...I'm still really happy."*

Having me ride on her back. Being able to fly with me. While I couldn't help but feel happy for her excitement, at the same time, I felt bad for her.

"Don't worry. Please don't worry about it," Layla turned to look at me, trying to reassure me. Even in dragon form, her golden eyes were exactly the same.

Shall we go for a spin?

"Yes dear."

With a stomp, Layla's wings unfurled and carried us up into the sky.

That day was the first time I really understood how flight felt to a dragon. It felt great.

†††

"And so, though unofficially, I've been appointed head of the Research Laboratory. And thanks to the harness the dwarves made for me, I can now directly read Layla's thoughts and feelings, so I can be even more sure of her sincerity than before."

"Is that so..." Prati replied to my report, a hand to her forehead as though she was fighting a headache. It seemed she wasn't entirely sure how happy she should be about the news I had given her. "A fortress...though on loan...head of the laboratory...but for **Necromancy**..." Prati groaned softly. "At any rate, the fact you have been able to establish a good relationship with the king is exceptional," she said, digging deep to find something positive. "Even between parent and child, no positive relationship comes guaranteed." A distant look took over her eyes. I had to bet Gorilacia was sneezing right about now.

Also, getting along with the king? It seemed like a stretch to

say that. We were both just kind of on the same track.

"He was the one who killed you, after all."

True enough. Looked like he had a blast while doing it too.

"And then there's this Konectus. I presume there is no way for me to try it for myself?" Prati frowned as her gaze shifted to the choker around Layla's neck. We had conducted an experiment earlier to prove that it worked—Prati told Layla a code while I was out of the room, once I returned and heard it from her telepathically I repeated it—but Prati still seemed a bit uneasy.

"Unfortunately it only seems to work between Layla and myself."

"That really is unfortunate." Prati sighed. "I suppose that will have to suffice," she said with an awkward smile directed toward Layla. Prati probably thought it was more trouble than it was worth to doubt Layla too much at risk of irritating her. "Besides that, I was unaware we had such a skilled craftsman here in the castle. It is exceptionally rare for a dwarf to state someone is on the same level as a Saintsmith, you know."

"Well…in exchange, she has a few personality issues. It's probably more accurate to call her an eccentric artist than a craftsman." That was probably why the head of the forge was hush-hush about her, but I just shrugged at the thought. Kusemoun becoming famous would be an issue in and of itself. But if you could overlook her tastes, she had an incredible talent. If I asked her to make me some leather armor, no doubt I'd get something incredible. Though with the design in her hands, it would feel like I was risking my life.

"Why not try ordering a piece for yourself?"

Ugh. I *could*. When it came to my ultimate goals, I couldn't really be a stickler about how "fashionable" my equipment was.

"Oh? The dwarves had no issue assigning you a craftsman that strange?" Prati's eyes narrowed, as if wondering if the dwarves were taking me lightly.

"From a pure ability perspective, they said she was the only one capable of granting my request. And she proved she definitely has the skills."

"Hmm. Out of curiosity, what exactly is the issue with her design sense?"

"Ah…well…" I frowned a bit myself, turning to look at Layla. With a small nod, Layla pulled the ribbon on her uniform, face flushing as she unbuttoned her top.

Prati was awestruck. “Very…original. You call that…clothing?”

“More like a harness.”

“I see…” She once again began trying to massage away a headache.

Thanks to the harness, I was able to avoid the fate of having to get lovey-dovey with Prati around like Gorilacia had suggested. That was enough to make me thankful for crossing paths with Kusemoun.

“How unfortunate. I was very much looking forward to you two finally becoming one…”

Don’t call it that.

“To think we haven’t even been home for two days yet. You have made some rather startling progress,” Prati said, propping her head up with one arm on the sofa as she regarded me with what seemed equal parts exasperation and pride. “Every day is so interesting thanks to you, Zilbagias.”

I…

“I’m…glad to hear it, mother.” I gave her an awkward smile. All of a sudden, it was like I was drowning in a bottomless ocean, struggling to breathe.

“I suppose it is about time for another one of your lunch get-togethers.”

Oh, right. With all the traveling, it had completely slipped my mind that it was Moon Day. The day when all the princes and princesses gathered to have lunch with the king and play the part of a big, happy family.

“I am most proud of you, Zilbagias. Go build a strong relationship with the other heirs.” Despite her words, the smile on her face was much closer to “ferocious” than “affectionate.”

That was fine by me. In fact, I preferred it when she looked like that.

“Understood. When it comes to my faction alignment, I’ll keep them guessing.” This time my smile was much more natural, matching Prati’s own. “I’ll make sure to leave them nice and confused.”

Acting this way was much easier for me.

Chapter 2: Family Bonding

The next day, just like most days, I woke up around sunset. As the sun dipped down to the horizon, I warmed up with a little training. In preparation for the lunch I'd be having later, I had a light waking meal. Heading to that meeting with anything less than an empty stomach would be an insult to the chef.

"How do you plan to spend your time before lunch, Lord Zilba?" Sophia asked me.

"Maybe I'll do an inventory check of what I'll need for the fortress. I don't want to get too sweaty right before the meal, so I should take it easy."

"Understood."

So I had Sophia make a record of everything I would be able to take with me. She did so by using her magic to inscribe knowledge from her mind directly onto paper. Having Sophia around was quite convenient; no wonder Prati had given her such an important position.

I kicked back and relaxed on the sofa in the company of Liliana, Layla, Garunya, and some others (including even Veene and the maids) while I looked over the list. *Hmm. Emergency rations, construction tools, stuff for maintaining weapons and armor, materials, medical supplies, even a few luxury items. Having all this stuff on the battlefield would be more than enough.*

"You should be able to take anything written on that list without issue. Of course we'll need to do a bit of negotiating if you want *all* of it. Don't hesitate to notify me if there's anything else you may need," Sophia added.

So I can just take this stuff? Royalty really has its perks. Man, talk about living large. During my days as a hero, there were a number of times where we had no access to necessary supplies because of covert operations and sabotage aimed at our supply routes. I'll never forgive these damn demons...!

"Sophia, how exactly will I transport everything there? Just have Layla carry it?"

"That would be the easiest solution, I imagine. If this was just about traversing land, the beastfolk or night elves could have aided you, but..." Yeah, I'd kind of chosen a place in the middle of

nowhere. Even if I hadn't, that wouldn't have worked either. "I can't exactly recommend that as it will draw a lot of attention to the fortress."

"True enough. Can you lend me a hand then, Layla?"

"I'll do my best!" Layla puffed up in her maid uniform. Honestly, at this point, her being dressed in her maid getup was pretty pointless.

"Though, I must say, I have become quite fond of how that outfit looks on her."

No one asked you. Still, color me surprised. I figured you'd be more into an outlandish look.

"Just thinking about what lies beneath that otherwise reserved and modest uniform...!"

Oh, so *that's* her game.

Anyway, she had only needed to act like a servant when we first took her in. With her talents as a dragon fully maturing, she was allowed greater freedom...but according to her, "that outfit helps put everyone else at ease." If that made her happy, who was I to complain? So with those thoughts in mind, I drew up my personal list.

"If Layla will be carrying them, I can get some extra large dragon-sized bags for you," Sophia suggested.

"That would be great." Honestly, support work like this was right up Sophia's alley. I had originally planned to work on the list up until lunch, but we had finished in no time flat.

"Your tea is ready," Garunya said, putting a steaming cup on the table in front of me.

"Thanks."

With the sun well below the horizon, the castle was approaching full wakefulness. The darkness of night was finally starting to set in outside, the cloud cover just enough to make the stars not visible. I could hear the wind howling outside the crystal glass windows.

"Looks like it'll be a cold day today."

"Winter is truly upon us, isn't it?" Garunya replied to my muttering. She had started to grow into her winter coat while we were in the Rage territory, giving her a much poofier appearance. Though she looked quite warm to me, it seemed she wasn't a fan of the cold even with the extra layer of fur.

That said, this was a room for a prince. It was built quite strong and secure, without so much as a draft. The walls were

thoroughly insulated, making it cool in the summer and warm in the winter. In my eyes, it was very lavish.

"*Woof.*"

As I sat on the sofa enjoying my tea, I felt something warm land on my lap—Liliana had plopped her head down on my legs, looking up at me with her bright blue eyes.

"Good girl."

Putting my teacup aside, I ruffled her hair a bit, earning a satisfied whine from her. With so much going on as of late, the extent of our interactions had been me dragging her around. We hadn't had much time to just enjoy each other's company like this. And judging by her behavior now, that had left her feeling a bit lonely. Though that was only natural. Given her current state, I basically meant the world to her...

As I thought that, I felt another gaze on me—Garunya's. Her disheartened look was akin to that of a cat who had their favorite napping spot stolen right from under them. I guess when it came to having less time together, Garunya had suffered more than anyone. Liliana was able to freely frolic around beside me as she wished, and I had plenty of time with Layla between flying and other things. With their considerable contributions to my daily life, Garunya probably felt like she was getting pushed out.

"Even the amount of time spent with one's master is determined by one's own strength. Such is the way of the demonic kingdom."

I mean...relationships built on power are a thing in all cultures, right? The demonic kingdom's extra focus on combat ability is the only real difference.

"Come on over, Garunya." I couldn't help but call her over with how down she looked.

"Ah, yes, Master!" The maid's face immediately brightened as she quickly hopped over to sit on the opposite side of me as Liliana.

"*Woof.*" With a bit of a sigh Liliana shuffled her head over, making some room on my lap for Garunya. Garunya quickly took it, so I began ruffling her fur as well. She immediately began purring. Man, she really was just a giant cat, wasn't she? Well, tiger, I suppose.

The texture of her fur was really something else. My fingers practically rejoiced at the glossy yet fluffy sensation. When it came to petting her, I couldn't get enough. This made me

somewhat recall petting a cat back in my previous life…but the memories seemed to be escaping me now.

Between Liliana's woofing and Garunya's purring I watched the light outside gradually fade, then I felt a soft touch on my shoulders. Without needing to turn around I knew those hands were Layla's.

She gave a quiet chuckle. "Aren't your shoulders a bit stiff, dear?" Her breath tickled my ear as she gently massaged my shoulders.

Ever since we had first connected using Konectus, even if it was kinda unintentional, she had felt…I don't know, more assertive? Our minds being directly connected felt pleasant. But not everything was sunshine and rainbows. The longer our connection lasted, the greater the chance we would stumble on the other's darker, gloomier feelings. Just as she saw my pathetic, ugly side, I also saw something new in her: that despite her prim and proper outward appearance, she still possessed ferocious, jealous avarice just like any other dragon.

"You were training very early today, so please relax until meal time."

"S-Sure…thank you…"

Garunya on my right, Liliana on my left, and Layla massaging me from behind. The best way to put it…I felt peaceful. Peaceful, but for some reason it still felt like a dragon's jaws were clamped around my neck. I sure was glad I couldn't see Layla's face right about now.

"Ah, popularity brings its own form of suffering," Ante teased.

I'm not sure popular was the right word. Maybe it was more like we were accomplices, or, you know, sinking in the same boat. Though I guess Garunya wasn't included in this equation.

On that note, Veene stood across from us with a despondent look on her face, all but saying "here we go again." Veene's eyes were quite expressive, huh? On the other hand, the previously lively Sophia had turned totally expressionless.

Starting to feel a bit thirsty, I took a break from the petting to take a sip of tea.

"Have you ever considered writing a book on how to seduce women of other races?" Sophia suddenly piped up, causing me to choke on my drink.

After clearing my throat (and nose): "What the hell are you talking about?!"

“Oh, I’m being serious. I’m sure it would become a hit.”

“No one would be caught dead reading that!”

“Perhaps, but surely its contents would spread far and wide. Thanks to me.”

Please don’t. I don’t want that to be my legacy!

“On a serious note, I’d really like you to write something, Lord Zilba.” After what seemed to be her attempt at making conversation, she gave a sad sigh.

“What’s this all of the sudden?”

“Well, at the rate I’m going, I’ll run out of books to read.”

According to her, if she maintained her current pace, it’d only take her a few years to finish all the books in the castle. And that included all of the reference materials kept in Enma’s study. “Conquering more territories will mean more books to take, but most will probably end up being duplicates of what we already have. Someone has to start writing so we can get more new books!”

And, of course, the demonic kingdom wasn’t exactly a hotbed for aspiring authors. A number of demons had taken up the pen in an attempt to make something of themselves. However, they had been forced to abandon the trade after their attempts were quickly discovered before they could refine their skills.

At present, the vast majority of written works were produced by the forest elves and humans. On top of that, the demonic kingdom had no qualms with cutting down writers and poets. This was inevitably leading to a decline in cultural output. It wasn’t that far-fetched to claim literature would eventually die out entirely at this rate. It had been an ever-present fear, but now that fear was startlingly close to becoming reality.

“I would love to cultivate some writing talent among the demons, but the only promising prospect among them that I know is you. At least since my lady doesn’t seem interested,” she added with a pout.

“I suppose I could keep memos of my research into **Necromancy**, but would a book on that really satisfy you?”

“It would be a *thousand* times better than nothing. But since I already plan on reading everything in Enma’s library, some new research would be preferred…and as far as fields I have little experience in, I really think seducing women of other races…”

There’s no “seducing” happening here at all! And don’t bring this up when they are right here!

“Unfortunately I don’t think I can meet that expectation. It’s not like I have some sort of methodology here.”

First and foremost, it wasn’t something I could leave in writing.

Liliana: I had convinced her to trust me by revealing my true identity, then used the power of **Taboo** to seal her memories and make her think she was a dog. All of her built-up trauma had made it so even after her memories returned, she chose to remain a dog. As a result, she took a liking to me.

Garunya: Though she was extremely loyal from the start, my experience petting animals in my past life provided me with the skills necessary to melt her heart. As a result, she took a liking to me.

Layla: Though I had both killed her father and saved her life, making our relationship extremely complicated, I used **Necromancy** to summon her father’s soul from beyond the grave which helped us work things out. When I revealed my true identity to her, she decided to ally with me.

But I couldn’t exactly jot all that down in a book. Though maybe it was something to think about once everything was over. And besides, it wasn’t like anyone would believe even half of it.

“If you’re really interested in that subject, might as well ask Daiagias. He’s the expert.”

“Oh, I suppose I could, couldn’t I?”

Sophia, I was joking. Please don’t actually ask him about that! If you end up getting eaten, that’s all your fault!

“Mortals are so strange though,” she continued. “Even though my duties involve teaching you, you still manage to pick up things outside my curriculum.”

“Uh…yes…?” Veene replied with equal amounts of confusion and agreement as Sophia suddenly turned to her for confirmation. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t holding my breath.

“Are there any night elf writers?” Sophia asked.

“Not many. I’ve heard of a few with a keen interest in poison who record their findings to share with others, but…”

“Wait, really?! Could you introduce us?!”

“Um, well, they actually do all of that in secret, so…”

Sophia groaned. “Please! Find a way!” She all but clung to Veene, desperately pleading with the very much overwhelmed

night elf. Honestly her desperation was rather amusing to watch. Though in human terms, it felt like laughing at someone throwing a fit over an impending famine…

“Why does she not just capture some humans and demand they write for her?”

Right? If I come across any humans on the battlefield, I could maybe save them using Sophia as an excuse.

As that thought slipped into my head, I suddenly felt like I could hear the footsteps of my impending deployment looming closer.

I looked out the window. The wind outside sounded cold and harsh. Winter hibernation was approaching. Even the demonic kingdom’s armies were at the mercy of winter…but once spring came, so would my deployment to the battlefield.

Meanwhile, I had apparently unconsciously gone back to petting, as evidenced by Garunya’s soft purring and Liliana’s spacing out in a dreamlike trance.

“Are you okay?” Layla resumed rubbing my shoulders softly, noticing my change in attitude. It seemed the nerves had tensed up my shoulders again. With a bit of effort I forced myself to relax, leaning back into the sofa.

“Yeah…” If only life was always this gentle and peaceful. For a moment I found that thought quite seductive. But no matter how peaceful life was for me here, outside this room innocent people were still dying. As long as the demonic armies marched, people would keep dying. There was nothing to be gained from steeping in this lukewarm atmosphere while that was still a reality.

But soldiers were allowed to rest in preparation for future battles.

“How ironic,” Ante said, her voice pitying. *“That very battle you are preparing for will take the lives of the humans you wish so desperately to protect.”*

How long did I have to wait? When would I finally be able to wield my sword for humanity? No, I couldn’t think like that. There was no concrete answer to be found at present, so I didn’t have the luxury to stew on the question. Focusing on the immediate issues was much more important.

“Lunch, huh?”

The Demon King and his heirs, who I was supposed to be fighting. Aside from the king, it would be my first time seeing

any of them in a month. Since he had been on the front lines until just before I left for the Rage territory, it had been even longer since I'd seen the green bastard. Just the thought of the stories he'd bring back of his battles was enough to make me feel depressed.

Hopefully it didn't ruin the meal too much.

†††

As lunchtime finally came around, I made my way to the king's palace. Though it was an open-air palace, a large-scale barrier had been erected to protect it from the wind and rain, making the environment still rather comfortable.

I remembered. Back during our attack on the castle we had intended to drop down right on the palace itself, but that barrier had forced us to land significantly lower down. As a result we had been torn apart, with my squad being the only one to reach the palace itself. I couldn't help but wonder if we had been able to reunite with Liliana's squad and confront the king together, would we have been able to give him a scratch or two?

As usual, I was guided through to the dining room. The third prince Daiagias the Lustful, the fourth prince Emergias the Green Bastard, and the fifth princess Spinezia the Gutsy Gorger were already seated ahead of me. It wasn't a surprise to see Spinezia getting an early start stuffing her face, but Daiagias being here was quite unusual since he usually waited until the last possible second to show up.

"Hey, little brother. Guess who got promoted to marquis?" the green trash bin immediately greeted me with a smug smile. *Sounds like he went on a rampage in Deftelos, the bastard.*

"Really? Congrats," I replied, earning a dissatisfied look from him. Maybe I had been a bit too curt, but I couldn't imagine being over the moon and blurting out "Wow, amazing! A marquis at your age? Now I really respect you!" would have made him any happier. It was a hard balance to strike.

One after another, the other princes and princesses made their appearances, and we started the meal right on schedule. I exchanged a diplomatic greeting with the first prince and the second princess as well.

"It has been a while, Aiogias, Rubifya."

"Indeed it has. I can tell your time away was a fruitful

experience for you.”

“That takes me back,” Rubifya added. “The days when getting stronger meant putting in some extra effort sure were a lot of fun. How nostalgic.” Both of them smiled faintly at the sight of my growth. Though instead of the fondness and support of my progress as my older siblings, it felt more like they were predators sizing up their prey. But whatever. They could do what they liked. Sooner or later they’d figure out which of us was the prey here.

By the way, the sixth princess Topazia the Sleeping Beauty came in on Rubifya’s back as usual, and spent the whole meal basically asleep. It was really impressive that she could eat like that…

Unfortunately the finer details of the meal evaded me. It was hard to enjoy the meal with Emergias rambling about the tales of his exploits on the front lines. Honestly I would have preferred to dive into the food without paying him any mind, but his words kept dragging my attention back.

Apparently he had taken down a number of heroes and Swordmasters. Damn him. He even made a comment like “don’t worry, I left some for you too, Zilbagias.” Screw this guy.

But wait, didn’t this count as talking about politics?

Can we kick this guy out already?

But, to my surprise, Aiogias and Rubifya seemed to get a kick out of Emergias’s stories. They even laughed out loud when he described getting ambushed by an elite squad, impaling their remains on a spear, and sending said remains back to the squad’s camp.

Ha ha ha. Bastards. Just wait, you’ll have your just deserts in due time.

On the other hand, Daiagias seemed like he couldn’t care less, while the Gutsy Gorger was plowing through the meal in her usual fashion; I could probably learn a thing or two from her. All the while Topazia was asleep with her spoon sticking out of her mouth. I could just barely forgive these three. Though only relatively speaking.

And then there was the king. Despite his huge build, he ate surprisingly little. Or maybe I should say, surprisingly slowly.

“Mm-hmm. So good.”

He was even taking the time to slowly slice up the bone-in roast lamb we had been served as the main course so he could

enjoy each tiny bite one at a time. Out of all of us, he was the slowest eater. One thing was for sure: He loved to savor his food. Looked like he had something to learn from Spinezia too.

Dessert followed, a pudding so smooth it felt out of this world covered in gently sweet whipped cream. And then the meal was over, enjoyed in a peaceful and ordinary fashion—for everyone except me.

"Any other business?" Everyone was silent at the king's last question. "Very well then. Dismissed."

Usually, Daiagias would then dash out of the room muttering about his women...but instead, we all had the opportunity to stare at him in shock. Instead of his typical routine, he stayed right where he was, leisurely enjoying his tea.

"What?" Noticing our attention, Daiagias returned our looks with a frown.

"Uh...aren't your girls waiting for you?" Aiogias asked for all of us.

"Not really. Sometimes it's like that."

"I-I see..."

"Are you sure today isn't the first time...?" Rubifya and the king shared a look.

"W-Well, no matter. Please excuse me." Aiogias stood. Rubifya also seemed curious, but nevertheless lifted her usual sleeping burden and took her leave.

"Do you need something?" the king asked him, expecting some sort of secret business.

"No," Daiagias shook his head...and then turned to me. "I have a personal matter of sorts to discuss with Zilbagias."

Wait, me?!

"Let's talk, Zilbagias."

Why?! I'm a guy! You know that, right?!

It was like the royal family had been struck by an earthquake.

"What could you possibly need from him, Daiagias?" the king said, awestruck.

"Don't tell me...have you moved on to boys now?!" Even the green toilet stain was borderline hysteric.

"No way..." Even the Gutsy Gorger stopped eating.

"Let's get some privacy elsewhere." Without waiting for my response, Daiagias stood up and left the room. I tried shooting a curious glance at the king, but all I received was a confused shrug. And there went my plans to discuss the laboratory's

security with the king after the meal…but oh well, I guess I'd have to go see what Daiagias wanted.

"Won't shock me if that kid ends up becoming my little sister by next week," the seaweed-headed bastard muttered just before the door closed.

Shut up asshole. Don't make me kill you.

†††

Together with Daiagias, I left the king's palace. After the long staircase, we passed through the Dazzling Hall, a gathering place for the higher-ups of demonic society, where the pair of us attracted no small amount of attention.

"That's…the third prince and the seventh prince?!"

"What on earth…have the Rage family finally thrown their lot in with Rubifya?"

"If that was the case, she'd be with them. But she already left…"

We were *really* standing out in a bad way.

"This way, Zilbagias. Let's find somewhere…quieter," he said, giving me no more than a small glance.

What's this guy up to?! Is my chastity at risk here?! Thank goodness Sophia is here at least. If things go south, I could always sacrifice her to escape. That sounds like a solid plan.

"How heartless," Ante commented.

Hey, Sophia is the one so eager to learn something new. If anything, I would be doing her a favor.

However, Daiagias also had an attractive female devil accompanying him. As expected, even his attendants had to be drop-dead gorgeous. She was easily on a completely different level from Sophia. That might be a problem. Sophia's sacrifice might not be enough to ensure my safety…

With those thoughts in mind, I was led to a quiet part of the castle, an out-of-the-way balcony overlooking the castle town. We sat down on a bench facing each other.

"Of course, there's only one matter I want to discuss with you," he began, leaning forward. The platinum blond-haired demon stared into my eyes, his expression dead serious. "What's it like to sleep with a high elf or a dragon?"

I'm sorry?

"What's it like to sleep with a high elf or a dragon?" he

repeated the question again, word for word. So I hadn't misheard him.

"Uh...what's this all of the sudden?"

"I was curious since I've never slept with either. Forest elves are one thing, but it's hard to get your hands on high elves." He stared directly at me. His calm expression was betrayed by the look in his eyes—the eyes of a predator.

"You can't have them," I said tersely.

"Of course not." Daiagias nodded immediately, taking my surprisingly harsh reply in stride. "I too would never allow another man to put his hands on my women. That would be a declaration of war." With a small sigh, he leaned back on his bench. "Speaking of which, you have yet to declare your allegiance, so I can't make an enemy out of you. Rubi would get mad at me."

So that's why he'll leave them alone. That means if we were enemies, trying to steal them from me would be on the table... Hold up, that comment about Rubifya was interesting. This guy really takes her commands seriously, huh?

"So you really obey Rubi, do you?"

"Well, she's the boss, so I have to. Not that I have any complaints about her either."

"May I ask what made you side with her over Aiogias? Was it just because of her good looks?"

"Exactly." My joke had been met with a dead serious response. "Well, of course that wasn't the *only* reason. Some business between our families and all that. Her looks were the biggest reason though."

This guy really is honest to a fault, huh?

"W-Well, I do have to agree, she is quite pretty," I replied.

"Yes. I'd love to take her myself one day."

Uh...that sounded a bit improper, right?

"You mean in combat...right?"

Yeah, he probably meant something along the lines of "taking her down."

"Nope, I mean sleeping with her."

Oh. Right.

"Um, you do realize she is your sister, right?"

"Of course, though only a half sister." He nodded without hesitation.

Wait...am I missing something here? I turned to give Sophia a

look, but her expression seemed to indicate something was off after all.

"Apparently, my grandparents were brother and sister," Daiagias said, sweeping up his hair with a hand. "It's not so uncommon in our family."

"I-I see..."

"And Rubi is really the perfect sister. Dignified, beautiful...strong-willed." A passion took to his light-brown eyes. "Even if I have to do so by force, I want her for myself. That's why I joined her faction."

"Okay..." This went well beyond the bounds of some secret slipping. "Is that the kind of thing you should be telling me?" What was he going to do if I told Rubifya that he was gunning for her?

"I don't see the problem. It's not like she doesn't know."

Is he for real? This has to be some joke. Rubifya let him join her faction knowing that? What's wrong with her*?*

"I've proposed to her a number of times, but so far she's always turned me down."

Gee, I wonder why.

"She said the only way she'd consider it is if I became stronger than her. So I'm trying my best at that."

I was starting to get a headache. *What the heck...? Is this kind of thing normal for demons?* I turned to look at Sophia again, but she seemed just as flabbergasted as I was. At the very least this wouldn't come off as some misconception I had because I wasn't really a demon. *Man...and people have been going around calling me the second coming of Daiagias? This guy is on a whole other level.*

"All right then. Well if you'll excuse me..." I stood up, attempting to leave.

"Hold on. You still haven't answered my question." Daiagias's hand shot forward like a lightning bolt, grabbing my hand and pulling me back into my seat. "So, to get back on topic...what's it like to sleep with a high elf or a dragon?"

Damn, he doesn't quit... Okay, guess I gotta come up with something and fast.

"Good, I guess."

"I figured that would be the case." Daiagias nodded, something akin to envy in his eyes. "What form does the dragon take when you do it?" *He does realize he's talking to a five-year-old,*

right? Oh well, I suppose I earned this.

"Human form, of course."

"I see…" He nodded thoughtfully. "A dragon would be far too large. So how does a dragon feel in human form?"

Quit talking about her like she's a piece of clothing!

"I suppose the same as a human does? Though I don't have experience sleeping with a human, so I can't say for sure."

"Ah, that makes sense. There aren't that many opportunities to sleep with humans around here…" Daiagias's eyes turned distant. "Once you get out on the battlefield, maybe you'll get the chance."

I was speechless.

"Personally, I wouldn't recommend it though. Love is really an important part of the equation."

My headache was starting to get worse. What was this guy trying to do to me?

"But…how should I put it?" Daiagias returned his gaze to me with a small frown. "I certainly feel plenty of love from you…but I don't feel any *lust*." His light-brown eyes saw right through me. "Have you really slept with them?" His tone clearly indicated he had reached his conclusion, the inquiry basically rhetorical. "You're still a virgin, aren't you?"

The "young" noble delivered a straight punch right through my facade.

"A vir—" I couldn't hide my shock.

This was bad. All my work building up this fake persona was about to be torn down simply because he didn't "feel" any lust from me?! If people didn't think of me as the lustful type, a lot of my actions would start being called into question! If we weren't doing *that*, what exactly were we holing up in my room for? And Sophia was right here too! If word of this was to reach Prati…I couldn't even begin to imagine the headache that would bring.

What do I do? What do I do?!

My only option was…

"What do you mean?"

Secret art: pretending to be an idiot!

"What? Uh…did you not get what I meant by 'sleeping' with them?" Daiagias frowned again, totally shocked. "Maybe not. I'm talking about intercourse between a man and a woman. The man sticks the spear between his legs into the woman's—"

"No, I get it! I know that much!" *Please spare me "the talk"!* "You

mean copulation, right?!"

"Yes, copulation. Have you ever done it before?"

It was the first time I'd ever been asked that question, even including my past life. But, as humiliating as it was...!

"Yes."

That was the only reply I could give!

"Hmm. That's definitely a lie. There isn't an ounce of lust coming from him, right?" Daiagias said, turning to the devil at his side.

"Yes, you're right," the devil replied. *Wait, is she...?*

"Ah, this is Libidine, the Devil of Lust. She is the devil I have a true pact with."

"A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. My name is Libidine," she said, giving a cutesy wave and a flirtatious smile. Despite her modest maid uniform and proper appearance, this woman was a Devil of Lust...

"Devils are generally like that."

And yet look at our Devil God of Taboo here...

"Long time no see, Sophia." While I was thunderstruck, my companion replied to the greeting with no hint of surprise. *Sophia knows her? Why didn't she give me a heads-up*?!

"To be clear, I had no idea who she was!"

Of course you didn't. I never expected you would.

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

That you've never been useful!

"I doubt there's any need to get into the details of her authority," Daiagias said, sweeping his hair aside with a hand as he looked down at me. "We can tell. It's like...a smell that hangs around you."

"You have a very deep, bright and warm love, accentuated by a faint side of guilt. The flavor is quite pleasant. But for someone who supposedly has a high elf plaything, or someone who regularly forces themselves on a dragon girl, I would have expected something much more...oily. People like that tend to have a much more viscous, sticky flavor." Hands on her cheeks, the devil recited her appraisal like a food critic appraising a dish.

"So don't try to lie to us. It's like a novice trying to fake it in front of a master."

"Oh Daia, it's not *like* it. That's exactly what it is."

"Ah, true enough." The sex-mad prince and the incarnation of lust shared a hearty chuckle.



Damn. He was right. There was no way to fake it through this. That didn't mean I could admit to the lie though.

Lying wasn't something accepted among demons. A little bit of deception or misdirection was one thing, but a full-on lie was crossing the line. The great freedom Prati gave me was because I was open to freely sharing my honest actions and intentions (or at least, so she thought). Getting caught lying now would mean facing not just Prati's disappointment, but also the chance that she would restrict my freedom in the future.

After everything I went through to win some more freedom for myself, no way am I getting dragged back to the starting line like this! I'll need to trick them somehow. Somehow…dammit, every scenario in my head ends with me losing!

"What a strange issue for a five-year-old to face…"

Ante commented offhandedly, as if this weren't a critical—

Wait, that's it!

I was five years old! I was just a kid! Lies might be unacceptable, but a desperate attempt to save face on the other hand…

"Fine. I admit it." I dropped my shoulders as if in despair. "Actually…the truth is…"

"So, you are a virgin?" Daiagias gave an amused smile.

"That isn't what I meant." Making a face like I was deeply ashamed, I gave my ultimate excuse. "I…still haven't had my first orgasm."

Daiagias froze. "Ah." He wore a bitter expression, mixed with a sense of understanding and sympathy—plus what seemed to be something slightly apologetic.

"Oh my…" Meanwhile, Libidine was licking her lips, hands on her cheeks. I felt a shudder run down my spine. I was like I had been tied up and thrown in front of a pack of hungry wolves.

"So that's what it is…you still aren't producing anything…that makes sense." Honestly, the way he worded it was nothing short of being utterly embarrassing.

But technically I wasn't lying. I had in fact slept with Liliana and Layla. As in literally falling asleep beside them. That was my alibi. And there was probably some truth that my body hadn't matured to that point yet. We could argue semantics, but it still counted as trying to save face!

"Sorry, Zilbagias. It must be really hard to have such desires but be unable to fulfill them."

“Then, Your Highness,” Libidine chuckled, “why don’t I give you a helping hand?” As Daiagias looked at me apologetically, she slid up beside me, hands aflutter. “Don’t worry, it won’t be scary at all. I’ll have you gushing like a fountain in no time…!”

Wow. Her eyes were bloodshot and her breathing ragged. And now that I got a closer look, she had pupils like a goat’s—long and thin. It was unbelievably creepy. Who was it that said this woman was prim and proper again?!

“No.” But Daiagias immediately grabbed her tail (which I now noticed she had) and pulled her backward, earning a stifled “oof” from the devil. “When we made our contract, you promised that you’d only love me!”

Whoa. I’ve never seen Daiagias get so intense.

“Oh come on! You can’t expect me to pass up on such delicious prey!”

Hey! I’m right here you know!

“This one is mine!” Ante shouted.

Wait, you’re really throwing your hat into the ring?

“That’s not fair! You get to sleep with whoever you want!”

“You know I’ve been doing everything I can to satisfy you in exchange.” He returned her pout with a fierce look. “Are you saying I haven’t done a good enough job?”

Libidine giggled. “Oh, who knows?” She smiled, her tail curling back and forth.

It was like sparks were flying between these two. The atmosphere felt like a duel was about to break out! What exactly was going on here?

“Zilbagias,” Daiagias suddenly turned to me, determination strong in his eyes. “It seems I have business I must attend to.”

“O-Okay…”

“But since I invited you all the way out here, I can’t just send you away on a whim. So allow me to help you with your issue.”

Please don’t.

“I’ll give you this.” Ignoring my silent plea, Daiagias reached out his hand, where a huge amount of magical energy began to swirl and gather. It honestly looked like a magic trick, the way a pink rose just appeared in his hand.

“What is this?”

“Condensed **Lust** magic.”

Thanks for making it clear this is something exceptionally dangerous!

“It possesses Libidine’s incredibly strong charm magic. Doesn’t matter if they’re man or woman, one whiff of this and they’ll be absolutely dying for sex.”

What the hell kind of thing is that?! And wait, are you really just outright telling me what your devil’s power is?!

In demonic society, people generally kept the nature of their devil’s abilities a secret. *Sure, most could probably guess what a Devil of Lust’s magic does, but still…!*

“If you use this, you’ll definitely make some progress,” he said, trying to pass me the flower like it was no more than candy.

I was super conflicted. The third prince not only had revealed his magic to me, but was also literally handing me a cursed object I could study to get insight on his abilities. But if I accepted this, considering my position here, I’d have to use it to “solve” my problem at the expense of Liliana or Layla. That was impossible.

“But what a good opportunity. Come, let us break some taboos! Accept the magic of ***Lust*** *and give in to your animalistic passions…just think of all the power you would gain…”* Ante whispered.

You’re not wrong…I guess.

“Your hesitation is understandable. That is precisely what makes it a violation of taboo. The more you hesitate, the riper that rotten fruit grows.”

Oh. So if I hesitate more, it’ll keep maturing?

“Hmm? Ah. Well, I suppose.”

In that case, I could put off the thought for now. For the time being, studying **Necromancy** should provide me some power from violating taboos. If these feelings could create even more power later, I’d rather hold off on them until the situation became absolutely unavoidable. Honestly I wasn’t feeling all that power hungry at the moment. *Wow. Talk about luxury.*

“I appreciate the thought,” I finally replied. How was I going to turn him down? Thinking over it for a bit… “But…I am sure if I try a little harder, I will get there on my own!” I clenched a fist, turning a determined look of my own on Daiagias. “I haven’t been very successful yet, but…I feel like something is coming! Like if I keep going…I’m going to make it! So I want to try and do it myself, without relying on your magic!” What the hell was I saying…?

“Is that so?” But Daiagias nodded gravely, pulling back his

hand. “Well, I was the one who approached you about the topic. I’ll respect your wishes, then. I can fully understand your desire as a man to overcome this hurdle by your own strength, little brother. No…” Daiagias smiled. “Comrade.”

And now he’s accepted me as a friend…

“I look forward to the day you are fully grown. Feel free to consult with me if any issues come up. I’ll take your help whenever you need it.”

Wait…did I hear him wrong? Didn’t he mean he’d help me*?*

“We both gain power even by helping others,” Libidine giggled. “Of course, we’ll also be helping you too.”

They keep spilling their secrets! What exactly is their game here?!

“The most likely explanation is to ensure you are conscious about the workings of their magic. If they draw power from roping people in to be their allies, the magical connection between you will strengthen if you are fully cognizant of the goings-on.”

Are you saying they may have a legitimate reason for telling me?!

While I was still sitting in my confusion, Daiagias stood up and put the rose of lust to his nose. And then he breathed in deep.

Wait…he’s using it on himself?

As a wave of magic exploded from him, I saw his eyes open wide. “Come, Libidine.” It wasn’t a request.

“Yes sir,” Libidine answered, and it was almost like her eyes lit up as she leaned up against him. Like some lead in a play, Daiagias held the flower in his mouth as he swept Libidine off her feet and carried her in his arms. Meanwhile, the devil wrapped her arms around his neck and her tail around his leg.

“See you.” With the flower in his mouth, after saying his final line, as fast as lightning, Daiagias vanished. He was so fast I couldn’t keep up, his footfalls in the dimly lit corridors of the castle marked with traces of purple lightning.

W-Wow… So that’s what happens when you enhance your body with lightning magic…

It was starting to make sense how he made it through so many battles without injury. Using charm magic in combination with being able to unleash magical and physical attacks with a spear at such an insane speed would be impossible for anyone to contend with. Despite seeing it firsthand, it was frustrating that I couldn’t think of a single way to deal with him. *What if I stopped my breathing so I couldn’t smell anything? Then it would be a contest of brute strength. But the smell seems to also power him*

up…

With that storm no longer present, silence blanketed the balcony as all who remained were Sophia and I. After that whole ordeal, I had no idea what would be a good conversation starter. Steeling myself, I turned to face her, getting a judgmental look in return.

“I hope you get there soon! I’ll be cheering for you!” she said, balling her hands into fists.

If that’s the road you want to take…!

“I think it’s about time I try my hand at some alcohol,” I said while turning away, earning a satisfying gulp from the devil.

You remember what happened last time, don’t you?!

The silence this time was a bit different than before.

“Or maybe we should just put both of those conversations behind us,” I suggested. “What do you say?”

“Sounds like a plan…” Sophia nodded, a distant look in her eyes.

“Let’s go home.”

“Okay.”

And so we stood up. All the lust talk had left me exhausted.

†††

In the middle of the day, Liliana opened her eyes and roused from her sleep as she was greeted by bright sunlight streaming through the gaps in the curtains. She rolled over in bed. It seemed to be her routine to wake up around this time of day.

Looking to her side, “he” was still asleep. For a while, she just stared at his sleeping face.

He seems to be in pain again.

Careful not to wake him, she sidled up closer and licked at his cheek. She knew that her licks helped people feel better.

With a soft groan at the ticklish sensation, the young demon’s face seemed to soften slightly.

“*Woof.*” With a satisfied nod, Liliana sprawled out over the bed again. Since it was way too early in the day, as always, she went back to sleep.

Once evening came, she woke up and got out of bed at the same time “he” did.

“Good morning, Liliana.”

“*Bark!*”

Liliana’s special privilege was to get petted first thing in the morning. Though “he” smiled, he always seemed to look at her somewhat apologetically. All she could do was wonder why that was the case. But she never gave it much thought. After all, she was just a dog.

“He” rubbed her cheeks, the top of her head, down her shoulders, and all the way down her back. She wagged her tail—really just her hips since she lacked a tail—waiting for him to finish.

“*Woof! Woof!*”

With their morning ritual complete, they began breakfast together. At this point, since she had already slept twice, Liliana was quite famished.

Food! Food!

Liliana’s arms and legs were quite short, so she had a small plate right at “his” feet just for her. As much as she sometimes wished for longer limbs, there was a feeling deep within her that something terrible would happen if that wish came true. So really, she was satisfied with her current lot in life.

“Wait.”

“*Bark!*”

“Good girl! Go ahead.”

Liliana was smart, so simple commands like “wait” were easy to follow. No matter how delicious the food looked, she waited for “him” to give her permission before taking a single bite.

“*Munch munch.*”

So tasty!

The platter of steamed vegetables was arranged in such a way that all she needed to use was her mouth. She had a separate dish with water, and some days soy milk or soup.

A chuckle sounded from the edge of the room.

“As pathetic as always.”

“Oh, she’s looking at us again.”

The room filled with whispers.

It’s those pale people again.

Those subdued laughs came from the group of people in the corner of the room as they watched her. They had pale skin, white hair, red eyes, long ears…and every time she met their gaze, they’d always give her big smiles. They always seemed to be engaged in conversation while looking at Liliana, but she

could never pick up on what they were saying. After all, she was just a dog.

Those people are scary.

Though they were smiling, the look on their faces was anything but pleasant. Every time Liliana saw them, she felt herself start to shrink back. It was as though she got the feeling they were intent on doing something scary—something painful, something cruel—to her. She didn't have a clue what made her feel that way. It felt like if she tried, she could probably remember something, but…

Ah, whatever.

She didn't try. After all, she was just a dog. There were more pressing matters, like the food right in front of her.

It's so good! This is the life!

Being able to stuff her face with nutritious vegetables like this felt like paradise. And the best part? The meal ended with "him" personally feeding her fruit as dessert.

"Okay, open up."

"*Woof woof!*"

Today he gave her some apples. He cut them up into small, bite-sized chunks and fed them to her one piece at a time. The crunchy texture, the sweet and sour flavor, "his" kind gaze and gentle smile…

Amazing! This is heaven!

Once they were done eating, "he" would give her another pat on the head while using a napkin to clean her mouth. Liliana had to wonder what she had done to deserve such a blessed life. "He" was kind, always gave her head pats, fed her, and never caused her any harm. She thanked him for all of his effort to protect her by vigorously licking at his face.

After eating, they often had some quiet time. Liliana would watch as "his" face would turn serious as he sat facing a desk, seemingly reading or writing something or other. Really she'd love to never leave his side so he could keep petting her, but Liliana was smart. She knew when to not bother him. Even if "he" couldn't give her attention, she was happy just to be near him.

So peaceful… So happy.

A warm feeling spread throughout her chest. It was as though she was blessed to be able to breathe freely without restraint or hindrance. With nothing to be afraid of, she began to grow sleepy and started nodding off.

“I think I will take Liliana for a bath.”

“Okay, thanks.”

But a familiar, high-pitched voice snapped her right out of her sleepiness.

Bath!

Opening her eyes, she saw the white fluffy person beckoning her.

“Come on Lili, let’s go!”

“*Woof!*”

Jumping off the sofa, Liliana shot “him” a look to say “I’ll be back soon!” before trotting off after the fluffy person.

I love Garunya!

It was her beloved Garunya. She was the reliable older sister type, who always had a finger on the pulse of things.

“Oh, your skirt is dragging. One sec.” Garunya knelt down and tied up Liliana’s clothes—while Liliana remained stiff as a statue to allow the fluffy woman to work. After all, she was a good dog. “There! Let’s go!”

“*Woof!*”

She trotted along behind Garunya.

Liliana liked her baths. They were warm and pleasant. But today, they took a slight detour on the way to the bath.

“Layla, is your break coming up soon?” Garunya called out.

“Ah, yes. I just finished.” A bit deeper in the castle from where “he” lived was a smaller, messy room. A slender young woman in a maid uniform put her iron aside and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a sigh.

Layla! I love her too!

This was another one of Liliana’s favorite people. At least…Liliana thought she was a person. For some reason, the woman would sometimes transform and become huge. While there was a kindness and gentleness to Layla, there was also a sense she might be somewhat dangerous. Still, it felt like you couldn’t leave her to her own devices. Liliana thought of her like a little sister.

“I’m taking Lili for a bath. Wanna come?”

“Sure. Give me a minute.” After taking a basket of laundry deeper into the room, Layla joined them.

The trio then made their way to the bath.

“Not only can you fly now, but your reading and writing has gotten really good. My lady has already accepted that you get

along well with Master so…I don’t think you really need to worry about ironing anymore.”

“I-I suppose. But it’s something I’m really good at…and I would be restless thinking about all the work everyone else is putting effort into while I’m doing nothing.”

“Sounds like you could learn a thing or two from Lili here. All she does is eat and sleep.”

“I think Liliana is a bit special…”

Liliana couldn’t understand the chitchat between her two friends while they undressed. After all, she was a dog. At best she could recognize her own name whenever it came up.

Bath time! Bath time!

And into the bath they went.

“Stay still, Lili!”

“*Woof! Bark bark!*”

Though she loved the bath, she hated the shampoo. It always hurt when it got in her eyes.



She much preferred just jumping into the water, and if the chance presented itself she'd dash off and do just that, but Garunya was really, really strong. Liliana was helpless against her. So Liliana had no choice but to suffer through her usual cleaning like always.

But once that was done, she had a one-way ticket to heaven.

"*Woof…*"

"Ahh…"

Floating in the water felt so good. Garunya and Liliana both lay spread-eagle in the water. Layla on the other hand seemed to enjoy sitting near the edge of the bath, sinking down to leave her face half submerged.

After being thoroughly warmed, they got out of the water and Garunya and Layla dried her off. Heading back to their room, it was time for their night meal. Once again Liliana ate her plate of steamed vegetables, "he" fed her some fruit by hand, and then she curled up on the sofa and started to snooze off.

So happy…

But then came the part of the day Liliana hated.

"Okay."

The signal was "him" drawing his sword and using the bones he wore to form a long pole. The intensity that came to his face every single time broke Liliana's heart.

They were in the parade ground.

"You seem full of energy as always," said the beautiful woman with horns, wearing attire suitable for exercising.

I hate her. She's scary.

Though her face bore a striking resemblance to "his," the same could not be said about her expression and aura. It was she who always caused "him" pain. Liliana couldn't help but be scared of her. Apparently her name was Pratifya, but it was hard for Liliana to remember it. Not only was the name too long, but Liliana didn't like the woman anyway. One time Liliana had attempted to bark at the woman to scare her into leaving "him" alone, but all it had taken was a single glare for Liliana to realize she was out of her depth. And ever since then, the woman's presence made Liliana nervous.

"I'll put you in the ground for real today."

"Oh, I see we've grown quite bold. I'll look forward to it then."

With vicious smiles, the two commenced their brutal bout.

Slowly but surely, “his” wounds kept multiplying. Pratifya would also get wounded, but every time “he” tried something, one of her wounds would disappear. And each time that happened, “he” would get even more hurt.

Liliana didn’t even begin to try to understand why that was the case. After all, she was just a dog. But she did understand that “he” was suffering a lot, and that it was Pratifya’s fault.

Liliana whimpered. Even though Garunya held her back so she couldn’t run to “his” side, Liliana soon realized this was also painful for Garunya. The same also went for Layla who was watching from another step behind them. If they all hated it so much, why didn’t they intervene? It was too sad…

“G-Guh…” Finally “he” reached his limit, falling to his knees. At the same time, Garunya let Liliana go.

“*Bark bark!*” Liliana ran over to “him” as fast as she could. With all her might, she licked at all the places “he” was hurt. That would make “him” feel better. She knew that.

“Thanks as always, Liliana,” he said with a chuckle…smiling like always.

Why are you smiling? How are you so happy? Doesn’t it hurt? Isn’t it hard?

All Liliana could do was give a pitiful whine. After all, she was just a dog.

She was then pulled away, and “he” was beaten up all over again. As much as her life brought her peace and happiness, she hated times like this.

After what felt like forever, that painful time finally came to an end. They had another quick bath, ate another meal, and then returned to their room to relax. As the sky started to lighten, she crawled into bed and got ready to sleep once more.

“Good night, Master.”

“Night.”

After the servants took their leave, all who remained were Liliana and “him.”

“Man, I’m beat…as usual.” He sighed. Completely relaxing, he cracked his neck side to side before wrapping Liliana in his arms. “Time for sleep.”

“*Woof.*”

Snuggling up close, she rubbed her face against his.

This is great.

Her happiest moments were those in “his” arms.

“Good night, Liliana.”

“*Woof.*”

Before bed, he had already started dozing off while reading. He must have really pushed himself to the limit. With Liliana in his arms, “he” fell asleep immediately.

Meanwhile, Liliana wasn’t particularly tired since she had spent a great deal of time napping on the sofa. As such, she had plenty of time to look at “his” sleeping face from up close.

But while he started with a peaceful slumber, his face soon began to twist in pain, soft groans coming from him.

He’s in pain again…

She licked at “his” face again.

“Mmm…Cl…aire…”

“He” squeezed her tight, so much so that it started to hurt.

Don’t cry. It’s okay. Liliana’s face fell once more. She gently shifted upward and put her mouth over his lips, sharing the warmth in her with him. And then, the peaceful expression returned to his face.

Good. Liliana gave a relieved smile. *I love you so much.* She nuzzled up to “his” cheek again. *I love you, Alex.* Wrapped in his warmth, she surrendered herself to the world of dreams.

In the arms of her favorite person, seeing dreams of him.

†††

I woke up with a start, roused by the sound of my own snoring. Though I was sure I had been dreaming, the moment my eyes opened, I couldn’t recall what the dreams had been about. That seemed to happen a lot.

By the way, can you actually see what’s going on in my dreams, Ante?

“Depends. Sometimes I see only incoherent nonsense or jumbled emotion, and other times I get vivid images. By the way, the dream you just had ended with you covered in horse dung.”

Oh man, hearing that brought back a stark memory. Back to the time Claire had set a pitfall trap using horse crap. Naturally, at the time, I got pretty pissed off. But now I could only look back and laugh with nostalgia.

As I gazed outside the window, I could see it was still light out.

“*Woof?*”

A glance to the side revealed Liliana staring at me, a look on her face as if she was questioning why I was awake.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

As I rubbed Liliana’s cheeks, she shuffled up and started rubbing her face against me. *What a cutie…* Here I was, lying in bed with a beautiful half naked high elf, and the first thing that came to mind was that she was cute, like a pet. I might have been a lost cause. Even though I still had the heart of a human, I guess there was no denying I now had the body of a demon. Was my body having that much influence on my mind?

“Are you sure you are not overestimating the goodness of humanity? If anything, I believe humans are greatly skilled in adapting to any situation.”

Is that all it is?

Anyway, I had woken up at a pretty strange time. I guess I had turned in early due to how exhausted I had been after training. Since Liliana had healed away all of my fatigue, that probably explained why I was awake now. It was the first time in a long time that I had gotten to train with Prati in the castle, so I had gotten really into it. But I was starting to get the hang of these training sessions where magic was allowed. I was getting used to dealing with Prati’s triple wielding, curse of pain, and even her **Void Spear**, *Repida Skias*.

Meanwhile, my skill with **Necromancy** and using magic to manipulate bones was improving. So, with the help of that seasoned human soldier’s soul, my physical defenses were getting quite strong. Pressing through all of her attacks to deal a clean hit to Prati’s horns had left her with a remarkably memorable look of frustration.

“You are getting…much better. At a terrifying rate…!”

Well, I suppose that was fair. For a demon who was possibly over a hundred years old, losing to a five-year-old—even if it was her own son—must have been pretty frustrating. But her expression also seemed to have had a hint of pride.

However, the only reason I was able to do so well against Prati was because I knew her magic like the back of my hand. If I were pitted against another archduke-caliber demon on Prati’s level, I would have to fight cautiously due to having no idea what they might throw at me. And that extra caution would be a distraction in its own right. At most two Bloodline Magics, at least one

unique authority bestowed on them by a devil pact, possibly more depending on what pacts they had sworn… Demons just had too many weapons at their disposal.

*"You also have your Bloodline Magics and your **Constraint** magic. Even if your opponent learned of them, they would still have their hands full. Besting you in combat would come down to their own physical ability. Though of course, if you were to go all out, your **Constraint** would become **Taboo**, plus you could add **Necromancy** and holy magic to the mix. You have plenty of secret weapons yourself."* Ante laughed. *"At present, generally, you seem to come up short whenever she takes notice of a weakness in your bone armor and penetrates your defenses. Beyond that, she is simply wearing down your stamina. While your ability to focus all of your magic in one place is a useful skill, your attention tends to get too focused on offense, and she uses that to her advantage. Both you and your enemy are capable of perceiving the finer movements of magic, so you cannot afford to wield it recklessly as you did when you were human. You should endeavor to be more modest in its application."*

Easy for you to say.

But really, she was right. I'd have to be careful.

"A devil god is offering you advice here. You should be endlessly thankful!"

I could tell Ante was kicking back and acting all smug in my mind.

Our little back-and-forth was interrupted by a cute rumbling sound. Liliana whined, a pleading look on her face. I could only guess that she was hungry. Since I had been so beat last night, it was possible I had forgotten to feed her dessert after our last meal. Maybe she hadn't had enough to eat.

"Let's get something to eat then."

"*Bark!*"

Since I was starting the day early, I could take it easy for a while. I hadn't enjoyed the sunlight in quite a while, maybe I could do that.

"Good morning, dear." A short while after asking one of the devil servants to bring us something to eat, Layla came in with our food, blushing.

"Good morning, Layla. Are you okay being up this early?" Whether we were in the Rage territory or here in the castle, it seemed Layla was always awake before I was. She was starting to make this little prince worry.

“Yes. Being up this early is better for my body, it seems,” she replied, pumping her arms in a show of energy. As a white dragon, the exposure to sunlight appeared to be good for her. So she woke up super early (by demon standards) like this and got right to work.

Back when the king of the dark dragons handed her over to me, she had brutal dark circles under her eyes, as if she’d never slept a day in her life.

“But now it’s quiet enough for me to sleep comfortably,” she said with a faint smile. There were no traces left of that weary girl, now replaced by a healthy and full complexion. Apparently the dragons had intentionally made loud noises or jabbed at her to wake her up when she lived in their cave.

I couldn’t help but be surprised she was still mentally sound after everything she had gone through there. Though with the caveat that she was bound in service to me, I couldn’t be happier at the fact she could live out her days in peace now.

So anyway, lunch. For once, actually around the middle of the day.

“*Woof, woof!*”

Liliana gleefully stuffed her face with fruit, leaving quite the mess across her face. With the night elf maids all on break, it felt like Liliana was able to let loose a bit more than usual. Just like with Layla, the sun probably did her some good, being a high elf and all. Her once deeply tanned complexion was now as white as a sheet…

“I think I’m going to go for a walk. Do you want to come, Layla?”

“I would love to.”

“*Bark! Bark bark!*” All it took was the word “walk” for Liliana to start bouncing off the walls.

Together with Layla, we took a stroll around the early afternoon castle. As we walked through the corridors, we occasionally caught glimpses of the castle town, which brought back memories of our time in the Rage territory. I wondered what the three idiots were up to now. Where did they end up staying? Maybe I’d ask Sophia about it later.

“Now that I think about it…I’ve never properly visited the castle town. Aside from glances from up here and passing through, I’ve never checked it out.”

“Not once?”

Layla replied to my murmur, tilting her head. With a nod, I stretched a hand out toward her neck, placing my hand on Konectus's choker around her neck.

It's hard for me to be all that interested in a demon town.

Unlike when I was first reborn, I now understood the importance of information…but even so, I couldn't care less about the place, thus had no real urge to head over there.

"Your busyness is also part of the reason, right?" Layla's voice echoed in the back of my mind.

When it came to secret conversations, there was nothing more perfect than Konectus. A soundproof barrier sometimes got the job done, but erecting one was basically the equivalent of shouting you were having a private conversation. The fact we could talk through Konectus while we walked was also a big plus.

And since it involved putting my hand around her neck, using it was camouflaged well under the guise of flirting or something in the eyes of outsiders. That said, it would be pretty weird if I kept my hand around her neck all the time, so I moved to caress her face instead. Layla returned the gesture with a smile, putting her hand over mine and squeezing.

True. Maybe being so busy was a part of it too.

Though the growth of my horns had helped grant me more freedom, all my training and studying left me very little in the way of free time. I was so desperate just to get through each day.

"It's a strange feeling. It's been years since you were born in this castle…" Layla shifted her gaze to the castle town, a deep expression on her face. *"We were alive in the same place, unbeknownst to either of us…"* Behind those words lurked images of a deep, dark cave.

I also never could have imagined it. To have someone within the castle I could let into my heart to help bear my burdens… I'd thought I would have to carry them all by myself.

"If there's anything I can do…"—a strong light took to her eyes—*"…tell me. I will help you."*

…Thanks.

"And, of course, I am here too!" Ante's sudden roar startled both me and Layla.

It was a side effect of Konectus. Since it connected my soul to Layla's, naturally Ante—being a good-for-nothing freeloader in my soul—could jump in on the conversations.

“A freeloader?! I’m nothing of the sort! This is me simply conserving energy!”

Yeah? So why does it always come across like you’re lounging around like a princess?

“Hmph. To think this soul once belonged to me alone. Unbelievable!”

Layla chuckled softly, almost apologetically. The fact there was no shyness or reservation in her demeanor brought a smile to my face as well.

Liliana gave a small whine, looking up at me from where she sat at my feet.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Talking like this left Liliana totally out of the loop. So as an apology, I lifted her up in my arms.

“Maybe we should go and check out the town sometime.”

“To check on the three id—Alba and the others?” I called them the “three idiots” so often that Layla was starting to slip into the habit too.

“That too, but just taking a look around doesn’t seem like a bad idea.” Learning the lay of the land of your enemy’s capital couldn’t hurt. It wasn’t like I had had the time to do so during the assault on the castle, but now I very much did. “Maybe we can go tour the food stalls again.”

“That…would be lovely.” A bright smile took to her face, likely as she remembered our little date back in the Rage territory.

Ante began to chuckle.

What is it?

“Oh, nothing. I hope you two have fun.”

We continued on our walk through the castle corridors. Though the air was crisp with the promise of winter, the sunlight kept us comfortably warm. The sun really was great. As this was the time denizens of the dark were usually fast asleep, we mostly passed beastfolk in the halls.

At my side was Layla in human form and an excitedly prancing Liliana. If you could overlook the fact I was a prince…and that Liliana was missing four limbs, you could almost forget we were in the castle.

Before long, we found ourselves at my favorite rest spot, the inner garden.

“*Bark bark!*”

Liliana happily frolicked over the grass, enjoying the sun on

her skin. Layla and I took a seat on the bench as we watched Liliana playing. Before long Layla leaned over, resting her head on my shoulder, leaving me feeling warm. Honestly, peaceful time like this was the last thing I ever expected here in a castle full of demons.

Now, at this moment, I knew I was neglecting numerous duties that demanded my attention. But I still needed times like this. If I wanted to be fuel for the flames of revenge, that still required me to replenish myself whenever I needed. Long ago, back in my hero days, all I would do was eat and sleep. Not even thinking made the cut. Now, my heart was able to rest. Thanks to that, I could keep fighting.

It was so quiet. Was there no one here today? Topazia wasn't hiding here again, was she? I focused my eyes, but didn't see any signs of strange magical happenings. There was no concealment magic at work, nor any sleeping princesses. The only people I could see were the dragon patrols far, far overhead.

Dropping my gaze back down, I saw Liliana lying in the grass, staring at a flower withered from the cold. As one might expect, an open garden like this would go from being lively to looking rather gloomy come winter. But with just a tiny bump from her nose, the withered flower sprang back to life before our eyes. All it took was her presence to bring about small miracles like that. The title of "saint" was truly fitting for her.

However, I knew the flower was poisonous. Was it really okay to let Liliana near it? It wouldn't hurt her, would it?

Beside me, Layla watched with eyes half closed, a gentle smile on her face.

"If you're tired, feel free to sleep."

"Ah, no, I'm fine. It's not that I'm tired." Her eyes immediately shot open, with a small, embarrassed laugh.

"Are you getting enough sleep? There's no need to push yourself."

"Yes, I am fine. I appreciate your concern."

"If anything, you can go to bed a little earlier."

"That..." She started to frown. "If...possible...I..."

"Hmm?"

"If possible...I want to spend as much time with you as I can." Her face went a deep red as she said it, but I couldn't imagine I looked much better as I felt my cheeks start to heat up.

What the heck was this girl saying?!

“Ahhh! What’s that face?! Your virgin status will be found out if anyone sees you like this!”

Shut it! That’s completely irrelevant here!

But Ante’s teasing did help me recover a little.

“O-Oh…” Even so, the best I could do was nod in response.

And then I heard soft footsteps behind me.

“My, look who it is.” A voice like metal scraping metal called out. “If it isn’t His Highness Zilbagias.”

Turning around, I saw a large man dressed from head to toe in black stepping out of the corridor’s darkness. His icy blue eyes locked onto me.

“It has been quite some time. Truly, it is a pleasure to see you again.” Standing there was Oruphen, king of the dark dragons.

†††

Layla’s feelings toward Zilbagias couldn’t be summed up in a single word. Gratitude, respect, sympathy, pity, regret…positive and negative emotions wove a complex tapestry. That hodgepodge of emotions made a muddled mess. As it currently stood, she was building a deep affection for him. Maybe it was a kind of dependence, or the thrill of being a secret conspirator. Regardless, Layla was unsure of the reason herself.

But she had come to like him. To her, he was a symbol of hope. Zilbagias had managed to fill the hole in Layla’s heart after her dreams of her father rescuing her had been crushed.

Not a day passed that Zilbagias wasn’t on her mind. From the moment she woke up, he was always at the forefront of her thoughts. How could she support him? How could she help him? How could she assuage his suffering?

No, even when she was asleep, more often than not she would dream of him. Her horrific nightmares of the prince flaunting her father’s severed head had been put to rest after saying goodbye to her father’s soul. In their place, she had dreams of spending time with her parents (while in human form) and Zilbagias. Dreams of Zilbagias riding her as she soared through the sky. Dreams of basking in the sunlight together with the prince. All of her dreams had become peaceful and gentle. With the nightmares over, she had been able to relax and sleep without worry.

And then, the other day, Konectus had tied their hearts

together. After touching his soul directly, she was unable to hold back any longer.

He was in tatters. Zilbagias's...no, Alex's soul. The image that first came to mind was of a man using the support of a sword to keep himself standing, yet still marching forward resolutely through the flames in a shattered, broken land. It had left a deep impression on her.

Until then, she had thought of him as a strong man, worthy of the title hero. She had imagined a soul burning with passion, a heart of steel, and an unshakable will. Ironically, her imagination hadn't been that far off. His revenge's inferno had charred what remained of his soul. Time had only sharpened the blade that had become his heart, adamant to only destroy the dark. And no matter how much he suffered, he never so much as bowed.

But it was still a warped, fragile, patchwork thing. There was no telling when any small thing might send it all tumbling down. He wasn't some aloof demon prince, nor a dauntless and heroic savior. Simply put, he was a man. A man who had lost everything, using his anger and sorrow as fuel to continue forward as he desperately kept trying to put one foot in front of the other. In truth, he would gladly discard his own life if it meant protecting those he loved. And yet, here he was. Forced to play the part of a cruel, heartless demon prince.

She couldn't bear to leave him. That thought dominated her heart. He had saved her, so she wanted to find some way to save him. Of course, his tattered soul had not changed the fact he was a veteran soldier. The idea of her saving him was pretentious at best. But even so, she wanted to help him in any way she could. And maybe someday, if at all possible, to leave behind all the fighting and to live in peace with him—together.

That was her wish.

So Layla was endlessly grateful for days like today. After being worn down by his time in the Rage territory, he was brought back to the castle where he was once again thrust into the role of a prince. He was constantly working to make arrangements for the kingdom's downfall and was repeatedly abused during training, which had increased in intensity as of late. On top of that, during brief moments of reprieve, he was plagued by thoughts of the impending war or how to deal with the human slaves he had brought back. At the end of the day, exhaustion would knock him right out. The same Zilbagias who suffered day

in and day out was now sitting beside her, staring up at the sky as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Sitting alongside him on the bench, listening to his steady heartbeat, was enough to fill her own chest with warmth. If you had told Layla just a short time ago that such a relaxing scene was a possibility in her future, she wouldn't have believed you in the slightest.

I love you. I adore you. Even without Konectus transmitting her thoughts, they filled her with a kind of inexpressible joy.

"It has been quite some time. Truly, it is a pleasure to see you again."

But that grating voice stripped away her bliss. It felt like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water on her head. Why did that voice, the source of all her past suffering, have to show up here? She didn't even need to look. There was no mistaking that sinister presence behind her.

"Oh, what a coincidence, Oruphen." In an instant, the mask of the haughty demon prince was back on. "What do you need?"

"Ah, nothing so formal. I just happened to notice you while passing by and wanted to say hello." His grating, metallic voice was accompanied by the sound of footsteps drawing close. That reverberation came from bare feet, a common habit among dragons taking human form. At this point, Layla took wearing shoes for granted, so the sight was somewhat humorous.

At last, the large man shrouded in a robe of darkness entered the corner of her vision. As he looked down at her, she timidly returned his gaze. Seeing the two so intimate with each other left Oruphen dumbfounded, as if he believed his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Meanwhile, Layla...

Is this all he was?

She almost felt let down. Before, Oruphen had felt like a massive mountain blocking the horizon, a dark cloud blocking out the sky. But now, while he still gave an impression of strength, it wasn't so overpowering as to engender despair. He wasn't a foreboding giant ready to crush her on a whim, but rather just a bulky man. Though that perspective may have just been a result of Zilbagias's warmth still being present at her side. She felt her nerves gradually relax.

So that's all he is.

Layla was not the same girl Oruphen had known. She now possessed the magic and knowledge inherited from her father, the love she had been given by Zilbagias, and above all, the conceit born from having wings that could carry her off into the sky. All of this melded together in her heart to reduce Oruphen from an unstoppable and irrational natural disaster to a real but manageable threat.

The words of those with a great aptitude for magic could become curses or blessings themselves. The dark dragons had bombarded her with insults constantly. They'd called her "useless" and a "filthy traitor," tearing down any semblance of self-esteem she might have had.

But Zilbagias had swept all of that away by calling her a beautiful and splendid dragon. That had emboldened her beyond mere self-confidence. It had established her identity as a white dragon.

Despite that, Layla dropped her gaze. She was far past cowering in fear because of him, but she also decided that displaying meekness was the correct choice here.

"I see. How kind of you," Zilbagias responded, as if Oruphen simply coming to greet him were nothing more than dull. A suitably arrogant response. Layla wanted to believe that he was just as irritated that Oruphen's presence had ruined their good time.

"It appears you have taken a liking to my gift. I am elated to see it," Oruphen spoke carefully, eyeing Layla up and down.

"Yeah, I couldn't be happier," Zilbagias said casually, pulling Layla closer. But he didn't stop there. He proceeded to place a hand on Layla's cheek, turning her to face him.

"Ah—"

But before she could even be enchanted by his brilliant red eyes from so close, he leaned in and kissed her cheek. Speechless, Layla's face started to burn, her porcelain white skin immediately flushing a deep red.

"As you can see, we've gotten quite close."

"I-I see..." Oruphen replied mechanically, as if in a daze. It was as though he had been thrown into a sea of stars, completely unable to comprehend anything that was happening before his eyes.

Though that was to be expected. When the dark dragons had

surrendered Layla into the prince's care, it had come with the expectation—and indeed the hope—that he would treat her with a cruelty beyond what they had shown the girl.

"He hasn't even matured and he's already taken a liking to women of other races."

"He stole a high elf from the night elves and destroyed her sense of self."

"He then took off her legs and forced her to act like a dog. No doubt he's a freak."

Back then, he had been famous for being a monster among monsters. The dark dragons had been thrilled at the prospect of the prince committing heinous acts toward Layla outside their wildest dreams. But instead of punishing her in Faravgi's stead, he had put her in a place of honor and even started training her in the way of flight.

"Don't be stupid. There's no way she could be useful to him."

"The withering curse has been ailing her since she was a child. I doubt she can even flap her wings."

"Once he realizes just how useless she really is, he'll change his tune."

They'd never imagined she'd be a useful ally without the aid of other dragons. The dark dragons had sneered at his vain attempts to squeeze out any ounce of meaning from her. Honestly, back then, her "flying training" had been in name only. The best she could manage was to run and glide a bit. It was pathetic. While patrolling the skies above the castle, the dark dragons would watch her "training" all the while laughing at her blunders.

But one day, she suddenly got the hang of it. Out of nowhere, she took to the air as if she had been doing so for years.

"What kind of trick is this...?"

Oruphen couldn't believe it. How had she learned to fly? How could she use her dragon body so well after being forced into human form for most of her life?

"Unbelievable!"

How many dragons had ever been able to learn flight all on their own? Though he had promptly suspected she had received the aid of the white dragons' former allies, further investigation found no signs of their meddling.

Shortly after, Zilbagias took a trip back to his ancestral home, taking Layla along with him. And just the other day, a dragon

taking deliveries to the Rage territory reported that Layla had been flying with Zilbagias riding on her back.

"Impossible! What is he thinking?!"

At first, Oruphen didn't believe it. But the continuous reports quickly transformed his disbelief into astonishment. Of course, it was Zilbagias's sanity which was in question. He had killed her father. Why would he try to ride her?! Did he think a fall from that altitude would leave nothing more than a scratch? Was he *that* stupid?

And then Oruphen realized he had been thrust into an awful position. Unlike what he had expected, Layla hadn't become an object to torment, but instead a lover for the prince. It would be one thing if she had remained useless and stupid, but things had changed—now she could fly.

"This is very bad."

Oruphen was a dark dragon. Once subjected to various kinds of humiliation, he wouldn't rest until he had his revenge. He had no reason to believe everyone else didn't share that ideology. And he knew full well just how much Layla despised him.

"If Layla is just biding her time, trying to earn his trust..."

What exactly was the worst-case scenario?

"It's obvious! If it were me, I would take Zilbagias to a great height and throw him to his death. Then I would declare Oruphen had ordered me to do so, and then flee to the Alliance!"

Even if Oruphen could establish it was a false allegation, it would still do irreparable damage to his relationship with the demons. He could claim it was Zilbagias's own fault for being fooled by Layla, but there was no guarantee that would suffice. It wasn't an issue of who was at fault, but rather of who was vulnerable.

If he had been a demon himself, he would be more than happy for a chance to take a shot at the leader of the dragons. Recently the castle had started feeling quite cramped. This had resulted in talks among the demons about how to utilize the space more efficiently. And of course, a huge portion of the castle was being taken up by the dragons' cave. There was no doubt they'd take this opportunity to snatch up what little the dragons had left. After all, it wasn't like an excuse would be hard to come by.

"Oruphen brainwashed Layla into assassinating the prince."

"Or he gifted the prince someone he knew was dangerous under

the guise of her being harmless."

"Even if that wasn't the case, Oruphen had to be remarkably stupid to not notice she was waiting for a chance at revenge the whole time."

No matter how well things turned out for Oruphen, even the best potential scenarios ended with the collapse of his authority as king of the dark dragons.

There was still the possibility, however, that the rumors had been greatly exaggerated in regards to Zilbagias taking a liking to Layla. If he was still maintaining at least a little caution around her, they might be able to avoid the worst possible outcome. So Oruphen needed to scope out the situation with his own eyes. Having noticed the prince by chance sitting down in the garden while on patrol, Oruphen had descended in human form to go see for himself.

No…this is hopeless…

Seeing them sitting on the bench side by side, flirting like actual lovers, Oruphen wanted to scream.

Are you that stupid?! You killed her father! That much hate for you could never become love!

If the boy had not been a demon prince, Oruphen would have been shouting at him already. But of course, since Konectus hadn't been made public knowledge, Oruphen was oblivious to the fact that their hearts had been connected.

Why does no one intervene?! Are they all idiots?!

That was the only conclusion he could reach.

And the more he watched them, the more unbelievable the sight became. Zilbagias came across as a frank, sociable person. Layla, blushing while resting her head on the prince's shoulder, looked like no more than a young girl in love.

And what was most disturbing was her reaction to seeing Oruphen again.

She's…not afraid?

After acknowledging him with a look, she simply averted her gaze. Though she attempted to revert to her weak and timid self from back in the caves, Oruphen's expertise was in detecting negative emotion. He could tell easily that she didn't feel a shred of fear.

And this is not her simply growing impudent thanks to the prince's influence.

If that was the case, her response would have been more of a

haughty one. Instead she simply tried to avoid drawing attention to herself by doing nothing—as if she was fully aware this wasn't the time or place to butt in on this conversation. The days when all she could do was cower in fear and beg for forgiveness hadn't been all that long ago. Now she was calmly and rationally assessing the situation, all the while modifying her behavior to suit it.

The Layla before him was unrecognizable to the one he knew. That realization gave Oruphen a terrible premonition.

"Is that all?" Zilbagias's unveiled irritation snapped Oruphen back to reality. "As you can see, I'm quite busy at the moment," he said, putting an arm around Layla's shoulders.

Like hell you are!

As impure as his motives may have been, Oruphen was still here because he was worried about the prince's life. But make no mistake, he wasn't worried about the prince's well-being, but rather his own standing.

"Ah, my apologies. It's a bit of a shock to see how much Layla has grown since I last saw her."

"You have no idea how much work that was," Zilbagias said with a laugh. "When she was first placed into my care, she kept going on and on about what she couldn't do. Like 'Oh, I can't use my wings' or 'Oh, I can't read' or even 'Oh, I can't work.' She was in a terrible state," he said, hand rubbing the back of her neck. "But seeing her now, I couldn't be happier for so many different reasons. If any other young dragons are giving you trouble, don't hesitate to send them my way. I might be able to raise them well," he ended with another laugh.

At last, something seemed to make sense to Oruphen. That was why Layla hadn't been acting stuck-up.

This green little prince is so arrogant, he puts pressure on everyone around him without her lifting a finger!

With the way Zilbagias openly showed his disdain, it was smarter to stay quiet and avoid drawing his attention.

She's clever!

The fact she could think that far ahead only further emphasized that he wasn't dealing with the same Layla he was used to. He definitely needed to be on guard against her. At the same time...

He's offering to raise dragons?! Who does this worm think he is?!

The prince's cockiness was testing Oruphen's patience at

every turn.

"My, you are full of surprises as always, Your Highness. Should I encounter any young ones struggling to bloom, maybe I will do just that." Oruphen kept up his false smile, lying through his teeth. "But may I ask: the education you gave her, what exactly did it entail? I would love to have that knowledge for future reference." Oruphen was especially curious about what he had done to teach her how to fly.

"My methods aren't exactly easy to put into words," the prince replied. "I just pointed out some oddities I noticed with how she used magic around her wings. But of course, I don't have wings myself. If her issues were something an observer could simply fix after a quick glance, she never would have had those problems in the first place. No one knows dragons as well as other dragons."

"Oh?" *So another dragon helped teach her after all?!*

"Ah, it seems I let that tidbit slip. Do me a favor and pretend you didn't hear that," Zilbagias said, his haughty attitude shrinking a little.

That was too suspicious. Is this an act? Or was that actually a mistake...?

Obviously he was trying to suggest that another dragon had been involved. Oruphen had thoroughly investigated the former supporters of the white dragons, but had found no evidence indicating any contact between them and the prince. In that case, by process of elimination, only one option remained—one of Oruphen's allies had betrayed him.

That's impossible!

Who would go that far to help a white dragon?! Except...though they were part of the Oruphen's faction, there were still the green and red dragons. Among the dragons, they were known to be particularly greedy. So if the price was right... But Oruphen couldn't ignore the very real possibility that Zilbagias was spewing nonsense so he would turn on his own people.

But would he go that far? Against me?

Though Oruphen wasn't personally fond of the prince, he couldn't think of any reason for the prince to be openly hostile toward him. Oruphen acted plenty subservient in their interactions. He had even gifted Layla to the prince with the intent to try and earn his favor. Was there some other reason for

the prince to dislike him?

It's possible his altercation with Faravgi caused him to resent all dragons.

But in that case, it wouldn't make sense that he liked Layla so much—

No! Has Layla been slandering me behind my back?!

It was possible she clung to him all teary-eyed in the bedchamber, sparking a kind of righteous indignation in him. Was he trying to show off for her? That could be more than enough cause for him to view Oruphen as an enemy.

This is terrible! Downright frustrating!

Oruphen couldn't help but be vexed by the thought, blind to the fact any cold reception he might receive from Layla was every bit his own fault. He returned his gaze to Zilbagias's face, which seemed a bit stiffer than it had a moment prior.

Wait...that wasn't actually *a slip of the tongue, was it?*

Oruphen had no clue. Was Zilbagias trying to destabilize him, or was it an actual mistake? He couldn't decide.

"It appears this conversation isn't exactly entertaining for either of us," Zilbagias said with a cold smile, crossing his legs. It seemed clear he was trying to dismiss Oruphen.

"Not at all, Your Highness. I always find it a great honor to be able to speak with you." Oruphen shook his head, trying to muster a cheery liveliness he had never possessed in his entire life.

If a dragon actually taught her, who was it?

That was something he desperately wanted to know, but he couldn't press the prince on the issue. Saying "I strictly prohibited all dragons from sharing any knowledge with Layla, so tell me who it was as it's a violation of that order" would just be picking a fight with the prince.

"I have heard recently that you have begun riding Layla regularly." So shelving the issue for now, he got to the last main issue. "I cannot imagine she has all that much experience yet. How comfortable is the ride?" There was no small number of dragons with much more experience; why not try riding them? If there was any way out of this predicament, that suggestion seemed like Oruphen's best route.

"How comfortable?" Zilbagias gave a vulgar grin, stroking the choker around her neck that was looking more and more like a collar. "Amazing. As I alluded to before, all my needs are more

than satisfied."

Oruphen was dumbfounded again. He just wanted to shout, "I'm trying to have a serious conversation here!"

This brat is clearly trying to make a fool out of me—

He thought, but as he glanced over at Layla, he was shocked yet again.

What is going on there?!

One feeling went through Oruphen's body—fear. Layla was blushing like a naive little girl. Even Oruphen, as adept as he was at lies and deceit, couldn't see it as a ruse. She was truly and honestly embarrassed!

No way…this girl shouldn't have the skill to act like this!

If she had actually been that proficient in sucking up to men, she would have fared far better in the caves.

No way…maybe her sense of self…?

Looking around the garden, his gaze met that of the high elf, sitting and staring at him.

"*Woof.*"

Clearly on guard against him, she trotted off to hide among the grass.

"*Grrrr…*"

With a strange growl, she popped her head out again to peek at him. She lacked even a hint of self-respect. It was as though she was nothing more than a dog.

He was capable of doing that to a high elf saint.

Perhaps that meant he had the skill to steal the heart of a young dragon?

That is…a terrifying ability.

Oruphen shuddered. It had been a long time since something had made his blood run cold like that. That made Zilbagias riding on Layla's back make so much more sense. She no longer possessed the free will left to betray him even if she wanted to!

And with that brainwashing ability in mind, his offer to "care for" other young dragons that Oruphen might be struggling with took on an entirely different meaning. He was literally looking for more potential pawns! And he wasn't making even the slightest attempt to hide his intentions!

Disgusting!

Very few could stir such feelings of repugnance in a dark dragon. And for it to be a boy this young…only five years old. Five?! This brat?! There was no way!

There's no doubt… Oruphen clenched his hands. *Demons are monsters!*

It seemed nothing good could possibly come out of any involvement with this prince. If Oruphen lowered his guard, he too might end up brainwashed.

Wait, if that's feasible, he may have brainwashed a dark dragon to teach Layla… No! That can wait!

For now, he needed to take his leave expeditiously. Oruphen gave the prince a polite bow. "At any rate, it brings me great joy to see how useful she has been for you. Witnessing that has made this meeting very worthwhile for me."

"Glad you enjoyed it," Zilbagias said, leaning back as if relieved the conversation was finally coming to a close. Honestly, he gave off the impression of nothing more than an arrogant brat. That arrogance and that brainwashing ability was quite a terrifying combination. If by some horrible error he was to become the next Demon King…

As he made to leave, Oruphen caught Layla's gaze once more. "I am happy for you too, Layla. You have been so blessed by your master, and for that I am glad," he let slip sarcastically without thinking.

"Indeed, I have been."

In response, Layla nodded with a smile, no timidity in her demeanor whatsoever.

What an irredeemable man.

As for Layla, though she didn't entirely understand Oruphen's intentions, she could surmise he wanted to disrupt her relationship with Zilbagias for one reason or another. That spawned little more than exasperation in her. She just wanted him to leave her alone.

She didn't hate him that much. At least, not nearly to the same extent as Zilbagias wanted to wipe out all demons and night elves. If she had to, she would say…she didn't really care.

There was only one thing currently important to her—Zilbagias. She knew of his ambitions. His plans included pitting the dark dragons against the demons. How many of her fellow dragons would be killed in that conflict? How much would they suffer? Layla didn't care in the least.

The fire of revenge didn't burn within her, so she had no

desire to make Oruphen suffer. In fact, it was the exact opposite. She couldn't care less how much they suffered. Nothing could be less important to her. She found guessing the daily weather report far more interesting.

Layla accidentally let a soft chuckle slip out. She could see Oruphen wince slightly at that. Moments before, when Zilbagias had been intentionally acting as a sleazebag, he had been simultaneously apologizing to her desperately through Konectus. It had taken everything she had to stop herself from going into a laughing fit.

"I am happy for you too, Layla. You have been so blessed by your master, and for that I am glad."

She felt exactly the same way.

"It's all because of you," Layla responded, staring directly into his icy blue eyes. "Thank you." She had grown enough to say that.

He had put her through so much hardship. Not only had he killed her mother, but his actions had also ultimately led to her father's death. Though she wouldn't describe her feelings toward him as hate, she couldn't say they were anything positive. However...it was thanks to the dark dragons' despicable behavior that she had eventually met Zilbagias. That was where her "thank you" came from.

"You introduced me to my soulmate," Layla said, shuffling closer to Zilbagias.

There was one thing she was sure of. No matter where Zilbagias's plans might lead in the future, no matter what hardship it might bring to the dark dragons, Layla would fully support him until the very end. He had saved a hopeless and helpless girl like her. With the pride of a hero of humanity burning in his chest, he gritted his teeth and carried on his bloody, solitary struggle in the demonic kingdom. Being able to provide him with assistance... She couldn't express how happy that would make her. Just imagining it had her in a state bordering on ecstasy.

She had lost everything, and now Zilbagias was her hope. She'd gladly offer her life to him. No...her life was already his. She had been given to him by the dark dragons, as a present. Layla chuckled again.



She found that increasingly hilarious, to a degree she couldn't quite contain.

Meanwhile, the king of the dark dragons saw her eyes as an endless, inescapable mire. They gave him an indescribable feeling of unease, together with a sensation like the ground beneath his feet was starting to give way. With a wince, he shrank back and retreated.

Oruphen, king of the dark dragons, fled.

†††

I leaned back on the bench as I casually watched Oruphen take his leave. At the very end there, it seemed like he was scared of something. What had that been about?

"Who knows?" Layla answered, similarly confused. On that note, why had he showed up in the first place? *"Maybe he had come to see whether I had met as grisly a fate as he had imagined?"*

Yeah, it wouldn't have surprised me if torturing Layla was exactly what the dark dragons had hoped for. But not only had I treated her well, our relationship had also made great strides. That must have been quite the shocking development.

Layla chuckled while leaning her head on my shoulder. "He was quite surprised, wasn't he?"

His face when she said "thank you" had truly been a sight to behold. To be fair, that had left me pretty surprised too. When Oruphen had first come over she had flinched, but she had seemed perfectly unbothered by him after that.

"It seems she has built up quite a degree of confidence in herself," Ante whispered so that only I could hear.

Right? It's like night and day compared to when we were first met. I was glad she had managed to overcome all that trauma.

Liliana popped her head out of the grass with a soft whine. Apparently Oruphen had scared her enough that she had gone and ran off to hide. Trotting over to our bench, she hopped up beside me and curled up. That said, I couldn't imagine the bench was all that comfortable considering it was made of stone.

"With that troublemaker no longer bothering us," I said, slowly rising to my feet and picking up Liliana, "maybe I'll start acting my age a bit." I walked over to the center of the garden and sprawled across the grass.

“Funny you say that when you’re only five years old on paper.”

I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m just a kid.

I spread my arms and legs wide, lying in the middle of the garden. The sun felt so warm. That warmth was greatly accentuated by the cold breeze. If there was anything to be grateful for after having been reborn, it was that I could still handle and enjoy the sunlight. If I had been born as a night elf, I probably wouldn’t have been as lucky. Sprawling the same way I was, Liliana rested her chin on my stomach. Having finally relaxed, she was snoring in no time. As a forest elf, she probably loved the sun even more than I did.

Layla walked over and took a seat beside us. “Feel free to sleep on my lap, dear,” she said with a smile, smoothing out her uniform’s skirt.

“Oh. Thanks.” Though I initially hesitated, I figured declining would be rude, so I shuffled over and put my head in her lap. The firmness of her thighs combined with the warmth of her skin was as comfortable as it was embarrassing.

Man…what a pillow. If only I could lie on my side…curse these damn horns! I could use **Anthromorphy**, but weakening myself like that out in the open was too risky. *Though…maybe I could ask her to do this again once we get back to our rooms?*

“H-How is it?”

“The best.”

My bluntness earned a shy laugh from Layla as she proceeded to stroke my hair. “This time I’ll do the petting.”

Oh. Yeah, I guess normally I was the one doling out the pets. This spiced things up for a change. Layla’s slender white fingers gently massaged my head.

So this is what it feels like to get pet? No wonder everyone else loves it so much.

With the brilliant, warm sun overhead, the best possible lap pillow underneath my head, all topped off with a massage…it was like I had stumbled into paradise.

Layla had a deep, affectionate smile on her face as she let out another chuckle. The sincerity of that gesture made me feel apologetic all over again.

“Sorry. I was pretty rough back there.”

“It was nothing. There’s no need to worry any longer…” Layla smiled again, having heard the apology plenty of times already.

“But…the way I just grabbed your face like that…” Not to

mention forcing a kiss on her. I had figured such an obvious and open display of my affection and "ownership" would help ward off the dark dragons in the future.

"Ah…that." Guessing at what I meant, Layla scowled a bit. "That was mean. You really caught me by surprise there."

"I'm sorry." Even if I had done it out of a desire to protect her, I had still done it without her permission. It was no wonder she'd found it unpleasant—

"So." Layla suddenly put her hands on either side of my face, then with a big smile leaned forward. The next thing I felt was a soft sensation on my forehead. "Payback," she said, sitting back up with a serious expression…which she failed to maintain, eventually averting her eyes with a blush.

I felt my whole body go hot. Wait, Layla's legs were getting hot too! Wh-What was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to react to this?!

Ante! Help me!

"You expect me to have all the answers?!"

Gah, at least stop throwing a fit inside me!

The sound of stone breaking cut through the warm atmosphere. As Layla looked up to search for the source of the noise, I could immediately feel her tense up.

"What is it?" Sitting up, I followed Layla's gaze. "Oh."

And there was the source—with those glassy eyes.

"Hiiiii Ziiiiiil!" Far from us basking in the sunlight, the figure was cloaked in the darkness of the corridor's shadows. There stood a certain lich with a bright, artificial smile. "What a coincidence running into you here!" Enma's fingers had punched deep into the stone pillar beside her.

"Oh, Enma." To think we would cross paths here once again. She wasn't stalking me or anything, was she? Man, getting caught being all lovey-dovey with Layla was kinda embarrassing. I had totally let my guard down.

Enma gave a bit of a strangled laugh. See, she could barely contain herself. I had always gone to great lengths to act cool around her, but that image was definitely shattered now.

"S-Seriously?" Ante muttered, her voice trembling.

What's wrong?

"N-Nothing. If you haven't picked up on it then…it's fine."

Every time Enma is around you act like this. Why? Her magic doesn't influence you or anything, does it?

“So…what are you up to, Zil? You two seem to be getting along quite well.” Enma said, tilting her head slightly. The cadence in which she spoke and the way in which she carried herself was akin to a mechanical doll with broken gears.

“Just enjoying some sunlight. Also, there’s actually three of us here.” With Liliana now awake, I picked her up and put her on my lap. For some reason Liliana was also giving me a flabbergasted look. What was that about?

“I-Is that…so…” Enma said with another awkward laugh. Another crack resounded as her fingers dug deeper into the stone.

Man, she had an incredible grip. But why was she showing that off? Was she just that proud of being able to strengthen one of her bodies? I guess that kind of strength would make her quite the formidable opponent in hand-to-hand combat.

Liliana gave a pitiful whine, starting to tremble at the obviously uneasy atmosphere. Even Layla had started to pale.

“Come on, this isn’t the first time you two have met Enma, right? Wait, is this actually Liliana’s first time?”

“I-It’s not…the first time we’ve met, but…” Layla said haltingly, looking to me as if for protection. Well, I guess it was kinda scary seeing a lich showing off their strength out of the blue. Liliana seemed downright terrified. I guess to a dog it looked like Enma was threatening us and Liliana likely couldn’t figure out why that was.

“There’s no need to be so scared, Liliana. She’s a lich that used to be human,” I said, gently rocking Liliana back and forth. “She’s an undead, but she’s extremely intelligent. Not only does she have a good sense of humor, but she also has a great sense of style. Sometimes she finds ways to surprise you, kinda like now, but she’s a wonderful person. There’s never a dull moment when she’s around.” I did my best to paint Enma in a positive light to make Liliana relax. I wasn’t lying either. Things were definitely never boring with her around, and she was a *wonderful* enemy.

Liliana gave a quiet whine, as if to express her doubt in my words as she gave Enma another look. Meanwhile, Enma, being Enma, was staring back at us slack-jawed for some reason.

“Hey, Enma, you’re kind of scaring my dog. Can you take it easy on that pillar for me?”

“Huh? O-Oh! Whoops!” At my request, Enma finally noticed what she had done to the stone pillar, immediately snapping her

hand away. Man, she sure was shameless. They'd probably need to get a Corvut craftsman to come fix it. "Ah, sorry." Enma started to laugh. "Looks like I got a bit...carried away." Stretching her fingers, the full range of her expressions was put on display as she rapidly shifted between panic, seriousness, smiling, and concern. "U-Um, Zil!"

"What's up?"

"W-Was all of that... Were you being serious?"

"Serious about what?"

"When you said I...I was w-wonderful..." she asked, fidgeting with her fingers.

"Yeah, of course I was," I responded with a bright smile. "I don't think there's a single person in the entire world who even comes close to how you are." She was easily the greatest enemy I had!

"Zil...!" Enma's breathing started turning ragged as she pressed her hands to her chest. "Jeez...my heart almost stopped there...!"

"Didn't your heart stop a long time ago? You're undead."

"Not at all. This body's heart is operating just fine. Though, it isn't pumping blood anymore."

Huh? Really? That was quite interesting. Was that another secret of Enma's handcrafted bodies?

"Fascinating. I really can't take my eyes off you, can I?" Whether it came to her skills as a lich or her personality, I couldn't let my guard down around her for a second.

"Z-Zil...! If you talk like that, you're going to make me blush!" Enma replied, putting her hands to her face and exaggeratedly squirming in embarrassment.

"Every time I'm around you, I can't help but want to get to know you better." I'd love to learn precisely how she made her bodies.

"J-Jeez! You're so bold today! B-But...just because it's you!" Eyes fluttering back and forth in a bizarre tempo, fingers whirling as if to show off her dexterity, Enma finally nodded to herself. "Yah!"

In one swift motion, her robe was sent flying.

Wait, she's naked?!

Or so I thought. Just like during our first encounter, not only was her body flat and generic, but it also lacked anything in the way of sexual characteristics. And then she crouched down and kicked off— *Crap!*

“Liliana, move!”

“Ziiiiiiiiil!” She dashed toward me at full speed. Without an ounce of hesitation, she charged right at me in the middle of the sunlight.

Pushing Liliana to the side, I tried to stand up and push Enma back out of the sunlight, but she was so fast and her charge so powerful that she ended up crashing right into me—turning my motion into more of a hug.

“Ahhhhhh Ziiiiiil!!!” For a dead body, she was far softer than I had imagined…but she was still cold. And she was holding on tight! I couldn’t get her off of me! And why was she wearing perfume?!

Just as expected, her body quickly began to puff with smoke under the direct sunlight, before quickly bursting into flames.

“Waaaaah!” I gave a rather pathetic scream as the two of us were engulfed in fire.

Owowowowowow… Ow?

Actually, it wasn’t that hot? The flames weren’t hurting me at all.

“Ahhhh… You’re the best, Zil… Next time, I’ll teach you every little thing about how my bodies work…” As my face turned serious, Enma looked at me with an airy, elated smile.

And the next moment, she was a pile of ash.

“Uh…” Layla blurted out, matching Liliana’s confused whine. “U-Um! Th-Those ashes are…!” Layla suddenly started to panic, pointing at the pile of ash lying on the grass.

“This is how she does her experiments on surviving sunlight. For her, this is pretty normal.”

“Ah…” Layla was quite taken aback by the way of life (way of death?) of liches.

Liliana bashfully approached the pile of ash and gave it a sniff, triggering a violent sneeze. Enma’s remains were kicked up into a cloud, filling the air around us. *Stop it! That’ll mess up our lungs! It’s not like a high elf would have to worry about that! But ethically speaking, it’s still pretty bad!*

Anyway, in terms of speed, Enma had exceeded my expectations roughly three times over. Even if my guard was down, she had hit me dead-on with that charge. If this had been a battlefield, I’d have been turned into one of her zombies by now.

“It really is always violence when it comes to you and Enma, isn’t

it?"

Violence? I mean, what else is supposed to come to mind when thinking about her?

"Um, dear..." Layla called out to me again.

"Yeah?"

"Back then you said she was 'wonderful,'" Layla's lips curled into a bit of a pout. "That...you thought she was the greatest person in the world. Is that true?"

Her transparent appeal left me with a wry grin. "Yeah. That was one-hundred-percent true." Layla's gaze dropped at my casual reply. "*In* the world though, right?" My next words then took her by surprise, her eyes opening wide. "She does live underground, after all. But you're more at home up in the sky, yeah?" I knelt down, giving her a smile. "If you count above and below, no one beats you."

Those were my honest feelings too. Layla's brilliant silver shine in the night sky had been by far the most beautiful thing I had ever witnessed.

"Oh you..." Despite being the one to start it, Layla's face turned bright red as she smacked my chest.

Ha ha ha! What a cutie.

Then, without a word, while staring into each other's eyes...we held hands...

"Ah! They're flirting again!"

...when yet another voice interrupted us. Turning around, I saw a girl wearing a heavy hood standing in the corridor's shadows. She was squealing, hands covering her face as if to protect her eyes from some indecent sight. Yet her fingers were spread wide enough to make it obvious that she was still watching us.

"This time it's Claire, huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Claire fumed at my fed up response, before realizing how out of line she was and slapping a hand over her mouth while looking around. Unlike Enma, Claire didn't have a court rank, so she couldn't be quite so happy-go-lucky around me. "Ahem. I have a message from my master, Count Enma. 'Sorry about my disorderly behavior. Would you be available for a lecture tomorrow?'"

"Yeah, that's fine. And don't worry, it didn't bother me."

"Understood. Man, the prof really got worked to the bone on the front lines. She's been pretty explosive ever since we got

back.” Claire gave a bitter expression as she let out a laugh. I see. So all that pent-up stress due to her workload given by the demonic kingdom could make her explode like that. Even though the undead had no real reason to rest their bodies, it seemed they still had mental limits! Since high-level undead had their souls mostly intact, their emotional quirks stuck around. That was good to know.

“Is that so? Sounds rough.” But of course, on the surface I needed to show some sympathy.

“But with you back and all, that’s good news for me!” Claire continued. “Watching her count the days ’til you got back was such a pain in the neck…” I guess things were pretty rough for Claire too. I knew for sure I’d have my hands full trying to keep up with Enma around the clock.

“So anyway, we’ll see ya tomorrow. Look forward to it!” Giggling like a little girl that had just set a prank in motion, Claire turned and started walking away. “We’ve got souls from heroes, priests, mages, and Swordmasters all lined up and ready for you!” She listed off the rare “materials” they had collected like they were options on a menu.

Oh yeah, I knew. This wasn’t a peaceful human kingdom. It was the heart of this damn, rotten demonic kingdom.

Chapter 3: The Time for Blasphemy

The granite-carved room gave off every impression of a morgue. A number of human and beastfolk bodies were unceremoniously lined up. It was rough, cold, and lifeless. The thick smell of death mingled with the sharp scent of antiseptic in the air.

But this morgue was anything but quiet.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaah!”

There was no one resting in peace here.

Right before my eyes, the soul of a Swordmaster was screaming in anguish after being drawn back to the world of the living against its will. A muddled curse, taking the form of something like a circular saw, gave an ominous roar as it closed in on the soul, tearing into its “flesh.”

“It only hurts at the start,” Enma explained beside me as she manipulated the dark magic.

“Aaaaaaaggggghhhhhh! Stooooooop!”

The Swordmaster’s soul had initially been resolutely defiant and unwilling to cooperate with either Enma or the demonic kingdom, but now it wailed in agony shamelessly. Its face, then nose, then ears were all ripped apart, even its spiritual eyes destroyed, leaving empty cavities. Finally it even lost its voice, reduced only to the clacking of its teeth. It was like it was being reduced to nothing more than a mannequin. All identifiable features from its time in life had been stripped away, leaving no trace of its former personality or dignity.

“No matter how ugly or beautiful, remove their skin and all that’s left is meat,” Enma said with an artificial looking smile, her voice almost singing. Of course, her work didn’t so much as slow down. “Once there’s nothing left but a lump of meat, you could even mistake a slave for a king. If you strip that away and leave only the skeleton, all that remains is the fact it was once a person. So, what do you think, Mr. Swordmaster?” Enma spoke again to the Swordmaster, now reduced to literally no more than just a collection of bones. “Are you up for cooperating now?”

The bones rattled as the soul gave a nod. It felt like I was watching some kind of sick puppet show.

“Fantastic. Welcome to a world without pain!” Enma poured dark magic into the body at her feet. The soul, retaining virtually no traces of its former self, was sucked inside the body…which began to twitch. With clumsy, jerky movements, the Swordmaster grabbed the battered blade and round shield at its sides and stumbled to its feet.

Right now I, as Demon Prince Zilbagias, could clearly sense that dark magic had infused it, forcing its bones to move. This was a low-level undead, not unlike the countless I had encountered and had defeated on the battlefield. Though it looked like it still had flesh and blood, in reality it was just a skeleton puppet. The undead Swordmaster stood unsteadily, mouth working soundlessly, eyes empty and blind.

“Try swinging your sword,” Enma ordered, and the creature immediately obeyed.

Its curved blade whirled about, its movements lacking in any skill or technique. It was swinging merely with brute force. The refined skills it had possessed in life were nowhere to be found, leaving only this pathetic imitation.

“There you go, Zil,” Enma said, turning her artificial smile on me. “Even a Swordmaster loses their skills from life when they become an undead. In fact, they can’t use any swordsmanship at all.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I replied, keeping my face calm as I struggled to keep my nausea contained. “Tearing away its personality means its memories are also gone, right? I’m surprised it can hold and swing the sword at all in the first place.”

“That’s because I kept the bare minimum of personality intact. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say I left the core of it as a person. So it can do basic movements. Stop!” At Enma’s command, the undead Swordmaster froze in place, sword still in the air. “March in place.” Like a soldier on his first day of training, the Swordmaster began stomping his feet on the spot.

A Swordmaster who was once capable of transcending time and space and moving faster than lightning was now no more than a clumsy puppet. It was almost comical.

“Relax, Alex. You are getting too intense,” Ante warned me.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to relax. That was when I realized my hands had been tightly clenched, leaving me somewhat surprised there were no traces of blood.

“I’ve experimented with them a bit before. Having Swordmasters, Fistmasters…really, any Weaponmasters would be a big boost to our forces.” Enma sighed, oblivious to my behavior. “I tried sealing away their consciousness, modifying their memories to see me as an ally, and then asking them to show off their skills. I’ve tried just shaving off only the hostile parts of their consciousness. But nothing seems to work,” she said with a disappointed shrug. “Does their pride as martial artists have something to do with it? Perhaps the skills are tied to their own sense of dignity? Or maybe the magic used to animate their bodies causes the laws of nature to stop smiling on them?”

“Maybe,” I gave a distracted reply, my attention stolen by the rage boiling up in my stomach.

You’d never understand, would you, Enma? All you do is play with the dead. No way you’d ever understand the blood, sweat, and tears these masters had to endure on the path to swordsmanship!

Behind every swing of their blade was their very heart and soul. That was what allowed them to overcome the laws of nature. That was why their techniques surpassed understanding! Their soul itself was the core of their technique! But she just used them like playthings with her dark, filthy magic. Something so vile and disgusting could never produce a divine miracle. Assuming she could was the height of arrogance!

“Though there are those like Virossa.” In contrast to my seething anger, Ante’s voice was cold. *“Despite being in constant use of magic, they can sometimes use such transcendent techniques. So if you are correct, that the soul is the core of the technique…then perhaps if the soul is left unmodified…”*

That was right, wasn’t it? It was pointless to get so angry. All I could do was let them die. I was in a lich’s lair—surrounded by undead. Not only did I have no idea where Enma’s true body was, but I had also only recently started learning how to defend one’s soul from attacks. So I had a long way to go until I fully understood how souls really worked. Nothing I did here could save the Swordmasters.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Prince?” A hand patted me on the shoulder from behind. And then a sly grin slid into view. “You don’t look so good.” It was Claire.

“I’m a soldier myself, so I guess seeing all this sparked some feelings in me.” I gave a despondent sigh. “I don’t know how

much effort this man put into his training, but to see it all amount to this…it's kind of depressing."

"You're so kind, Zil. Especially for a demon. But that's what I like about you," Enma giggled.

"Huh. That's the first time I've seen that smile." Was that a new variation she had made?

"Of course you would notice! Sure makes me glad I put in the extra effort!" Enma returned to a more familiar bright smile, clearly getting excited.

"The professor has been practicing that one all day," Claire added.

"We don't need to talk about that!"

"Whoa!"

With her usual unbelievable speed, Enma attempted to strike Claire, who likewise reacted remarkably quickly to dodge. Even in the smallest of ways they were showing off their unreal physical abilities. I really couldn't lower my guard for even a second around these two.

"But really, it takes a lot of practice to get the expressions right for when you actually need to use them." Claire's face then flashed through serious, enraged, happy, and troubled, before settling back on her mischievous grin from before. An expression that she had come up with herself, her own method of self-expression.

"I'm getting a bit thirsty. Do you have anything to drink?" I asked after a bitter swallow.

"Ah! We do! I've got tea just for times like this! Today's a bit special, so why don't I put it on for you myself!"

"The professor's been putting in a lot of practice into that too."

"I told you we don't need to bring that up! Feel free to practice while you wait, Zil. Why not try with the forest elf over there? It's pretty beat-up though, so it's not like you'll be able to do anything fancy." With that, Enma danced her way out of the room.

Practice, huh?

"All right Mr. Prince, let's see what you've got!" Claire laughed, settling in to spectate.

I found my hand reaching toward Adamas of its own accord. There was nothing particularly new about the feeling, but seeing my childhood friend so happily wielding such heretical magic—at

least, happy on the surface—was extremely hard to watch. It made me want to burn everything down.

Dammit… I know, I know. Not now.

"Okay, I'll take a stab at it," I said, mostly to convince myself, with all the gravity of one deciding to go on a walk. I turned to face the pile of bodies. Enma had especially preserved these bodies for my sake.

"So, if I remember right, by forcing the soul back into the body before modifying it and putting it to sleep, you can keep it from deteriorating." I gave a small sigh after repeating what I had just learned from Enma's lecture.

"Exactly. Going to the spiritual world causes them to start degrading over time. People who are magically powerful are one thing, but normal humans and beastfolk will lose most of their form after a few days," Claire said with a nod.

Once animated, all the undead required was a source of magic to last forever. In other words, that meant the soul serving as an undead's core didn't deteriorate. In short, if you made the absolute weakest form of undead, you could use a physical body as something like a storage tank for preserving souls.

"Not unlike what you have done with those bones," Ante commented.

Yeah, before I had any idea what I was doing, I had managed to accomplish the same thing. The bones I always had on me contained the sleeping soul of the veteran human soldier from that first group of humans I had ever killed. In a way, it was also kinda like a storage for souls.

"**Necromancy** is really versatile, isn't it?"

"That's what makes learning it worthwhile, right?" Claire giggled with a playful smile. Although the expression suited her all too well, it hopelessly stuck out like a sore thumb in this underground cavern full of corpses.

"Do you often store souls like this?" I asked casually as I pretended to peruse the bodies to decide on one for myself.

"Hmm, not really," Claire said, putting a finger to her mouth in thought. "Even if they're left asleep, they still need to be fed magic over time. Keeping a lot of them around would start to add up pretty quickly. So we don't really do long-term storage. Plenty of people die all the time, so there's no need to save them."

"Ah. That makes sense." *Dead bodies and souls are a dime a*

dozen on the battlefield, huh? Dammit.

"So, which will it be, Mr. Prince?" With Claire urging me to hurry, I reluctantly singled out a body that was in particularly bad shape.

I guess I'll do this one. Maybe something inside me was trying to steer me toward the least human looking body in the lot. Reciting the incantation, I pulled the soul out of its body.

"U-Ugh..." A translucent shade appeared, likely a forest elf, groaning in pain. "Likely" because it had already lost much of its shape. Apparently the magic that had killed it had been mixed with curses so the soul had taken a considerable amount of damage. But despite its worn out appearance, it was still clearly rather well featured. The first thing that caught my eye was that one of its long, pointed ears was missing.

Souls generally took the form of how they recognized themselves, so the fact it was missing an ear meant that ear must have been gone for quite a long time. It was possible healing the injury to its ear had been put off for so long as a means to preserve magic. That was a common occurrence on the front lines.

"Ah, this one was already like this when we pulled it out," Claire claimed, seemingly her attempt at making some sort of excuse. It would be like someone saying meat in an icehouse didn't go bad, only to open the door to be greeted by the stench of rotten meat. I could see why she was a bit defensive. That was basically her way of saying, "It was rotten before we put it in there, I swear."

"It looks like it took quite the beating from whatever magic killed them. So, don't worry about it," I said with a shrug. "If you hadn't preserved it, it probably would have only lasted a few more days, right?"

"Probably."

"So...let's give it a try." As unpleasant as it sounded, I readied myself to awaken the soul...

"Is...someone...there?" But the forest elf already began to murmur. Apparently it had been startled halfway to wakefulness by being pulled from its body.

"Be careful now. It might fire off light magic the moment it wakes up," Claire warned.

"Got it. Guess it's time to use that magical defensive layer I just learned?"

“If you can pull that off without even practicing once, you’ll really have my respect.”

“Oh, so you don’t respect me now?”

“Uh, whoops!”

While Claire and I bantered back and forth…

“Someone…anyone…please…” the forest elf’s voice reached my ears. *“That…green-haired demon prince…the way he uses his magic…I have to tell…”*

Green-haired demon prince? That could only be referring to *him*. The one who destroyed my village…*our* village—the fourth demon prince, Emergias!

If memory served me right, most of these bodies were picked up from Deftelos. Upon closer inspection, the forest elf’s body was marred with dozens of slash marks. Were those from blades of wind? Had he been killed as a direct result of that green bastard’s magic?

Emergias was famous for his use of the Izanis family’s **Curse of Transmission**. The Bloodline Magics used by the demonic kingdom’s major players were pretty well-known, so there wasn’t much value in that.

However, knowledge of the devil he had made a pact with was a different story. Emergias the Envious. He had earned that moniker due to his ever-so-apparent dissatisfaction, never so much as attempting to hide his displeasure. But, according to the rumors, he also had a pact with a Devil of Envy.

To repeat myself yet again, knowledge of devil pacts was kept strictly secret in demonic society. It was perfectly normal to keep the identity of a devil one had made a pact with and the authority they wielded under wraps. In fact, it was seen as quite rude to inquire about someone else’s. It typically would reveal itself on the battlefield eventually…but not all magics could be so easily deciphered just by seeing them put into use. Emergias’s was one such example. Though if I could figure out the name of his devil, I could at least ask Sophia about it.

“But no such name was found in the records.” Ante sighed.

Unfortunately, the name of his devil hadn’t been made public. In fact, it being a Devil of Envy had never been officially confirmed. The rumors said it gave him a powerful weakening curse, but…

*“‘Weakening’ could be in reference to any number of things. Even my power of **Taboo** could be seen as a weakening curse by the*

unfamiliar eye."

In other words, we still didn't have a clue.

But there was likely truth to the rumors. According to records, from the time he had first gone to battle until now, he had taken down numerous heroes and elven mages. His power may have been something tuned specifically to taking down those more powerful than him.

Had this forest elf caught a glimpse of that? Typically, demon princes and princesses fought alongside their own families. And in particular, the Izanis family was quite tight-lipped. There would likely never be a chance like this to get information on Emergias again. I wasn't going to pass this up! I'd have to use **Necromancy** to make him talk—

"I'm sorry...everyone... I've just screwed everything up..." The elf's face twisted in pain, as if beset by a nightmare. *"If I...hadn't died...we could have at least retreated..."*

No, not "as if." That was likely exactly what he was experiencing.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry...Char...please, forgive me..." His voice overflowed with regret.

Apparently he wasn't just some ordinary forest elf. His abilities as a mage had probably been so great that their unit had been organized around him. Now that I thought about it, I remembered Emergias talking about cutting down an elite squad that had infiltrated his camp. This elf might have been one of them. Suddenly I really wanted to hear his story. But how would I go about doing that? I suppose first, I needed the technique to warp his perception—

"I'm sorry... I couldn't get Leonardo...home safe..."

I froze.

Leonardo? That name was fresh in my memory. That was the same name as the hero that had been forced to lead an "army" of slaves against me back in the Rage territory. Well, the name wasn't super uncommon so it could have been nothing more than a coincidence.

But...if this forest elf was an elite as I suspected, naturally he would have been in the company of Swordmasters and heroes. And I knew Leonardo had been captured in battle and shipped to the Rage territory. When had he been taken captive? I heard they had given him three weeks to train the slaves. Traveling from the front lines in Deftelos to the Rage territory would take about a

week.

In other words…it had been about a month since he was taken captive. The timing of Emergias's story lined up perfectly.

"Except the elf said he couldn't get them home safely. Does that not mean they were killed?"

Ante raised a good point, helping me to calm down. So maybe it was just a coincidence?

"I'm sorry…Els…Ermanno…Orban…" The forest elf continued calling his friends' names, his face still contorted in pain.

What would happen if I woke him up now and spoke to him? If he saw I was a demon, his hated foe? There certainly wouldn't be any talking.

And though his soul was still fairly fresh, that didn't change the fact that it was in terrible shape. If I tried to use **Necromancy** to force him to speak, a single slipup could destroy his mind and take his memories with it. If my only objective here was to practice turning unwilling souls into undead, there wouldn't be an issue with that.

But I really needed to hear what he knew about the green-headed bastard.

"So, what will you do?" Ante asked.

What else can I do? I'll just ask him honestly.

I closed my eyes and drew a picture in my mind of a boy that looked the same age as I did, his hair still silver but with black eyes and dark tanned skin.

In an instant, color seemed to drain from the world. I ignored the surprised "huh?" from behind me. Rubbing a hand across my head, I felt nothing but soft, smooth hair— My horns were gone. All thanks to **Anthromorphy**.

"Excuse me, sir! The elven mage!" Putting strength into my voice, I called out to the forest elf's soul.

"Who's…there? Is someone there?" The elf immediately started looking around, as if snapping out of a trance.

"Right here! In front of you!" This time my voice brought his eyes to focus on me.

"A human! What luck! No…wait. What happened…to me…?" The elf started to panic, finally realizing his current situation. *"I thought…to let Dogasin escape…I took the magic…didn't I die…?"*

"Please, calm down. Listen. My name is Zil. I'm sorry, but…yes, you died. I'm a necromancer."

"A necromancer?!"

The forest elf's eyes went wide, and he immediately lifted a hand toward me.

Crap!

"Please wait! I'm not your enemy! I'm with the Holy Church!"

"The Church...?"

"Yes. The Church shelters those like me born with an affinity for dark magic and trains us in the ways of **Necromancy**."

"Why would they do that?" Though confused, he halted his attack. Maybe because of all the damage done to his soul or the confusion from having just woken up, he couldn't think straight, but his sense of suspicion was still perfectly intact. *"I've never heard...such a thing!"*

"It's top secret, of course," I responded seriously to his suspicious gaze. This was really painful. I couldn't just show him my holy magic. "Just now...before you woke up, you mentioned someone named Leonardo." Though I had to talk as though there was a lump of lead in my throat, I managed to force the name out. "Is that a hero you knew?"

The elf was silent.

"He was about this tall...with a thin face, bluish eyes. Brown hair cut really short. In his mid-twenties, and used fire magic?"

The elf's eyes went wide.

"And he sang... Did he often sing? Perhaps maybe the Silverlight Anthem?"

I brought up as many concrete details as I could, and each one caused the elf to sink deeper into shock.

Ah. So it was him.

"No way...you..."

"Yes. It's because of him I learned what a hero's pride really means..." I said, each word feeling like I was spitting blood. I couldn't have been more honest if I had tried.

"He...what happened to him?"

"He also fell in battle. Though unlike you, I wasn't able to draw his soul out. However, after your attack on the demon's camp, the retreat of the Demon King's army allowed us to retrieve your remains."

"Really...that's how it happened..." The forest elf mage gave a small sigh, filled with regret...and just a hint of relief. *"So our sacrifice...meant something..."*

The only reason the demons had retreated was because the Izanis family had finished ravaging the land they were permitted

to. It had nothing to do with his squad's attack…but there was no reason to bring that up.

"You mentioned something about having information on a demon prince?"

"That's right! I took an attack directly from Demon Prince Emergias! I need to tell someone!" Pressing himself to the edge of the barrier containing his soul, the elf started gushing words. *"First, he uses wind magic. He can get past the protection of the spirits, and has a curse to steal the magical power of his enemies. In the middle of the battle, his curse made it so I couldn't use magic at all."*

That would be deadly. There was no need to guess what would happen to Weaponmasters once stripped of their magical protection.

"That isn't to say my power was sealed. It was more like it was stolen. I could feel the world losing color, similar to the feeling when a large-scale ritual consumes all the magic from you at once. Right before my power vanished, a cut he delivered to my face started to burn, and I could hear him whispering the curse as if directly into my ear. The likely explanation is that wounding the enemy is his curse's requirement in some way. He might also be able to use his wind magic to send curses or magic words over great distances. I can't think of any other way he could break through my barrier…!"

Incredible. He had seen through the Izanis family's **Curse of Transmission** almost perfectly. And as suspected, the devil Emergias had made a pact with didn't possess the authority to simply weaken his foes.

"Stealing their power, is it? How very fitting for a Devil of Envy. No doubt it leverages extreme jealousy to make the power of one's opponent into their own. Magically binding with the target by means of the inflicted wound, and then utilizing the ***Curse of Transmission*** *allows him to activate it from a distance, significantly increasing its effective range. That is quite a lethal combination."*

In contrast to my excitement, Ante's reflection on the information was cold and calculating.

"Thank you! This information is as valuable as the Sacred Tree's own fruit!" I thanked him from the bottom of my heart, looking straight into his eyes. "Now that I have received your message, you have my word that we will make the most out of it!"

"Ah…" The elf's face relaxed, as if a spirit possessing him had

suddenly lifted. *“Thank goodness. I had so much regret. If I didn’t tell someone…I felt like I would never be able to rest. I also told this to Sir Dogasin…but I have no idea if he made it back. Hey, you. Do you know of Sir Dogasin?”*

“I’m…sorry. I don’t.” *Damn. My story was that we had collected their remains from the front lines. Should I know who this Dogasin person is?*

“I see…” But the elf didn’t press the matter. All of the sudden, it seemed like he had lost interest in this world. That meant… *“I really wish…I could have seen the Sacred Tree one last time…”*

With a soft sigh, the forest elf closed his eyes…and dissipated like a cloud of smoke.

After relaying the information he had learned about Emergias, with his greatest regret having been absolved, he no longer had the strength to keep himself together. I never managed to even learn his name.

But I hadn’t lied to him. That information would inevitably be useful. And I would get revenge for him—by killing Emergias myself.

So please…rest in peace.

“Mr. Prince…?” I heard a girl call out from behind me.

Oh. I had totally forgotten she was there. Turning around to face Claire—

“What the heck is this?!” Her eyes were sparkling. Blazing, even. “You turned into a human?!”

*Well, it is **Anthromorphy**, so…*

“You’re adorable!” Faster than I could react with my dulled senses, she lunged forward, grabbed me, and started rubbing my head. What cruel trick of fate was this?



“Ack, stop it!” Releasing my transformation, I pushed her away. Seeing my horns and magical presence return, Claire backed off.

“Ew…”

“What do you mean, ‘ew’?!”

Stop staring at me like I’m covered in filth! Keep looking at me like that and you’ll remind me I’m now actually a damn dirty demon!

“Out of nowhere you got all strong. That’s not cute, not at all.” Claire’s face fell.

“So that’s your standard of cuteness?”

“Before you were like…a little baby chick!”

“A chick?”

“Tiny, weak…so little I could have crushed you with one hand…”

“Please don’t.”

That stirred up something of a memory within me. She had liked baby birds, hadn’t she? I remembered her always doting over the chicks. Just recalling how much she cried and cried when she had learned they came from the eggs she loved scarfing down almost made me burst out laughing. Where had that little girl gone…?

“Hey! Can you turn back into a human again?” she asked.

“No.” I didn’t need her crushing me with one hand! Unfortunately…as she was now, I couldn’t really trust Claire.

“But wow, you surprised me. Was that **Anthromorphy**?”

“You know of it?”

“I mean, we see dragons walking around in human form all the time, right? And the prof is always talking with the king of the dark dragons at her meetings.”

I guess that’s true.

“Also, Mr. Prince, about that elf earlier. Who is Leonardo? How did you know him?” Claire’s tone dropped slightly, her head taking an innocent, curious tilt. Of course, that innocence was shallow.

“Just a coincidence,” I replied, looking back to the now empty shell that was the elf’s body. “When I visited the Rage territory, I had a chance to fight against a hero they had taken captive. His name was Leonardo.”

“Wow…” Claire’s gaze moved between me and the pile of bodies. “Ah. They’re from the Deftelos warfront. Guess it’s no wonder they knew each other. Any recent captives likely came

from the same place." So maybe less of a coincidence, and more of an inevitability. "What also caught me by surprise is that you know about the Silverlight Anthem. It's a human song, after all. And that thing you said about the fruit of the Sacred Tree? That's definitely an elven saying. But the *most* surprising part? Hearing you talk all polite like an actual schoolboy!"

Claire's smile didn't budge. In other words, the undead equivalent of being expressionless. She was definitely suspicious of me, right?

"That certainly seems to be the case. Feel free to allay her concerns."

But unfortunately for Claire, I had plenty of believable excuses.

"The human slave militia I fought in the Rage territory sang that anthem. In fact, I heard them sing it right before our final battle, so it left a bit of an impression." I kept my mouth shut regarding the slaves I had brought back with me. After all, I didn't want them to end up as "material" for "practice."

"As for the forest elf saying, I just knew that one. One of my devil servants was teaching me elven poetry. I can recite 'The Song of Queen Tatiana' or 'King Erismos' for you if you'd like. I know how I look, but I'm pretty cultured, you know."

My serious answer drew a burst of breath out of Claire as she looked away, probably the undead equivalent of a sudden burst of laughter.

"Also my father is the Demon King. You think I can talk casually like this with him? I'm pretty high up in the hierarchy, but there are still plenty even above me."

"Wow, what an arrogant way of putting it!"

"Well, I *am* a prince. It's not arrogance, I'm actually just important." As I made a show of puffing up with "pride," Claire once again got into something akin to a laughing fit.

"Ah. I see. That explains how you were able to trick him." After a good while, she finally calmed down, muttering almost as if disappointed.

"You make it sound so bad. I think I was pretty honest with him, in my own way."

"Somehow that feels worse," Claire said, shifting her gaze to the now-empty barrier. "Looks like he's totally disappeared."

"He had some pretty strong regrets. But any info on the other heirs is pretty valuable. I'll definitely be putting it to good use," I

said, trying to return my expression to one befitting a prince.

"To go back to the topic of **Anthromorphy**," Claire said, turning to me. "I thought only dragons could use that magic." Her artificial eyes lit up with curiosity once more. "I had no idea demons could use it too."

I hesitated a bit before responding. "A dragon taught me it."

"Oh! Do you think undead like us could use it?"

I couldn't help but wonder. Honestly, I was quite curious about it myself.

"Virossa said that in human form he was only slightly susceptible to sunburn. It made it safe for him to operate in sunlight," Ante recalled.

If they could use it…wouldn't that put them on a fast track to achieving Enma's dream? Oh crap! That would be terrible! Wait…would it?

Even if he was resilient against sunlight, Virossa still suffered from holy magic. If the undead I knew were to use **Anthromorphy**, wouldn't they actually become *easier* to kill? Like if Enma transformed, she would no doubt be doing so with her real body. She'd have nowhere left to run. That said, Enma's existence was like a statement that the concept of being "alive" was flawed. It might be hard to convince her to do it in the first place.

"Well, there are some conditions to learn it." I crossed my arms, pretending to sink into thought. "You guys don't eat anything, right?"

"Of course not. Not having those animalistic cravings is one of our strong points."

"In order to learn **Anthromorphy**, you need to drink the blood of a live dragon."

"Ew. Just straight blood?" Claire's face scrunched into a scowl.

The question was whether the physical act of drinking the blood was sufficient to complete the ritual, or if that blood actually needed to be digested and infused into your flesh and bone. If the act was purely ritualistic, then those without a living body like undead could probably acquire it. But if it wasn't, then any attempts by undead would be in vain.

"Ah…I guess this isn't something the prof would be up for."

"Even though her dream is to conquer the sun?"

"Still, returning to a living body after being granted the freedom of death kind of defeats the purpose."

So Claire felt the same way?

"And above all, she would never drink blood like some kind of vampire," she said with a shrug.

Like a vampire. Hearing that reminded me that there was supposed to be a faction of vampire lords somewhere in the castle.

"Not that I have ever seen one," Ante commented.

Honestly, I had just about forgotten about them myself. It was weird to think that considering we were all awake through the night. Had I even seen one since the assault on the castle?

"What's wrong, Mr. Prince?"

"Oh, you bringing them up made me remember vampires are around, but it's kinda strange I've never seen them."

"Probably because you're friends with us, right?"

What?

"We, or I should say the professor, are on *really* bad terms with them."

"Oh?"

Why is that? Shouldn't they all be happy little undead friends?

"According to the prof, vampires are immortal, but they aren't undead. After all, they still have beating hearts, they still need to drink blood, they can still reproduce..."

"A-Ah..." *Now that I think about it...* "So practically speaking they're actually closer to being alive, huh?"

The Church lumped them in with the undead, but the fact they had beating hearts and still needed to feed (even if just on blood) made them closer to living things.

"Exactly. And on top of that, we are planning on turning all the humans in the world into undead, right? The vampires keep making a fuss about it since we'll be taking away all their food."

So on a fundamental level they just couldn't get along. I wanted to say "serves them right," but humanity would suffer no matter who came out on top, so I wasn't really in a position to laugh.

"One time the prof was going around calling the vampires 'idiots that need their regular serving of blood to keep their heads on straight,' and of course word got back to them. So they came back with 'why don't you go bury your smelly, rotting body where it belongs?' And from there things just kept escalating..."

A-Ah...

"A horrible case of the pot calling the kettle black, no?"

Harsh as it was, I had to agree.

"If it wasn't for the Demon King, things would've heated up into war a long time ago." Claire nodded to herself. And so, since I was friends with Enma, the vampires avoided me. I guess it made sense since I had met Enma not long after I had been granted more freedom. But this information...

"It feels useful, no?"

The more embers smoldering beneath the demonic kingdom, the better. Hopefully their relationship would continue to deteriorate.

"So I guess learning **Anthromorphy** is off the table for us then." Claire linked her hands behind her head with a sad pout. Something felt off about the way she said that. It was almost like...she thought that was a bad thing?

"Isn't being freed from the pain that comes with mortal life one of the selling points of being undead? There's not much to be gained from becoming human again," I pressed, testing her.

"Well—" Claire froze for a moment and gave a soft laugh before returning to her usual fake, resting smile...and then her eyes started to dart about.

That movement...I remembered. Yes, the way her eyes moved. The nostalgic sight brought me to the verge of tears. Every time she was about to be scolded for some prank, she'd have a look like that on her face. Even though making proper expressions was a hefty task as she was now, apparently she could still use her eyes fairly well. While her eyes darted around like that, she was desperately thinking up some kind of excuse.

Which meant the next thing out of her mouth...was without a doubt going to be a lie.

"Well...it's not like I really want to be human again," she said, maintaining her smile. "I was just curious, is all. And besides, it never hurts to have more cards in your hand, right? But above all, if it goes against the prof's plan, it's impossible for me anyway."

I see. Claire, you...

†††

Most of my life was characterized by suffering. I am sure there were plenty of happy moments, but as if to try and paint over all those good memories, there was pain, bitterness,

sadness, frustration, humiliation… Death would have been a blessing. But I couldn't die.

I had been kept alive to be tortured and treated as livestock. All of my limbs had been cut off so I couldn't run. No matter how much I didn't want them, scraps of food had been stuffed down my throat. And then, as if in an attempt to gradually grind away both my body and spirit over time, I had been forced to give birth over and over and over.

Until finally, I had been completely worn out. My body had broken down and I died. In the end, the gods never saved me. My desperate hopes and prayers were never answered. I thought dying would make things easier for me, but that hadn't been the case. Instead I had found myself drowning in a sea of endless darkness, unable to do anything but curse the world as I sank. Not that I remember much of my time there. It was mostly like a horrible nightmare.

And then someone reached a hand out to me—the professor.

"Hey there. Looks like you've met a pretty miserable fate. Just like me. What do you say? Want to put an end to all this suffering with me?"

Frankly, I thought her dreams were insane. So there's no life after death. She didn't see the point in being reborn again for nothing…so she wanted to destroy the world? Who thought like that? Even a prankster at heart like me never thought that way. Honestly, she sounded crazy.

Okay, to tell you the truth, she probably was. But I took her hand. It wasn't like I had any other choice. I couldn't just let my life end that way. And anything that would let me escape that suffering was welcome.

I couldn't care less about the whole constantly being reborn thing, but it was true it didn't feel like it had any meaning. So much so that I found I disliked the prospect of being alive. Above all, I was much more grateful for the professor who lent me a hand in a time of need than the gods who, no matter how hard anyone prayed, ignored our pleas.

I couldn't bear to let things end the way they had. Wiping out all life would allow me to get my revenge, so I was on board. I'd do anything for the chance to kill everything and everyone that I hated.

So I was reborn as the student of a lich. Life was surprisingly comfortable. Only having to worry about having a source of

magic instead of stamina was pretty nice. I didn't need food and I didn't need sleep. Just being able to stay awake all day was a huge bonus. I knew any wink of sleep I got would mean being tormented by nightmares, so no thank you to that.

After becoming undead, it became quite clear that I wasn't the same as I had been in life. That was probably thanks to me having lost some of my memories and reason in the spiritual world, things that had to be supplemented by magic. My way of thinking had turned a bit dry. For example, I had started thinking that nothing really mattered.

On that note, apparently I had an affinity for dark magic. Since I had never gotten tested in life, I hadn't learned until after dying. I went on to learn all about **Necromancy** from the professor. It was really weird thinking that I was living under the Demon King's castle. Life sure knows when to hit you with the unexpected, doesn't it? Not that I was alive anymore, ha ha.

Studying **Necromancy** was a lot of fun. Well, except at the start when I had to keep memorizing stuff. While learning, I saw firsthand just how far off the deep end the professor was, and I came into contact with plenty of dead bodies.

Honestly, as much as I had taken her hand and agreed to help…I don't think I could say my heart was really in it. I mean, I was originally human.

So…

"There's not much to be gained from becoming human again."

When that stuck-up demon prince said that…

Are you kidding?

I'd instinctively wanted to snap at him. It was just further proof that I was once human.

Not much to be gained? Are you crazy? I'm nothing like the professor. Are you stupid? Whose fault is it that I'm undead in the first place? It's yours! You and every last demon! If you hadn't attacked us! If you had just stayed in your sacred ground! I never would have gone through that hell! I would still be living an ordinary life! So, how dare you?! How dare you talk like you know anything about me?! That was unforgivable!

Honestly, I had never felt more grateful to have a body that wasn't great at showing facial expressions. When was the last time I'd gotten this mad at someone that wasn't a damn goblin? Even so, my face didn't so much as twitch. It would stay exactly the same, just as I had left it. As long as I didn't surrender to my

impulses and lunge at the person in front of me.

Though if I thought about things calmly, this was a bit bad. I might be making him somewhat suspicious of me. Had I seemed a bit too interested in **Anthromorphy** for one of the professor's students?

This Zilbagias guy was pretty quick-witted for a demon. His good looks were enough to make the professor go even crazier about him, but I had no idea what was going on in that head of his.

So, how am I supposed to respond to that? Hmm…

"Well…it's not like I really want to be human again." Yeah, what a joke that would be. Coming all this way just to back out now? It wouldn't change the fact we were dead. Me, my parents, my childhood friend, everyone… "I was just curious, is all. And besides, it never hurts to have more cards in your hand, right? But above all, if it goes against the prof's plan, it's impossible for me anyway." In the end, I could never betray the professor. So that was all I could say.

"Right. Never hurts to have some more cards," Zilbagias responded with a faint smile, averting his eyes. Actually…if he caught that card metaphor, was this demon prince familiar with card games? It was a phrase I had picked up from my father.

Actually, now that I think about it…

"Anyway, I should be asking you the same thing. Why did *you* learn **Anthromorphy**?" Was there anything for him to gain by turning into a human?

"So I could sleep on my side."

What…?

"So I could sleep on my side."

His face was deathly serious as he repeated himself.

"Originally, I could never manage to sleep on my back. But then my horns grew in, leaving me not much of a choice ever since," he knocked on his horns as if irritated by them.

So he could lie on his side? That was it? I was totally taken aback. Weren't demons obsessively proud of their horns?

"But I can't really afford to sleep in that form given the threats of potential assassination attempts and surprise attacks. So while I learned it for that reason, I haven't been able to put it to use."

"I-I see…"

Well, I guess he had a point. Those horns did look like a pain

in the butt.

“Besides, it’s proven pretty useful today, hasn’t it? So what you said about cards makes sense,” he said while flashing a grin.

Man, this kid really messed with your head. But I was sure that’s what made the professor like him so much.

She seemed a lot more dark and dangerous before she met him. Okay, she was still pretty dangerous. But that was in a very different meaning of the word. I guess she was just that happy to be recognized by someone she viewed as an equal, not one of her subordinates. It was probably the first time it had ever happened.

“Aha ha, what a weirdo,” I laughed, putting on my “exasperated smile.”

Man. He really was weird. Why was I here, in the caves below the Demon King’s castle, chatting with a demon prince about how to sleep soundly? Seriously. How had things come to this?

Of course I knew it was the demonic army’s fault. That fact would always remain.

Honestly, I had given up on a future for humanity. The professor was the type to follow through with what she set out to do. And it seemed like the Alliance’s chances of winning the war were slim to none. Even if I wanted to help them, I was undead now. The Holy Church would take one good look at me before setting me on fire. Ah, forget it. I had already died and come back once; I didn’t want to spend my time lamenting my own powerlessness.

“Anyway, I don’t want Enma to think I slack off whenever she isn’t around. I guess I should give it another go.” With our conversation coming to a natural close, Zilbagias turned back to the pile of corpses. It was as though the human corpses on the ground meant nothing to him.

It was too bad. Without those horns, he’d be pretty cute. If he was as weak as he looked earlier after transforming…I wonder what would have happened if I had just snapped his neck? A little kid like him… I bet the fact he’d die someday never crossed his mind.

Humanity was definitely going to be wiped out by the Demon King’s armies. But that didn’t mean those people would just disappear. In whatever form they took, they’d come back as our allies.

And then it would be the demons’ turn.

If I were to be honest, I wasn't all that big on the idea of wiping out all life. The demonic kingdom was one thing, but I really liked flowers and birds. Regardless, it wasn't like I had much of a choice. The professor was like a god to me. She was no less of a monster than the Demon King himself. There was nothing I could do to stop her.

Necromancy was fun, but I knew it had its limits. Immediately after I learned how, I tried calling the souls of my parents. But it hadn't worked. There was nothing left of them. I tried calling on the soul of my childhood friend from ages ago. Nothing. Not even a word.

There wasn't a shred left of anyone that I knew. If there was actually a world for the dead, we could maybe meet again someday... But no matter how far I delved into the spiritual world, there was nothing there.

That just made me even more sick of the idea of people being reborn again and again. Everyone I cared about from my previous life I would never see again. Ah, the moment I realized that was probably when I stopped caring about anything. For all I cared, this boring world could vanish tomorrow.

No...if this world as we knew it was going to come to an end, it would be best if it happened in such a way that would get a laugh out of me. So let's all work together! Let's have a blast bringing down the demonic kingdom! I had a knack for finding fun even in the most mundane things! Aha ha ha ha ha!

"Is something wrong, Claire?"

"Hmm?" At some point, Zilbagias had turned back to face me. "Why?"

"You just seemed really excited all of a sudden."

"Oh, did I?" If he said that, it had to be true, right? Aha ha ha.

Hey, Mr. Prince.

The professor really likes you. She really wants you to join our side. But it's hard for me to picture you ever bending for us. How will the professor react to that? Will she give up on you? Make you into her puppet? If she ever started to lose interest in you, as your older sister in **Necromancy**, I'd end things for you just like that.

And boy would you learn just how much humanity has suffered. Ah! I really can't wait for that day! The thought is just so exciting. Isn't it, Mr. Prince?

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Around sunset, in the city below the castle, Albaoryl Rage woke up in his room.

“Huh? Oh, right. I’m in the dorms.” He was always left a bit confused after being greeted by that unfamiliar ceiling upon waking up.

Sitting up on his fluffy, canopied bed, he swept his gaze across an elegant bedroom that was larger than the living room back at his family’s home.

A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Adorning the wall was a tapestry bearing the heraldry of the Rage family, a black flag with three silver slashes. The floor was decorated with the pelt of an enormous warbear. The cupboards, the desk, even the stand for holding his spear were all elegant in their simplistic, utilitarian design. This made his swordspear (modeled after Zilbagias’s) seem seedy and out of place.

The room itself was a phenomenal luxury, the likes of which he had rarely experienced during his entire life. It was exceptionally comfortable, but…

“I just can’t relax!!!” he shouted, clutching at his head as he sat on the bed.

A few days ago, when they had first arrived at the castle, he and his brothers had looked up at the magnificent structure in awe, completely blown away that they’d be calling a grandiose piece of architecture home.

“What?! We’re staying in the city?!”

“Of course.” But before they had even unloaded their belongings from the carriage Kuviltal, who was not only their senior and instructor but also Zilbagias’s second-in-command, informed them of the harsh reality. “The castle is filled to the brim with high-class people and their servants. There’s no room in there for newbies.”

“But, but…it’s huge!” Seiranite pointed up at the massive structure, shouldering his small bag which likely contained every item in the world he could call his own.

“Yes, it’s big. But most of that space is taken up by the dragons and their hatchery. Major families and a few other bigwigs in demon society occupy the outer edges. A three-meter square room with a window in there would probably blow

through a full year's wages for a count if you wanted to rent it," Kuviltal, himself a count, said with a shrug.

"Th-That much...?" Okkenite gaped, picking up his own bag.

Even a count, someone who was unquestionably an elite in demonic society, couldn't afford a tiny room in that huge castle.

For the record, from the top down, the rankings in the demonic kingdom were as follows: Demon King, archduke, duke, marquis, count, viscount, baron, baronet, knight, esquire. Alba was a viscount, while Okke and Seira were both barons. They were basically middle of the pack for demons their age.

"If nothing goes terribly wrong, I'll probably make it to marquis during the next battle," Kuviltal said as if it were already a given. "But even then, I wouldn't consider moving into the castle."

"I thought jumping from count to marquis also meant a big jump in pay. Wouldn't you be able to afford it no problem?" Okke asked, being quite familiar with the legal and government systems of the kingdom.

"Don't be stupid. You go ahead and try moving into the castle without a single servant to your name. I'm sure everyone will get a good laugh out of that."

"Ah...good point."

A marquis was an elite among the elite, very much at the high end of demonic society. It was an appropriate rank for a clan chief, at least one coming from one of the smaller families. Cramming someone like that into a room that could barely fit more than four people would make them a laughingstock.

"If you really want to live in the castle, you'll have to aim for the rank of count," Kuviltal said, crossing his arms with a suddenly ferocious smile. "Can you imagine that? Can you see yourselves sitting on the top, looking down on the rest of the kingdom?" Kuviltal's gaze swept over the castle, a fire in his eyes.

"I can." While the Nite brothers were clearly cowed, Alba had no issue speaking up.

He's trying to sound like some hotshot, but this guy couldn't even protect the prince from a white dragon. What a huge blunder, Alba thought. Of course, Alba wasn't so reckless as to say that out loud. He might have had a pact with a Devil of Abandon, but even that had its limits.

"In that sense, you can't look down on the chiefs of even the smallest families. The old families that supported the first

Demon King each have a floor of their own on the outside of the castle."

"That's amazing..."

"I wonder how much they'd get if they sold it?"

Seira was absolutely blown away by the thought, while Okke seemed like he was ready to start counting some very unhatched chickens.

"Probably enough to set up their families with a life of luxury for two or three generations. Even so, if they let go of that status now, those small families will never be able to reclaim it. I doubt they'd ever try selling it." Kuviltal snorted, signaling the end of this line of conversation. "As much as we've talked about the castle, let's get on to where you'll actually be living. Naturally, the Rage family has a mansion in the city. And of course, in the best part of the city," he said, motioning to a section of the city fairly close to the castle. "We need to be able to make it to the castle on a moment's notice. While the mansion belongs to the Rage family chief, it also contains dorms for my lady and the prince's servants. It's ten times the place that the chief's mansion in the Rage capital is. You'll be blown away."

"Whoa...!"

"There's one downside, however. It's so close to the castle that you can pretty much only see a wall." Taking a small pouch from his belt, Kuviltal tossed it to Alba. Barely avoiding fumbling it, Alba caught the bag, which felt quite heavy with coins. "That's some pocket money for you guys. You can spend tonight and tomorrow in an inn around here. I'm already sick of seeing the castle..." He was tired of looking up at it. He wanted to be looking *down* from it. "But you guys are still new to all this. I was just like you three when I first came here. So enjoy the view 'til you're sick of it." He was giving them the opportunity to be tourists for a bit.

"Thank you. But, isn't it dangerous to be so far away if the prince needs us?" Alba asked, carefully putting away the money. As elated as he was by the gift, he was also a bit uneasy.

"I don't think you need to worry about that. The prince is exceptionally busy. He'll probably spend the next few days notifying the castle's leaders of his return. On top of that, he has his family meals on Moon Days."

"Family meals?"

"Once a week, all of the princes and princesses set aside their differences and meet for lunch."

“Really? They only eat together as a family once a week?!” Seira exclaimed.

“That’s how it is with the nobility. Though really, since they’ll eventually be fighting to the death over the throne, one might say that’s too often.”

The three young demons greeted that revelation with silence.

“When that time comes, you three will be called on to serve as well. Make sure you’re ready for it.”

“Yes sir!” As much as they were excited to be in the capital, Kuviltal’s words inspired them to take their time there more seriously.

That said, they still ended up staying at a rather expensive inn, and indulging in all the food and drink they could get their hands on.

The next day, they decided to move into the Rage family mansion.

“Man, we really screwed up!” Alba said, guiltily patting the now-empty coin purse. They had mixed up the details regarding the room’s price, and thus ended up spending two days’ worth of money on a single night.

“I never expected they’d charge us that much *per person*...”

“But the food was incredible!” As Okkenite beat himself up for being too careless, Seira was already dreaming of another lavish night.

Though Kuviltal would probably sigh at the sight of their early arrival, Alba would feel much more the fool paying their own way at some cheap inn. They were also pretty curious about the Rage mansion, so in the end they decided to get a move on to see it with their own eyes. But the closer they got to the castle and the high-class district that housed the mansion, the more uneasy the three idiots became.

“I-It’s...huge...”

“All of them are... Every single one is enormous...”

“They’re almost like castles.”

Though they seemed small in the shadow of the Demon King’s castle, each and every one of the mansions owned by the great clans in this district could have been a fortress in its own right.

Though, if one was to learn about the previous succession war, this wouldn’t come as a surprise as the conflict had spilled

over into this district as well. Any mansion not properly equipped to defend itself had been burned to the ground. With that lesson under their belt, the great families all built their residences in the capital with a mind for military conflict, not just civilian splendor.

"This is…our mansion…"

As they reached their destination, the trio were blown away yet again. It was a six-story building, complete with a large training field and surrounded by watchtowers.

"It really is ten times the chief's mansion…"

The Rage chief's residence was only three floors, and even then the upper floors were quite small. Compared to this, it was much smaller. The only thing it had over this place was a larger training ground.

"Who might you be?" As they gawked, night elf watchmen gently called them to a stop. After announcing they were Zilbagias's subordinates, the three idiots waited for a bit.

"You guys are here already?" Then Kuviltal came out from the training ground, dressed roughly and wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Ah, yes sir! We felt it would be rude for us to spend too long just playing in the city!"

"So you got ripped off by some inn and are now broke, huh?" Kuviltal grinned, punching through Alba's face-saving excuse instantly.

And though Alba himself was able to contain his reaction, the Nite brothers weren't so skilled as they immediately choked and spluttered, giving the game away.

Kuviltal laughed. "That was a good lesson, right? After suffering like that, I'm sure you'll be more careful next time. If you let people see that you're out of your element, they'll easily pick up on all of your weaknesses."

"Yes sir…" They had no rebuttal, only able to slump in defeat.

"Okay, hold on a minute. I'll call everyone."

After waiting outside for about ten minutes, Kuviltal brought back a group of other viscounts—basically, four of their new seniors.

"We'll show you guys around."

"This place will leave your jaws on the floor."

"Don't chicken out!"

"Uh, sure…" The grins of Kuviltal and their other seniors inspired more unease in them than anticipation.

“Welcome to the Rage family’s second official base!” The door to the mansion swung open, revealing a resplendent entrance hall.

“Whoa…!”

The gorgeous luxury on display was like a blow to the three new arrival’s heads. Pillars engraved in overwhelming detail, weapons and artwork crowding the walls, ornamental vases and statues everywhere. It was the first time they had seen anything like it. There was even a massive art piece painted on the ceiling, depicting the supremacy of the first Demon King Raogias and the prosperity of the demonic kingdom.

“Th-This is…amazing!”

The three idiots were all but speechless at their first sight of the entrance hall. Though excess decoration was typically seen as a sign of weakness within demonic society, being faced with so much of it all at once was enough to silence any potential criticism.

“The mansion acts as the Rage family’s face within the capital. If we don’t show our absolute best, others will look down on us, so everything here has to be first-class,” Kuviltal explained with a satisfied expression. “As the prince’s retainers, the day will likely come when you will visit the mansions belonging to the other families. If you look as dumbstruck then as you do now, you’ll bring shame to the prince.”

Alba’s hand suddenly snapped to his face, and he saw the Nite brothers do the same.

“So, we need to get you guys acclimated to living in a place like this. Understand?”

“Y-Yes sir…”

“By the way, all the stuff you see here is extremely rare. If you were to accidentally break anything, you can kiss decades of pay goodbye. So I’d be careful if I were you.”

“Y-Yes sir…” Decades! Alba could only shudder, terrified to calculate how much that would actually amount to.

“While we’re here, take a look at the ceiling,” Kuviltal said, pointing upward to draw their attention back to it. “Actually, one of the people in that picture is Worils, a hero from the age of the first Demon King.”

“Wait, really?”

“Where, where?!”

Kuviltal chuckled. “See if you can find him.”

Worils was a legend in the Rage family, rampaging across every battlefield while wearing his distinct red-and-white attire, taking down enemies at every turn. Known as “Worils the Phantom,” he was the first member of the Rage family to achieve the rank of duke (though shortly after, the chief at that time was able to save some face by also being given that rank).

“Really? Where?”

“A red and white warrior…I don’t see him at all.”

“Keep looking! He’s in there somewhere!” Kuviltal continued to urge them on, but the three newbies couldn’t find any sign of him.

And then a large crash resounded throughout the entrance hall.

“Oh, whoops. Oh… Oh no…!”

“Nooooo!” Seiranite’s face went white as a sheet and Okkenite jumped with a scream.

What a tragedy! Seiranite’s foot had gotten caught on one of the spears ornamenting the wall, knocking it into one of the decorative vases and smashing the vase into pieces!

“Waaaaaaaah!”

“What have you done?!”

“That was a priceless artifact!”

“Do you have any idea how much that thing cost?!”

The four viscounts shouted, hands covering their faces in horror.

“Wait, no! It was an accident! I swear!”

“What the hell are you doing, Seiranite?!” Kuviltal raged with an anger they’d never seen before. “That vase was a relic from the sacred ground, passed down in the Rage family for generations! Do you realize how much it was worth?!”

Seiranite could do nothing but stammer wordlessly, while his younger twin brother screamed in agony at the unforgivable mistake that had just been made.

Before he realized what was happening, Alba’s body was already on the move. “My sincerest apologies!” he shouted, dashing in front of Seiranite and dropping to his hands and knees. “Please forgive my brother’s horrible mistake! We swear to pay back this loss! No matter how many years it takes us! So please, I’m begging you! Don’t send us away!”

“B-Bro…!” At Alba’s hefty apology, volunteering to share the blame with Seiranite regardless of how much of a precarious

position that would place him in, Seira immediately started to tear up. In no time at all, tears and snot were streaming down his face. “I’m so sorry!” And then as if he had just remembered what he needed to do, he dropped down, face to the floor with his own apology.

“Please! Forgive us!” Only a moment later, Okkenite slid in beside his brothers and joined in.

“You three…do you really think some apology will make up for what you did?!” Kuviltal continued to rage.

“We’re sorry!”

“Sorrrryyyyy!”

“Please forgive us!!!”

The three idiots wailed their apologies in their own way.

“Heh.” And then, one of the four viscounts finally cracked.

“Heh heh…ha ha…” One by one the others followed suit, and in short order all four of them were clutching their bellies, roaring with laughter. A low thumping sound then filled the air as night elf maids made their way into the entrance hall beating large drums.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Then, with an odd rhythmic chant, the four viscounts pulled out something from their pockets—small bags. They then proceeded to take some powdered bone from said bags and started throwing it over the three newbies. Completely flabbergasted, the three idiots sat frozen stiff, now covered in a fine dust.

Meanwhile, Kuviltal’s laughing fit was so great that he was tearing up. “Ahhh…oh man, I’m sorry. This is uh”—he paused to get out a bit more laughter—“a bit of a tradition around here.”

“A…tradition?”

“I don’t have a clue who started it, but whenever someone moves into the dorms here, they all have to go through this.”

“All of us went through it…”

“Our lady’s guards did it to us.”

“I was at my wit’s end thinking they were gonna kill me.”

“Honestly, looking back on it, I don’t know whether I should laugh or be in pain.” Fighting down their own laughter, there was a strange honesty to the four viscounts’ stories.

In other words…it had been a hazing.

While making the newbies look for Worils in the artwork on the ceiling, they’d sneakily place a spear around the newbies’

feet. Then they'd purposefully drop a pot and make a huge fuss out of it before finally bringing out a bunch of drums and throwing bone powder on the new arrivals.

"It's kind of a ritual to ward off bad luck. It was probably meant to make sure people never *actually* broke anything in here."

"Wait…so…the vase was…?" Seira's voice and hands were trembling as he reached for the shards of the destroyed vase.

"Oh, this? Just something cheap we got in the city."

"I thought… I thought it was from the sacred ground…"

Kuviltal roared with laughter again, clapping his hands. "Come on, think! Do you really think there would be a vase from back then? 'Culture' wasn't even in their vocabulary!"

For the record, the demons back then could make things out of bone and horn and sometimes made vessels for storage out of carved stone. But something like pottery? They had no knowledge of the sort.

"G-G-G…Gaaaaaaaah!" After learning the truth, Seiranite let out another scream, unleashing a howl mixed with both rage and relief.

He then collapsed to the ground, drawing the mysterious hazing ritual to a close.

†††

"Morning, guys."

"Morning, bro."

"Hope you don't mind that we already started."

After spending some time putting himself together, Alba headed down to the dining hall where he saw the Nite brothers already deep into their waking meal. The dining hall was buffet style, meaning they could eat to their heart's content at no expense. Of course it also offered a robust night meal alongside the option to order something to eat outside of the usual meal hours. The only area lacking was the dawn meal due to the expectation that most residents would be outside the mansion's walls to find something to eat. But even so, a light meal would be provided to those who stayed behind. So if one so desired, all of one's food needs could be met without putting down a single coin.

Despite being well into winter, there was an abundance of

fresh fruit and vegetables, ham, cheese, smoked meats, and freshly baked bread piled high for the taking. Alba regarded all of it with a conflicted expression before finally filling a tray of his own in silence.

"What are we doing today?" Seira asked around a mouthful of sausage. Though he felt like the "welcome ceremony" had taken off a few years of his life, he had finally bounced back.

"What else? Training. We need to get stronger," Alba replied, biting into a piece of bread.

"Kuviltal was right. We have a lot of free time on our hands," Okke said, stirring his stew with a worried expression.

Despite having been in the capital for a few days now, the trio had had a lot of time and little to do. After being accepted as Zilbagias's subordinates back in the Rage territory, their days had been packed full of intense training. Those days had been so busy they had just flown by while being fulfilling and satisfying. But since their arrival to this mansion, it almost felt like they had been thrown by the wayside.

"Apparently Kuviltal and the others take turns with part-time jobs. If we're going to keep going like this, maybe we should look for something too," Okke muttered almost to himself, finally bringing a mouthful of stew to his mouth. Kuviltal had inherited the Corvut family's Bloodline Magic, so as a side job he would maintain and repair people's houses using *Concreta*.

"I guess if we get bored out of our minds," Alba replied noncommittally.

"Man, I'm too used to seeing the prince every day," Seira said mournfully, biting into some vegetable sticks. "It feels kind of...you know? Like he doesn't care about us anymore."

"That wasn't really my intention. Time just sort of got away from me. Sorry."

"I mean, obviously you're a busy gu— Your Highness?!" Seira tumbled out of his seat. Alba also jumped from his chair in surprise.

"Hey. Long time no see." For some reason, Zilbagias himself was casually greeting them, here in the dining hall.

"Your Highness! Why are you here of all places?!"

"I wanted to check up on you guys. To tell you the truth, I've never visited this mansion before," Zilbagias said, looking over the dining hall.

"Would you like to join us for a meal, Your Highness?" Okke

said, inviting the prince to the buffet.

The prince, meanwhile, reacted with a bit of hesitation. “Am I allowed to eat here?”

“Of course you are! They let *us* eat here!”

“Doesn’t all this stuff belong to you?”

“No, it doesn’t. Technically, this whole mansion belongs to the Rage chief.” The prince shrugged. “I am kind of hungry.” He then stepped away to pick at the buffet. After placing some sliced fruit, bread, ham, and cheese on his tray, he returned and sat down beside Alba. “There’s so much food here. Won’t there be leftovers?” Transforming one of his bone accessories into a knife, he cut the bread, then put the ham and cheese between the pieces.

“The slaves get the leftovers, so it’s not a problem,” Seira replied casually. As the mansion was Rage family property, naturally it had a stock of human slaves at the ready.

“Ah. Makes sense.” Though the comment made him freeze for a moment, he quickly went back to nibbling on his sandwich. Despite the prince’s statement that he was hungry, to Alba it seemed as though he hardly had an appetite.

“Kuviltal was so mad.”

“Honestly, I thought we were goners.”

“I couldn’t believe what was happening.”

“They did all that to you guys? Ha ha ha…”

After finishing their meal, they told the prince about the welcome ritual and their light sparring to ensure they didn’t hurt themselves. And then Zilbagias took his leave, returning to the castle.

“We should train together again soon” were the prince’s parting words.

After that, the days passed by rather peacefully.

Okke got a part-time job at a butcher shop. His pact with a Devil of Analysis made him extremely proficient at processing meat. He quickly became pretty popular due to his work, earning himself a good chunk of change.

Seira began studying art of all things. Apparently he felt really offended at having been tricked by the fake pottery. Having a pact with a Devil of Strength meant that he was very much ill-suited for such delicate work when it came to using his own hands. But he was confident that, at the very least, he could

develop an appraising eye. Tormented by the unfamiliar human script, Seira had requested Sophia—one of Zilbagias's servants—to make a dictionary for him before diving into art literature.

Meanwhile, Alba spent his days at the training grounds, silently and zealously sharpening his skills. That was the only outlet he could find to release his building frustrations. The luxurious mansion, the private room that was far too big for him, the expensive art pieces just lying around, the overabundance of food on offer that even the slaves got the leftovers…

They have all this…why can't they share even just a little?!

His thoughts always came back to those unlucky and poor back in the Rage territory. Selling just a single piece of the mansion's furniture could help send numerous fatherless children to war. Giving up just one room in the mansion could allow many less fortunate to experience luxury in a place like this. How many mouths could they feed with just a day's worth of the food wasted here? The more he thought about it, the more the injustice of it all irritated him.

I could say something to the prince…

But doing so would likely be pointless. His reaction to seeing the buffet made it seem like he shared Alba's feelings to some extent, but the follow-up comment about it all belonging to the Rage family chief made his position on the matter somewhat ambiguous. As much as Zilbagias was a prince, he wasn't the head of the Rage family. In order to avoid stirring unnecessary friction between him and the Valt family, the prince rarely interfered in Rage family matters.

How has no one been bothered by this before?!

Burning with anger, Alba vented his frustration by swinging his swordspear through empty air. How had no one thought to do anything about all this injustice? Had it never crossed the chief's mind to share this tremendous wealth with the rest of the Rage family?

No, it likely hadn't. That was why they had been left to suffer for so long.

Albaoryl Rage had a pact with a Devil of Abandon. No restraint, no chain, could hold him down. That was why the fetters that plagued his world were so obvious.

The shackles of status, of heritage, of wealth, of hierarchy. The chains of common sense and convention. Though Alba would never allow himself to be held down by them, he lacked

the power to break them completely—at least for the time being.

"I…" Alba steeled himself as he prepared to reconfirm his vow—his words becoming a white breath to be carried away by the strong winter winds. "I *will* make it big."

Big enough, strong enough, that he could reach down and help the weak.



†††

In the days following my lunch meeting with the other royals, I visited the three idiots, listened to some music from Vigo in the night elf prison, had some lessons on **Necromancy**, and did quite a bit of training. Basically, I went right back to my life as a prince. I hadn't known about the Rage mansion in the city until fairly recently, but after thinking about it for a bit, it made complete sense that a major family in the kingdom would have a presence in the capital. I had gotten a good laugh out of the "warm welcome" the three idiots received. But above all, I was glad they were living a fulfilling life here.

As for Vigo and the other slaves in the night elf prison...

"So...how are you guys doing?"

"Extremely well. We are being treated quite kindly."

In spite of my worries, life was not treating them harshly as well. When I went to visit them, they had been in a large cell together. Dirilo the carpenter and Organo the instrument maker had been working on their crafts idly, as if just killing time. Meanwhile, Vigo the performer had been practicing on a string instrument.

When speaking with the night elf guards, they had told me the three humans had a remarkable tolerance for stress.

"I've been in charge of looking after plenty of human prisoners in the past. But the mental fortitude those three possess is far beyond anything I have ever seen. They act emotionless, but they clearly have strong emotional stability. I believe it is an act."

As if to tell me they could be waiting for me to let my guard down, so I needed to be careful around them. Outside of that, being trapped in the prison meant they had no opportunities to see sunlight. Back in the Rage territory, the slaves were regularly allowed outside to exercise in order to maintain their health. As mortal enemies of the sun, the night elves couldn't offer them the same treatment. Even if they were given proper meals and more than enough time to rest, their health would deteriorate anyway being holed up in there. It was a bit of a challenging problem.

Anyway, Vigo's performance was actually quite impressive. Even his simple melodies had a rich depth to them. Despite how harsh they were to the shorter-lived races, even the night elf

guards couldn't speak badly about his music—seemingly also recognizing the talent he possessed.

Then, one day, a letter arrived for me from the Demon King.

"I hereby appoint the management of Fort Aurora to Demon Prince Zilbagias Rage." A simple declaration, signed by Demon King Gordogias Orgi.

Fort Aurora, the ruined fortress I was to borrow from the king for the purposes of studying **Necromancy**. Apparently the repair work was finished. Even so, for a letter delivered from the king, it was incredibly simplistic. And wait, had he written it himself?

When I asked Sophia about it, she said this was pretty standard practice in the demonic kingdom. Long, flowery prose was time consuming. Plus, given the uncultured nature of most demons, few could even understand such writing.

"Okay, I guess I'll go give it a look." According to the accompanying memos, the interior had been cleaned up a bit, but prepping the place would be up to me. Taking the time to assess what I could bring to the fortress had been a marvelous act of foresight on my part.

Still, I had no idea how to go about storing my valuables. Brute force would make quick work of any normal lock. Maybe I should prepare a fake chest and a real chest and place a curse on both?

"Perhaps this is a matter worth consulting the dwarves on."

Good idea.

But it wasn't something needing my immediate attention, so I'd table it for the time being. For today, seeing my new secret base would be enough.

"I am going for a walk with Layla and Liliana."

"Please, take care."

With a word to my attendants, I headed for the dragon launch area. Today Liliana would be joining us for a trip through the skies. As it was winter now, Liliana was in a specially made short-sleeve wool shirt. The poofy white outfit made her look even more like a puppy.

Layla was wearing a large cloak that covered her entire body. The only thing she was wearing underneath was Konectus, so it was...a pretty bold style, to say the least. While it would make transforming into a dragon quicker for her, it still felt kind of wrong in a way. Apparently she somewhat shared that sentiment

as she kept fidgeting restlessly whenever we passed someone in the corridor.

"Oho ho..." Ante on the other hand was thrilled.

If you like it so much, why don't you prance around in an outfit like that?

"Ah! What an intriguing idea!"

I forgot she was like that. *My bad. Please don't.*

Waving the white flag in my heart, we arrived at the departure point. Layla's form wavered as she turned back into a dragon. As she did, I grabbed her discarded cloak and wrapped it tightly around myself. Man, Konectus worked so well it was kind of unsettling. Even though she was smaller than me in her human form, the harness was still a perfect fit when she transformed into a dragon.

Liliana began to give some inquisitive barks.

"You're flying with us today, Liliana."

My statement earned an excited howl from her. Usually she had to stay behind whenever we flew, so she was practically bouncing off the walls at this news. She hadn't ridden a dragon since...the attack on the castle. Seven years ago.

"Please, go ahead."

"Thanks, Layla."

With Liliana in my arms, I lifted myself up into the saddle.

I need to secure Liliana a bit, hold on.

"Okay."

Layla began beating her wings, warming up for takeoff. As she did, I sat Liliana in front of me and tied a lifeline around both of us.

There, we're good to go.

"Then let's do this!"

With a powerful beat of her wings, Layla lifted off the ground and into the sky. Clinging tightly to me with her short arms and legs, Liliana's eyes widened as she howled in awe. Her fluffy outfit was doing a good job of keeping me warm too.

"It feels much colder again today. Are you okay?" Layla asked.

I'm fine. The scarf you made me is doing great.

"I am glad to hear it." She chuckled.

She had spent pretty much all her free time diligently making this scarf for me. It seemed she still had a ways to go until she could make socks, so that was a goal she was working toward.

"Oh my. Things are certainly heating up, aren't they?" Ante

teased, causing Layla to retreat in embarrassment within her thoughts. Though they could communicate through me, I was basically in the way so their feelings didn't translate and their voices apparently sounded distant. Regardless, I was glad things were so lively.

While in the skies above, I looked down at the Demon King's castle. All the way up here in the sky was the only place I could be the real me.

"Let's not dwell on things that aren't important! At least not right now!" Layla's voice suddenly interjected into my thoughts, her wings starting to beat even harder.

Ha ha ha, shake all you want! With this new saddle, I was safe and secure!

Meanwhile, Liliana's gaze was stuck looking down at the same vista, her excited howling continuing nonstop. She had been going for quite a while. Was it really just excitement?

"Liliana?"

She growled in response. A look came to her face that I had never seen before—one that was both desperate and determined.

"Calm down, Liliana! This isn't like last time!" Liliana kept squirming restlessly, whining and howling while in my tight embrace.

"This isn't good." There was something ominous about Ante's curt comment. Concerned as well, Layla turned back to look, spreading her wings wide to glide.

And then suddenly, we had a huge drop in altitude. Still struggling, Liliana slipped out of my arms with a yelp.

"Liliana!"

The lifeline connecting us snapped tight.

"Oh no! Turbulence!" Layla hurriedly adjusted her wings to account for it. Apparently clear looking weather didn't dampen the roughness and chaotic nature of the sky's winds. Liliana continued her panicked yelping, hanging in midair.

"Liliana, stay still! I'll save you!" Pulling on the lifeline, I managed to get her back to safety. After I reeled her in, she immediately clung to me, long ears laid back and her whole body shaking silently. Her face was as white as a sheet, making it crystal clear that she grasped the severity of the fact she had almost died. I imagined that even someone like her would die instantly after falling from this height. But the accident did have

one silver lining—it had scared the struggle right out of her.

"Perhaps it caused an unpleasant memory to resurface."

Maybe. Heck, it would be something if she was back to her old self...

Liliana gave another pitiful whine.

Okay, guess not, I thought as she licked at my face again.

"I'm sorry, I should have anticipated the turbulence," Layla started to apologize, but really it was my fault. I had handled things way too casually when I knew it was Liliana's first flight in quite a while—with the last being the assault on the castle, no less. I should have taken this more seriously.

"Liliana, the battle is over. You aren't in danger anymore," I said, stroking her hair, which had started getting long as of late. "There's nothing to be scared of. So let's go together. I'll show you my new castle."

Well, I was really borrowing it. But no point getting bogged down in the details.

Liliana gave a soft woof, seeming to have calmed down somewhat. For a brief second, it was like I caught a glimpse of an unusual clarity in her eyes...

"*Woof?*" But she just tilted her head in a questioning manner, the same as always.

I hugged her tightly. There was no way I'd let her get thrown like that again. How long would it be until I could save her? Like *really* save her?

"I'll start heading south now."

Using the stars, Layla plotted a course for us. We made our way toward the fortress that might one day be the key to getting Liliana out of the demonic kingdom.

To Fort Aurora.

†††

That was scary...

Liliana continued to shake, held tight in "his" arms. The howling winds brushed against her ears. High in the sky, the wind was harsh as she was shaken on the back of a dragon. But with a short chant, "he" erected an invisible barrier to protect them. On the ground far below she could see little dots of light, cities and settlements slowly vanishing off into the distance.

Just earlier, when she had seen the Demon King's castle—

which she had recognized instantly—she had immediately been beset with the strong impulse to go there. She'd thought now wasn't the time for all this. Not that she knew what "all this" actually was.

In any case, she hadn't been able to bear to sit around doing nothing. Unable to sit still, she had started to struggle, and before she knew it she had been thrown out into the open air. She had been joined by those howling winds and a single cord that kept her hanging in the air.

That was close…

If she hadn't used the toilet before they departed, she may well have wet herself. Though she was a dog, Liliana was still smart. She never had an accident before. And she never would. Probably.

With a soft whine, she rubbed her face against "his," a gesture he returned by stroking her hair.

So warm…

Now that he was holding her tight, she felt safe.

Things are better this way.

That was what she thought.

But somewhere in the depths of her heart, there was a stinging pain. She had no idea what it was or why it was there. After all, she was just a dog.

They continued flying for a while, watching the nighttime scenery zipping by below them. Having totally calmed down, Liliana was just on the verge of dozing off when she felt them descending. Forcing her eyes open, she saw a stone building cut into the side of a cliff face, illuminated by the moonlight.

"So this is Fort Aurora…"

"He" dismounted from the dragon, looking up at the building with a sigh.

"There's barely anything left of the original. Forget repairing it, they practically rebuilt it."

"He" scowled a bit, running his hands along the smooth stone wall bearing characteristics of the demonic curse to reshape stone. Both physically and magically it looked quite sturdy in Liliana's eyes. So she wasn't sure what was bothering him. Was he just not a fan of their unnatural, stoic design? Liliana couldn't say she was fond of it either.

I don't like rocks. I like trees and forests.

For a moment, images of magnificent, enormous trees growing densely packed filled her mind. An image of a city, kind and tender, built into the treetops. Warm sunlight filtered through the leaves, music filled the air, the laughter of the spirits and the scent of flowers carried by the wind…

Ah…

But she had no clue where those images had come from. After all, she was just a dog.

“Well, I guess if I had to choose between a dilapidated human fortress and a brand-new demon one…I’d probably pick the newer one. Being a demon prince and all.” Then “he” let out a self-derisive chuckle, touching a hand to the solid bone door.

The bones quickly and magically moved, opening the way inside.

“That is an interesting mechanism.” Behind them, the presence of the dragon rapidly faded, as if coming undone.

“Yeah, any demon can open it plus it’s more resilient against things like wild animals.” Turning around to respond, “he” quickly averted his eyes again. Back in her human form, Layla all but illuminated a white glow within the darkness of night, wearing next to nothing aside from some leather straps tied tight around her chest.

I love Layla.

Though they had recently made Liliana wear all sorts of things when going outside, she felt a sort of kinship with Layla who stood there almost completely bare. But even Liliana had her wool clothing. Wouldn’t Layla be cold like that?

Just as the thought occurred to her, Layla sneezed quietly.

“Careful. You’ll catch a cold in your human form.” Quickly “he” moved to wrap his cloak around Layla, murmuring that it might have been better for her to stay in dragon form instead.

“Maybe. I should bring a change of clothes next time,” Layla said, swaying back and forth while sniffling, clearly somewhat embarrassed. A moment later, she swelled up again, taking the form of a beautiful silver-white dragon once more.

“I’m going to check around inside. I’ll be quick.”

“Okay. I’ll take a look around the exterior, then.” Her voice a bit more raspy than usual, Layla jumped back up into the air.

So beautiful…

Layla’s silver-white scales glittered in the moonlight. Lilliana loved her so much. Even more after she learned how to fly.

“Come on, Liliana. Let’s take a look inside.”

“*Bark!*”

At “his” beckoning, Liliana trotted along after him.

Immediately inside was a large room. The seamless stone floor stretched onward throughout the fortress. There were doors to their left and right, and a staircase at the far end of the room heading upward.

“Thirty paces in both directions, huh? Layla should have no problem standing in here in her dragon form since the ceiling is high enough.” Muttering to himself, “he” gave an impressively careful inspection.

“Liliana, can you use your purifying light for me? If there’s any evil magic or curses…pretty much anything you don’t like, I want you to get rid of it.”

“*Bark!*” Easy. Liliana grunted, gathering her power. “*Woof!*” And then unleashed the swirling warmth inside her. A wave of light washed over the fortress, licking over the floor and walls. “*Woof?*” Liliana tilted her head, confused by the lack of any reaction.

“So there’s nothing weird going on around here. Thanks, Liliana.” Liliana puffed up proudly as he patted her head. “Seriously. It’s always convenient having you around…” Then “he” proceeded to rub her cheeks, getting a pleased laugh out of her. Turning his attention to her ears, his fingers moved to stroke them.

“Ahhh…” The ticklish sensation sent a pleasant, paralyzing shock through her…and the voice that leaked out sounded nothing like that of a dog.

“Oh… Sorry, sorry.” They exchanged looks of surprise for a moment. Then, as if to dispel the awkward atmosphere, “he” started ruffling her hair again.

“*Woof, woof!*” She replied by squirming around, licking at his hand. After all, she was just a dog.

“Let’s look around the other rooms.”

“*Bark!*”

They opened the doors to their left and right. Just like the front door, they were made of bone, making them easy for demons to open.

“I guess my homework will be to figure out how to keep demons out. This room here should do the trick as a study. It helps that there are already shelves here.” Part of the wall was dented inward, making it ideal for cupboards or desks. “What’s

this bone section here? Oh, a cellar!" In the corner of the room, part of the stone floor had been replaced by bone. Shifting the bone aside revealed a staircase leading down.

"*Woof.*"

With a soft breath, light magic poured from Liliana's mouth in the form of a ball of light, flying down and illuminating the underground room.

"Thanks, Liliana. That helps."

"*Woof woof.*" Not even a demon could see in pitch darkness.

The cellar was surprisingly spacious, about as wide as the fortress's own walls.

"No way this was here before, right? It must have been part of their renovations. Maybe they pulled the material from the walls out from here and decided to make it into a cellar afterward." While muttering, "he" brushed his hand across the walls. "I could use this in a bunch of ways."

After confirming how sturdy it was, they left the cellar and headed into the opposite room.

"Oh, we've got a well. That's good."

Though this room was slightly bigger than the study, the well and stove made it feel a bit more cramped. Apparently it had once been a kitchen.

"Being able to draw drinking water up from here will be pretty handy. There's only so much Layla can carry." As if putting his words to action, "he" immediately drew some water from the well and took a drink. It was extremely cold, and she thought it looked somehow cleaner and tastier than what they could get at the castle.

Finally, they climbed the staircase at the far end of the entrance hall. It led up to a watchtower.

"*Woof...*"

Picking Liliana up, "he" helped her get a full view of the scenery from the lookout. Moonlight washed over a rugged, desolate mountainside. The lack of nearby settlements also meant a lack of light from fire sources anywhere.

"I suppose this was originally a fortress for keeping an eye on the border of an old human kingdom," "he" murmured, speaking to himself. "I heard there was once a village at the foot of the fortress. Not anymore, though."

The land wasn't well suited to farming, and the mountainous landscape made it hard to reach on foot.

“I want to help you escape someday. Back to the Alliance.”

Liliana didn’t respond since she couldn’t understand what he was saying. After all, she was just a dog. So instead, she licked his face.

“He” responded to that with a sad smile, stroking her hair. “Liliana.”

She didn’t respond to her name, just burying her face in “his” chest.

I want to stay with you, Alex.

That’s how she felt. But she couldn’t put those feelings into words. All she could do was give a soft, sad whine.

After all, she was just a dog.

†††

On the outskirts of Evaloti, the capital of the kingdom of Deftelos, a priestess sat praying in her private room within a fortress. Her name was Charlotte Vidwa. Born to a reasonably well-off family of merchants, she had been raised with a moderate level of care. Having an abundance of brothers and sisters resulted in her growing up quite introverted, never standing out in any meaningful way.

However her life had dramatically changed at her coming-of-age ceremony, during which it was discovered she had an aptitude for holy magic. Her parents rejoiced, calling her the pride of their family. That night might have been the longest conversation she ever had with them. Up until that day, they had seemed so apathetic toward her. But the revelation had them brimming with enthusiasm and invested in her future. She remembered that irking her somewhat.

That said, her parents had ensured she learned reading, writing, and mathematics as she grew up, so she was nothing short of grateful. She had entered training under the Holy Church to become a priestess, studied healing miracles and magic, and eventually came to work as a healer for the Alliance—bringing her to where she was now.

Realistically speaking, healers had no combat ability to speak of, thus they were usually positioned quite far from the front lines. Charlotte was no exception, but with the rapid advance of the Demon King’s armies, that front line had been pushed all the way back to the heartlands where she had been stationed.

Unable to abandon the wounded all around her, she chose to stay where she was.

Given Charlotte's very introverted and passive nature during her upbringing, it would likely astonish her family to see her choose to stay on the front lines.

She prayed for the lives of the common people that had been lost along with the brave warriors that had fallen in battle.

But as the faces of her friends she would never reunite with came to the forefront of her mind, a knock sounded at the door.

"You there, Char?"

"Yes. Come in."

Popping her head into the room upon opening the door was a certain swordswoman with long black hair—the Unicorn Swordmaster, Barbara. One of vanishingly few women that had become Swordmasters. Circumstances had led to the two of them sticking together for quite a while.

"Sorry to interrupt, but some special rations have come in," the visitor said, lifting up the bag she was carrying. "I figured we could share."

"I…appreciate your consideration, but please, enjoy them yourself. I'm not that hungry," Charlotte replied with a weak smile, earning a displeased look from the swordswoman.

"You've been working yourself to the bone. Starving yourself in the cold will just get you sick. Let's eat together."

"But…"

"If you refuse, I'll leave the bag here so you'll have no choice but to eat it all yourself," Barbara said, raising an eyebrow, forcing Charlotte to surrender with a bitter smile. Though it might have been mistaken for a joke, Barbara had resorted to that method before.

"Okay then. Let's eat together."

"Great." With a grin, Barbara stepped into the room and sat across from her at the small side table. Charlotte sat on her bed, while Barbara took the only chair in the room.

"Thank you for today's blessings," Charlotte prayed briefly before touching the food Barbara placed on the table. Though she didn't join in, Barbara patiently and politely waited for her to finish. Not wanting to keep Barbara waiting for too long, Charlotte kept it short. "Let's eat."

"Guess we'll be eating quite good today." Inside the bag was a

whole salami, a small bit of cheese with some crackers, and even some dried tomato with salt and herb seasoning. “This would make a great soup. Will you do the honors?”

“Of course.” Pouring some water into a small pot, Charlotte added a dash of fire and light magic. As the water started to boil, Barbara sliced up the salami and dumped it into the pot along with the dried tomato.

“Ahhh! With all this cold weather, warm soup really hits the spot!” Barbara exclaimed, relishing the smell of their cooking. Charlotte looked on with a faint smile.

Normally Charlotte’s work as a healer drained every drop of magic from her. Using it for her own personal reasons wasn’t unheard of, but she rarely had the capacity. Now, however, she had plenty of magic to spare.

At this point, those who needed treatment had either recovered or died.

Gazing out the window, she saw a line of simple graves sitting under a thickening blanket of snow. Being a priestess, Charlotte had been given a rather high-quality room. As such, her windows were made of glass. In comparison, normal soldiers or civilians usually had nothing but shutters or paper to seal them up, making their rooms quite frigid.

Winter would be harsh this year in Deftelos. The demonic armies had ravaged the rich grain producing regions to the west, and even the forests around the capital were occupied by invaders. Food was scarce and acquiring firewood would be a great challenge. Refugees from the west crowded the alleyways of the capital, everyone suffering from cold and hunger.

The arrival of reinforcements from the Holy Church was a blessing, but with the flow of supplies from the Alliance slowing down, it ultimately just left them with more mouths to feed. The strict rationing put in place had resulted in fights breaking out between the citizens of the capital and the refugees.

As if enjoying the spectacle, the Demon King’s army only deployed their daylight troops, units of goblins and beastfolk, to watch the front lines. Generally they just observed, but the moment the Alliance eased up, they’d come to test their lines again. There was no time for the Alliance to let their guard down, not even for a minute. So the soldiers were always on high alert, and thus were always kept well-fed.

Those with special abilities such as priests like Charlotte,

heroes, and Swordmasters were prioritized in the distribution of food and so they never had to worry about going hungry. However, when it came to those lower on the totem pole like the ordinary wounded and sick, the refugees... While Barbara and Charlotte indulged in their soup, how many others were silently taking their last breaths?

"Your soup's gonna get cold, you know," Barbara's gentle voice brought Charlotte back to the present.

"Sorry, I kind of spaced out." With a quiet laugh, Charlotte reached for the cup of soup in front of her. It was warm. That was the main impression it left on her. She didn't taste much of anything.

"Man, having something hot to eat is so great. It's delicious, right?" In contrast, Barbara was seemingly savoring the flavor, happily and slowly munching her way through some crackers and salami.

Seeing how much she was enjoying it, Charlotte took one of the bits of dried tomato that had floated to the surface, biting into it. This time she was greeted by the faint flavor of the salt. It was pretty good.

They continued eating for some time, not much conversation to be had except for Barbara exclaiming how good the food was.

"The supply squad just made it to the city." After finishing their meal, Barbara suddenly broached a new topic. "Once they wrap up handing over everything, they'll be heading back. Probably in a day or two. The snow is getting pretty deep, so we likely won't see them for the rest of the year."

The last resupply for the year... Well, that was something Charlotte had already expected. As a healer, she had a decent grasp on the current supply levels of the city. The realization that it would be a while before more arrived was a grim thought. No matter how you sliced it, they were sorely lacking. They'd have to tighten the rationing even more.

"Hey, Char. You haven't seen your parents in quite a while, right? Why don't you head back with the supply squad?" Barbara casually threw out the suggestion. Her eyes, usually sharp like a mountain lion's, looked on gently as if she were watching a kitten.

"No...I'll be staying here," Charlotte replied, shaking her head with a soft smile. She had all the calm stillness of a silent lake, and the firm, resolute will that implied. Hopelessly so.

“No matter what, huh?” Barbara gave a somewhat resigned sigh seeing the determination in the young priestess. “You haven’t been ordered to hold the line here. In fact, they ordered you to retreat, right? You can still make it if you leave, Char. For now.” In contrast to the priestess, Barbara’s gaze held a bitter sorrow.

“Even so. I understand that you are trying to be considerate of me, and I feel bad for disrespecting that. But…even so.” Charlotte’s eyes shifted to the small altar in her room. “I can’t leave everyone behind.”

Atop the altar was a small urn, containing a certain someone’s ashes. That was the final memento of the man who had once captured her heart. She had cremated the arm sent back to them on that demon prince’s spear.

The silence was painful.

“Yeah, I figured you’d say something like that.” Barbara gave another slightly self-deprecating sigh. “And honestly, having you around is a godsend. But…he…” Staring at the urn, Barbara trailed off. “Make sure you don’t skimp on eating. I get you’re bothered that not everyone eats as well as we do.” Barbara’s face turned sharp again. “But we need to be prepared to fight at a moment’s notice. While we wait, it’s our responsibility to stay in perfect shape and keep improving.”

Even before she was a Swordmaster, Barbara was nobility. The weight to her words was something entirely different from what Charlotte, the mere daughter of a merchant family, could ever muster.

“I understand,” the priestess replied while nodding gravely. And then the shadows lifted from Barbara’s face, replaced by a bright smile.

“Then thanks for the meal. I’ll be back sometime soon.” Clapping Charlotte on the shoulder, Barbara cleaned up the pot and dinnerware before taking her leave.

Charlotte turned silently back to the altar, resuming her prayers.

I know, Charlotte began to think, staring at the urn. *If you were here, you’d be shouting at me. Saying something like “Why aren’t you running?!” You’d be absolutely furious.*

He had felt a powerful sense of responsibility, putting his life on the line for the sake of others all the way until the very end.

Leonardo. Even Barbara knew she didn’t have to say anything.

Charlotte was well aware he'd have given anything to see her secure survival rather than seek revenge. But even so.

Picking up the urn, Charlotte gave it a soft kiss. "If we can see each other again on the other side..." Tears suddenly started pouring from her eyes. "You can scold me all you want."

I'll do whatever you say.

Outside her window, snow continued to fall in silence.



†††

In another fortress on the outskirts of the same city, an old beastfolk sat silently looking up at the sky, legs crossed on his chair beside the window. He was the Fistmaster, “old master” Dogasin, the lone survivor from the sneak attack on Fourth Demon Prince Emergias’s camp. Snowflakes landed gently on his wolflike snout, melting away.

“It’s so cold these days.”

With his winter coat having already grown in, he wasn’t shivering in the slightest, but he could still feel the cold. To be cold just meant lacking heat…and as he was now, Dogasin had certainly lost the warmth of people in his life.

The warmth of his companions.

I returned alive, well prepared to accept the shame of surviving alone… Dogasin breathed a heavy sigh, a cloud of white breath filling his vision. *But in the end, I accomplished nothing.*

Abandoning his companions to their fate he fled the battlefield, prioritizing bringing back information on the fourth demon prince’s magic over dying an honorable death. When he returned, neither Barbara nor Hessel found any fault with him. Instead, they celebrated and encouraged him. “We’re so glad you made it,” they had said. The Holy Church took the information he had on Emergias with great excitement, and Dogasin himself swore he’d make up for his dishonor in the next battle.

But…Emergias’s troops stopped in their tracks with Emergias himself making a declaration that the assault on the capital would be another family’s responsibility. The information Dogasin had brought back might very well come in handy someday.

But…I won’t be alive to see it myself, will I?

The frustration that built up regarding whether their sacrifice would ever amount to anything was hard to shake off. Retreating when he had was undeniably the right choice, but he had a feeling deep down that maybe it would have been better to stay behind—if he managed to bring down at least a single member of the Izanis family with him. That regret…no, that doubt continued to torment him.

Even at my age, I still have doubts like this…

That hollow, empty coldness continued to prick at his heart,

day after day.

“Sir Dogasin!” A loud knock resounded from his door.

“Hessel?”

“Oh, you’re here. Good, good.” The door swung open, revealing a burly man wearing a bright smile—the greatsword-wielding Swordmaster, Hessel. “We got some special rations this time around,” he said, dropping a heavy bag onto the room’s table.

“Oh my. Look at this.” Stepping over, Dogasin perused the bag’s contents. “How…fortunate.”

Bacon, ham, and all other kinds of dried meats filled the bag. These special rations were another point of guilt for the old master.

Dogasin was a wolf beastfolk. Their physical strength and endurance was greater than dog beastfolk’s, but that nevertheless came with one crippling drawback: Without a steady diet of meat, their strength would rapidly diminish. While they would of course eat fruit and vegetables from time to time, they couldn’t survive on a vegetarian diet and needed more hefty helpings of meat than their dog beastfolk cousins. If deprived for too long, they’d get sick, and their muscles would irreversibly atrophy.

Dogasin was one of the Alliance’s true elites, a Fistmaster. While the common folk were starving and freezing to death in the streets, he was given plenty to eat. That reality was another source of guilt for him.

“Old Master, would you like to have lunch together? I haven’t eaten yet either.”

“Sure. Let’s eat together.” Dogasin gave a faint smile at Hessel’s invitation, sitting down at the table.

The two men ate. They split some bread between them, Dogasin focusing his efforts on the ham which of all the food would likely be the first to spoil. Hessel meanwhile only grabbed a pea-sized bit of cheese and bacon.

“Come now, youngsters like you should eat more than that. Dig in,” Dogasin said, trying to pass a hefty chunk of ham to the Swordmaster.

“Old Master,” Hessel stopped him, his face serious. “This is the last of the special rations. We won’t be getting any more. Not until spring.”

In other words, this supply of meat was going to have to last

Dogasin throughout the entire winter. Certainly, to anyone else, this amount of food would seem like quite the luxury. But for a wolf beastfolk fighting on the front lines...it was hard to imagine this would be enough.

"Did I ever tell you why we called ourselves the Wise Wolf Clan?" But Dogasin was unperturbed, continuing to push the ham on Hessel. "My old homeland was once also the home of many, many wolf beastfolk. However, long ago, they were faced with a particularly harsh winter. Most of them died."

"And your clan was one of the survivors?"

"Indeed. Not that we did anything special. Our saving grace was our ability to ration food better than the other wolf beastfolk. We were smarter with our food, earning us the moniker of 'wise wolves.' To be honest with you, if supplemented with bread and wine, this much meat will be enough for me. Actually, it may be too much."

Hessel narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious.

"I am telling the truth, you know. Particularly now that I am quite old, I don't eat as much as the others. All this could likely last me two winters."

"There's no need to push yourself so much, Old Master."

"I am not lying! However, I will need more to drink." Rummaging through a bag beside the window, Dogasin pulled out a bottle and started filling his cup. "Ahhh. This will warm me right up." Dogasin gave a satisfied nod, hoping to ease Hessel's concerns.

Most of the time Dogasin refused alcohol, claiming it dulled his senses too much. Drinking so casually wasn't like him. He was clearly drinking much more than he had when Hessel had last checked on him.

"Oh, don't make that face," Dogasin said with a chuckle. Despite Hessel's efforts to hide his true feelings, Dogasin could see right through him.

"But...Old Master. If you don't get enough food... Just look at what it's doing to your fur."

"That's due to my age, not a lack of nourishment." The Fistmaster shrugged. "It is the same with you humans, no? Sometimes your fur starts to wither the older you get. We beastfolk are the same."

"That's not fur... Hmm. At any rate, if you don't eat properly, your muscles won't make it through the winter."

“Not even a mountain of meat could build up my muscles like the younger beastfolk’s,” Dogasin said, washing down another bite of ham. “When I was young, I sought that kind of strength, but now… I no longer need raw power with the laws of nature smiling on me, but rather technique.”

Hessel remained silent.

“So…even if I lose a bit of muscle, I will be fine. On the other hand, look at you. You’ll need all the muscle you can muster with that big sword of yours.”

“Yeah, well, actually…” Failing to convince the old master, Hessel’s guard finally started to break. “I should apologize since I also lied. I actually ate before coming here.”

“I told you, I’m telling the truth!” Dogasin insisted.

And so, constantly shifting the meat between each other, the two enjoyed a lively meal. In the end, Hessel had been too stubborn to give in, while Dogasin had barely eaten.

He’s so stubborn, they both thought.

“Anyway, I’ll make sure to swing by sometime! Next time I’ll bring something to drink.”

“Oho ho, that would be grand. The stronger the better, if you would be so kind.” Dogasin waved as Hessel took his leave—and the moment the door closed, he turned his attention back to the bag of food.

“Hmm…with this much…”

With the chunk of ham still in hand, Dogasin leaped out of his window. Landing softly, he ran like a gust of wind gliding over the snow, no sign of the alcohol in his system. He was on his way to the refugee camp, a tight collection of wooden buildings. Said buildings had tiny windows, making it clearly evident this was a place for beastfolk.

Following the wind, he arrived at a particular small house, knocking on the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s me.”

“Oh! Old Master!”

The door opened to reveal a dark, cramped little cabin housing an old beastfolk woman and a number of small children.

This was a beastfolk orphanage.

“Here. For the children.”

“Oh! Thank you so much!”

Dogasin quickly made his way inside. There were starving beastfolk on all sides. If they caught a whiff of what he was carrying, surely an uproar would break out.

“Okay everyone, gather around and eat quickly. Do it quietly now.”

“Wow…”

“Food!”

The children were rather soft-spoken. While that was partially due to the lack of food resulting in little energy, they also knew that if they kicked up a fuss, plenty of adults would become violent and they would have no scruples about swiping their little gift. They understood that far too well.

Dogasin watched with a smile as the children split up the ham, polishing it off in no time.

“Are you sure this is okay, Old Master?”

“Hmm? Of course. But…I am afraid I may not be able to bring much more.”

“I guess we’ll have to find a way to make do with milk and bread…” Despite no doubt being quite famished herself, the old woman put a hand to her forehead in worry for the kids.

“It may take a few days…but I’ll do what I can,” Dogasin declared.

“Honestly…how can I ever thank you?”

“Do not fret over it,” Dogasin assured, forcing a smile for the sake of the children as he patted their heads, trying to ignore their still-rumbling stomachs. “I’m here for the children. After all, they are our treasure.”

Strictly speaking, Dogasin never believed the reason he received such special treatment was due to being a Fistmaster. A Fistmaster served to destroy the enemies of the light. So why did those who fought get special treatment? Because the hate people had for the denizens of the dark was so great? To assure as many of them were killed as possible? No, he didn’t think that was so.

It was because the enemies of the light would kill children like these. Their fight was about ensuring the safety of these children. They were trying to safeguard a future for each little boy and girl. That was why they truly fought. The Wise Wolf Clan had learned that from their long, wintry battle.

In that case, Dogasin thought, stroking the head of one such child, *this is yet another battlefield!*

Before anyone else noticed his presence, Dogasin left the orphanage and took the same route to return to the fortress. Hopping back through his window, he took a seat again, all nonchalance.

"Phew." Pouring another cup, he took a long drink. "That really warms me up…"

It was kind of a strange sensation. He wasn't attempting to put on some strong act. Truly, as of late, he wasn't all that hungry. He had initially thought it was just a sign of his age, but he ate far too little for that to be a suitable explanation.

Why do we get hungry in the first place?

The more you moved, the hungrier you got. If you exerted yourself intensely, you'd get hungry faster. So, what about the opposite? What if he used as little energy as possible? Would his hunger slow down?

Though they felt like a drunkard's nonsensical ramblings, he considered the matter seriously. The ultimate extreme of that principle would be hibernation through the winter…but that would be a challenge for someone like him. There was no telling when the demonic armies would come to test their defenses.

We need to be ready to fight at a moment's notice.

Crossing his legs in his chair, Dogasin began to calm himself. As he sharpened his senses, he felt himself spreading out, melting into the environment around him. It was a strange sensation. As he did so, he took to his inner, mental training with vigor.

Next time he confronted Emergias, what would he do? How could he break through and avoid his curses? Dogasin mulled over the problem, over and over.

A thought suddenly popped into his mind. If *he* was there, that was what Dogasin could do. But then Dogasin remembered…*he* had already died in battle.

All of the sudden, he felt himself being dragged back to reality, the feeling of the material swiftly returning to him in his cold, lonely room.

"It's so cold these days…" the old wolf murmured, his words disappearing into the quiet room.

†††

"I guess it's about time for the Naked Men's Frozen Hell

Festival," Prati said, lifting her attention from her book to the snow squalls beyond the nearby window.

"Naked Men's Frozen Hell Festival...?!" What was she talking about?

Prati suddenly started spouting nonsense as we were enjoying the incessant snowstorms heralding the end of the year after our meal.

"I suppose it makes sense you're unaware of it. After all, it's only held once every ten years." Slapping her book shut, Prati propped her head up on one hand. "It's a tradition dating back eight hundred years, they say."

"That's quite the history." For something so pointless.

"Staying indoors, training or reading books, we have so many options to last us throughout the winter. But when winter arrived back in the sacred ground, demons had no way to spend their time."

"I guess." Since they were brainless savages living in caves.

"But holing up until winter passed would not only be depressing, but would also take quite the toll on their health. So that's how the tradition was born. A festival where they fight in the nude during winter to try and show off their true strength while bridging the gaps between different families."

What do you mean "so"? How does any of that make sense?

"I am...impressed by their methods to unite the families. I have to imagine some opportunistic coward would take advantage of everyone being unarmed."

"In the festival's long history, there are certainly some stories of such things happening. But those who tried it found themselves beset from all sides once the snow cleared, inevitably being disposed of."

"Ah, that makes sense." And so over the long history of the festival, the cowardly families were weeded out, further enriching the savage nature of the demons. "So is it just a big, naked brawl then?" I had heard about similar fighting festivals back during my time in the Alliance. Well, maybe "similar" was a stretch since they didn't involve fighting naked in the middle of winter.

"Apparently the main attraction is one-on-one fistfights. On paper no restrictions exist regarding who one may challenge even when accounting for rank, but these days the implications of the hierarchy are still felt in the festival itself. So the bouts

aren't exactly duels to the death."

"Is that so?"

"In short, it becomes a show where the Demon King and the other family chiefs accept challenges from their underlings to put their strength on display. Some people of similar ranks will fight to establish a pecking order among themselves, but generally only the young men bother with such."

"Ah."

Long ago the demon population was small enough that they could all gather together to hold the festival together, but these days each family held their own.

"Of course, the festival held at the castle is the largest of them. The larger families always ensure they send someone to participate, no matter how vicious the weather. I imagine Ziekvalt will be coming from the Rage family this year."

Zizivalt, the current chief of the Rage family, would be busy accepting challenges from the people of his own territory. If I had to guess, quite a few of those challengers would probably belong to House Dios. Defending their pride might make the festival kind of a big deal for the chief's family.

"So when is it happening?"

"This weekend."

I looked out the window. The wind was howling, still bringing curtains of snow down on us.

"Wow. It'll sure be tough for them in this weather."

"Just to be clear, you will be joining them," Prati said.

"What?" Having written it off as something I didn't need to worry about, her declaration took me by surprise.

"Of course you will. Your horns have grown in, and you're a demon prince."

Isn't this supposed to be grown men duking it out?! Is having horns really the only requirement here?!

"It will give you an opportunity to associate with others your age...or at least, your build. I'm looking forward to it."

I...really didn't care. Why did I have to freeze my butt off while beating up a bunch of kids?

"It is also an opportunity to ensure your training doesn't grow lax over the winter, and serves as a show of your health and fitness. So there is meaning in participating," Prati said, leaning forward. It was effectively an unspoken declaration that I had no choice in the matter. So unfortunately, all I could do was nod.

Skipping out would no doubt earn me the label of weak in the eyes of many.

"It'll sure be tough for you in this weather," Ante snarked.

Quit the commentary you Devil God of Slackers! Don't act like it's all someone else's problem!

Honestly though, I already trained outside and I had my fair share of experience marching and fighting in the middle of a blizzard in my past life. So, if anything, it wouldn't be much more than a nuisance. Although, doing all that naked might be kinda rough...

"Out of curiosity, if the men have this kind of a festival, do the women have anything similar?" I asked in an attempt to shift the mood, earning a strange look from Prati.

"Are you that eager to see naked women?"

I didn't mean a naked *festival, you idiot!*

"Not at all! I just thought if the men had their own festival, the women may have one too!"

"Nothing in particular. Though during the men's festival, the wives, mothers, and daughters all stand guard with their spears. I suppose you could say we're also participating, in a sense. You could even go as far to say we're judging each other based on the performance of our men," she said with a serious look.

So the strength of their husbands and sons is a way for the women to obtain clout...

"I-I see..." I said, a bit taken aback.

An event where all the demon men gather together butt naked, huh? If we had any idea this was going on, we could have planned our assault on the castle to crash the festival...!

"Alternatively, you could plan your own attempt on the Demon King's life for the next festival in ten years."

That was an option...but ten years? How many more countries would fall in that time? On the other hand, in ten years I'd only be fifteen.

"Should you not feel quite satisfied at the chance to take down the Demon King at such a young age?"

Maybe.

And so, with those complex feelings racking my head, my days of training and study flew by. Before I knew it, a week had passed.

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Within the first parade ground of the Demon King's castle demon women stood with spears in hand while dressed in striking war gear, forming a protective encirclement amid the blowing snow. In front of the gate leading from the parade ground into the castle itself was a huge wooden stage. Atop said stage was a similarly ridiculously large drum and another bright red woman in full armor.

It was the second princess, Rubifya Rivarel. As representative of all women in the castle, she was the drummer for today.

After expelling a long, cloudy breath, she lifted her bone drumsticks. Her tied up fiery red hair did indeed look like flames as it whipped about in the wind.

Thump! Thump!

The drumming reverberated through the air.

Boom! B-Boom! Thump! Thump!

The women watched, faces serious.

B-Boom! Thump! Boom boom boom!

"Enter!!!" Rubifya shouted.

Answering her call, the gates swung open accompanied by the roars of thousands of men, a throng of naked demons piling out of the castle and into the snow. And of course, at their head…

"I am the Demon King, Gordogias Orgi!" the Demon King declared, activating his **Naming** magic. He was, quite literally, the strongest man in the kingdom. Shouts of acclamation resounded from behind him. As if in response to them, a torrent of magic came out of the Demon King and flowed into the air above him, creating a brilliant burning flower overhead that then exploded. The shock wave shook through his blond mane, as if attempting to blow away the cold itself. His usually inseparable lance was nowhere to be seen—today being a rare exception to leave it behind—nothing on him but rugged muscle.

And behind him…

"I am the first demon prince!" Coming in just behind the king was a heavily muscled, well-featured man with blue hair. Naturally, he was also naked. *"Aiogias Vernas!"* Following the king's example, he activated his own **Naming**. At the same time, the surrounding air froze with a crackling sound, turning into a sparkling snowy blizzard.

“It’s already freezing out here!”

“Cut it out!”

Complaints rang from the crowd, but Aiogias was unfazed by the weather. This was thanks to his Bloodline Magic allowing him to manipulate water and ice, and thus had granted him resistance to the cold.

“I am the third demon prince!” A slender, platinum blond man stepped out next. Of course, just as naked as the others. *“Daiagias Gigamunt!”*

Though his roar wasn’t boisterous like the other two, his voice still carried far and wide. In his hand was a pink rose, made entirely from magic, which he then placed in his mouth. As he struck a pose, a storm of countless flower petals burst forth, billowing in the air around him. And then came the lightning! The sparks and electricity made his show match the impressiveness of the Demon King’s own. High-pitched squeals and cries of swooning women echoed from around the parade ground. Daiagias responded with waves and the occasional blown kiss.

“I am the fourth demon prince!” Next to follow up was a rough voice tinged with desperation. *“Emergias Izanis!”* As he shouted, his long green hair fluttered about in the wind. Perhaps due to his Bloodline Magic, his shouting proclamation stretched to every corner of the parade ground, slicing through the resonating gusts of wind. The declaration was followed by a roar as his magic whipped the howling winds and the snow they carried into a tornado.

“Nice one, Your Highness!”

“That was awesome!”

Voices from the Izanis family echoed in support of him. The Izanis family’s Bloodline Magic made their shouts clear as day, but that only proved to make it even more apparent that no one outside the family joined in on the cheer.

And then behind Emergias, one more man squared his shoulders and marched out.

“I am…the seventh demon prince…!”

A ripple went through the crowd of spectators.

He was just a boy. And still so young!

“Zilbagias Rage!!!” The young prince roared, his voice no less desperate than Emergias’s. An unearthly howl filled the air as dark magic billowed out from him.

“Whoa!”

“All that magic coming from a five-year-old?!”

“That’s incredible!”

“He’s so cool!”

Men and women, young and old alike, cried out in admiration.

“Rrrraaaaagh! I am Miavori, of the Omber family!”

“Ziekvalt, of the Rage family!”

“Ha ha ha! Tordon, of the Rofonos family!”

Following the entrances of the demon princes came representatives from each of the major families.

The Naked Men’s Frozen Hell Festival had finally commenced!

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And then, it was over.

Amid the hoots and hollers of the crowd, the core of the event had been the Demon King duking it out with representatives from each of the families and the princes. Plus some other fights had broken out in the vicinity. Since both sides took them seriously, they were less like chaotic brawls and more like straight up sparring matches, with none of them shying away from shedding blood.

Among all the goings-on, the most exciting spectacles had been the king taking on Aiogias and Daiagias.

“Allow me to be your sparring partner, father.”

“Ha ha, bring it on!”

Behind his icy good looks, surprisingly, Aiogias had fought like a heavyweight. The exchange of powerful blows between him and the king had earned cheers from the crowd more than once. In the end, Aiogias had been sent flying. Though, despite his countless scrapes and bleeding lip, he seemed to be having a blast. So he really was a savage just like the rest.

“Father, I would like the chance to return to the battlefield.”

“Again? Well, depending on your performance today, I’ll consider it.”

“Then I will hold nothing back.”

In contrast, Daiagias was very much the speedy type. His style perfectly exemplified the “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” mentality. Deftly dodging the Demon King’s fists, he had delivered his own stinging jabs. But in comparison to his older

brother, his strikes had lacked the weight to make any sort of impact. Likely in any match where magic was prohibited, Daiagias would be at a disadvantage. Taking Daiagias's hits without flinching, the king had finished off the third prince by grabbing one of his arms and sending him flying.

By the way, the green-haired bastard had also challenged him, but he got knocked out in a few punches.

What? Me? Of course I had given it a shot. If greeny was going to challenge him, I couldn't just sit there twiddling my thumbs.

"Are you ready, father?!"

"Of course! Bring it on!"

Mustering up as much strength as I could, I had delivered a solid, full-powered punch right to his gut...which didn't so much as scratch him. He had then returned the favor with a gut punch of his own, sending me flying through the air. That said, I had managed to readjust myself by flipping in the air to safely land on my feet. That really got the crowd roaring again. Not eating before the festival had been a great decision on my part in hindsight. It would have looked pretty lame if I puked everywhere.

The other princes had left the ring covered in scrapes, scratches, and bruises, but there I was relatively unscathed. It was probably a sign the king had pulled his punches, but it had seemingly helped to boost my stock quite a bit.

Amid all the confusion, I had attempted to **Transpose** my stomach pain back onto the king, but he resisted it of course. It felt like trying to leave scratch marks on steel using my fingernails. His magical resistance was unbelievable. It really hammered home the huge gap in our strength. Sure, I was definitely getting stronger, but I was still nowhere near his level. That reminder really irritated me.

Afterward, I had approached a group that were all about my size, if not my age. At the sight of me, they had all vanished like the tide being pulled back out to sea. Well, it wasn't much of a surprise considering they were all children in terms of magic. When it came to both strength and rank I was leaving them in the dust, so I couldn't really blame them for running.

However, one kid had decided to stand his ground, trembling as he was.

"I-I am Mikrolos! Esquire of the Anoitos family!" he had shouted

with a shaky voice that matched his legs. *“Zilbagias Rage! I challenge you!”*

“You got it.”

Apparently he was related to that Megalos guy, the very first person whose horns I had broken. Ever since then the Anoitos family had gotten quite the reputation for having weak horns, so Mikrolos had likely set out to get revenge and bring honor back to his family’s name.

It was kind of an unspoken rule that the challenger got to land one free hit on the person they challenged. So I had no problem abiding by that custom given the fact he had been willing to challenge me despite being weaker and of a lower rank.

But when he charged toward me with a scream, it became quite clear where his first attack had been aimed—right between my legs. Out of pure reflex, I grabbed his leg mid-kick followed by the swift delivery of a punch to his jaw which had put him flat on his back. In the end, I had ended up knocking him out without taking a single hit. But that was fine, right?

After that it wasn’t like I had challengers lining up, so I spent the rest of the festival spectating. Standing around naked in the snow wasn’t exactly comfortable, so I had looked for some fights to help warm me up. Though I had ended up loitering around since I couldn’t find any good opponents… Thankfully my **Constraint** magic forbidding the air around me from being extremely cold made things a lot more bearable.

“You’re always stealing my accomplishments!”

“The hell are you talking about?! You stole my first love!”

“Give me my money back, you bastard!”

“There’s still time before the deadline! Get over it!”

Shouting like that had resounded throughout as the men fought. Watching it all, I noticed that there weren’t many challenges going on between factions. It was mostly family members or close friends taking the opportunity to vent frustrations they normally couldn’t.

“Rrraaaaagh! Give the young commoners more chances to fight!”

“Expand the healing quotas for us!”

“I want more barbecue! Make a barbecue festival for the Rage family!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the three idiots challenging Ziekvalt. They had all been beaten silly, but each of them

managed to get a solid hit in before being sent packing. So they ended up being pretty satisfied with themselves.

All in all, the festival had been a much more peaceful affair despite my expectations.

"Peaceful? Are you serious?" Ante was quite taken aback. *"Even with the snow in the parade ground dyed blue from all the blood?"*

Yeah, well...no one had their insides ripped out or anything. Plus everyone still had all their limbs attached.

"Sounds like demonic culture is making its mark on you."

Not at all. In the end, not a single person died. That made it peaceful.

†††

The festival ended and with that returned my usual princely life. My once-a-week meals with the other royalty continued, now with much more obvious prying into the results of my growth. For example, both Aiogias and Rubifya approached me after the meals, urging me to hurry up and pick a side.

"How have things been going?"

"Slow and steady."

Occasionally Daiagias would come around too to broach some vulgar topic of some kind.

"I heard your dragon has been wearing a rather incredible bit of clothing these days."

"Ah...that...yeah..."

"Who made that for you? I'd love to gift something like that to my women."

In the end, I couldn't keep Kusemoun's involvement under wraps.

"Of course, I don't expect such information to be given for free. In exchange I'll introduce you to a rather good teacher from my family."

So in exchange for a tutor on the Gigamunt family's lightning magic, I had told him who made Konectus. After all, it would be pretty weird on my part to go to such lengths to keep Kusemoun a secret. Luckily Daiagias seemed fond of her sense of style, so maybe this would be the perfect opportunity for her to really spread her wings, so to speak. Not that I expected anyone other than Daiagias or me to ever give her any business.

“You won’t laze around all winter and come out weaker in the spring on my watch! Now run!”

I also had some training together with Kuviltal’s men and the three idiots. It was pretty impressive to see how much the three idiots had grown. When I first met them, they were on par with common thugs. But now, probably in part thanks to being worked over by higher-level demons, they were starting to become remarkably competent.

Or so Kuviltal reported, begrudgingly. As harsh as he was, he seemed to have the qualities of a great teacher and mentor. Or he was at least passionately loyal to fulfilling his responsibilities.

“Oh, by the way, Your Highness! We got a letter from the Rage territory!” During our break from training, Albaoryl had presented me with a letter. Though it was less a letter and more a card signed by a bunch of people.

“Work hard, bro!”

“Are you eating right?”

“Find a cute girl yet?”

And so on.

“This one was written for you.”

Another page was covered in things like “I hope my idiot son is being useful!”, “I want to be your retainer when I grow up too!”, and “you and big bro are so cool!” And in the corner, in rough, sloppy handwriting, “please take care of my brother.”

“Ah…sorry, that must be my sister. Her handwriting is terrible…”

Alba had let out an awkward laugh.

“After what you said, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” Alba had said entirely unprompted. *“If I want to save the weak and the poor, what about my enemies? We fought that hero’s unit in Tarfos, right? Mowing down slaves like that left a really bad taste in my mouth. But I won’t get anywhere if I keep worrying about the fact my enemy has a family.”*

He had given a small sigh, wiping the sweat from his brow as he looked up at the sky.

“It’s really tough…but I’m a demon, right?” The rare clear night sky at this time of year had matched the remarkable clarity of Alba’s muttering. *“So I’ve kind of come to accept it as unavoidable. Maybe if I was some bigwig things would be different, but right now I’m just small fry so my hands are tied. Being tripped up by guilt over something as pathetic as this will just drag you down.”*

Suddenly he had slid quite smoothly into his role as my retainer.

"So I'll toss all my worries aside and do my best, for your sake. I need to make it big. Until that happens, I have no right to worry about this kind of stuff. That's what I've decided," he had declared, looking straight at me.

"I see. You're right. Or at least, I feel the same way." It had taken everything I had to squeeze out that answer.

It was the truth. As a demonic warrior, as a retainer of a demon prince, what better answer could there be? Personal feelings, personal principles, all of that had to be cast aside for the sake of serving one's master. It was a wonderful attitude to take.

It really was tough, wasn't it?

†††

I was in the underground cellar at Fort Aurora, aka my **Necromancy** laboratory. Whenever it wasn't snowing, I spent the bulk of my free time here along with Liliana and Layla. We were transporting supplies into the fort little by little, and I did intend to do actual research into **Necromancy**, actual creation of undead.

Aside from all of that, it was the perfect spot for all kinds of other secret training. After all, an underground room perfectly sealed off was free of nosy witnesses.

"Adamas." So I could do things like this. *"Wake up."*

The holy sword unleashed its full power. A sound like crackling lightning filled the air as the old, battered sword suddenly grew white-hot. A holy light ready to incinerate all that was evil, all those that dwelled in the dark. Its blunt, lifeless edge suddenly returned to its former razor sharpness. Usually its light alone would be enough to sear a demon's flesh, mine included. But thanks to the bones of the soldiers, which acted as a sort of buffer between me and the sword, I was unharmed.

I then proceeded to wrap myself in a thick layer of dark magic, a shell to protect my soul—the spell I had learned from Enma. This technique was something high-level undead such as Enma used to protect and maintain their souls. Its particular strength wasn't in its ability to ward off magic or deflect and

neutralize curses. It was really just like a solid wall. According to Enma, it also served to protect you from the pressure the world put on you as you passed into the spiritual realm.

Compared to normal defensive spells, it exchanged all pretense at physical protection to become remarkably resilient against all sorts of magical or conceptual attacks. It was common to put on a new layer of it every day. Or really, the shell needed new layers every day in order to maintain it. As a result, it could even flawlessly fend off attacks meant to corrupt the soul directly. That was why she could still walk around so carefree after being burned to ash by sunlight. And I could understand why she was so willing to share it. The simplicity behind it also made it very hard to overcome.

I had tried it myself, but controlling magic with that level of precision was quite difficult, so I hadn't been able to master it right away. As expected, coating myself in this protective layer allowed me to use holy magic without so much as a scratch. But if I lowered my guard even a little, that same holy magic would fuse with the defensive layer. Whenever that happened, it would instantly become the perfect-sized oven to cook one thing—me. I'd lost count of how many times I had accidentally roasted myself.

But undeterred, I continued practicing, over and over and over.

"Gods of light, turn your gaze onto me."

I carefully started the chant.

"Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo."

May your holy light shine in my hands.

Silver light burned its way into the shell of darkness around me. It required absolutely perfect control, so I mustered all my focus on it. Liliana and Layla watched in nervous silence.

"Good." I was now cloaked in a silver light, unharmed. In terms of control, I was making great strides. The shell of darkness was protecting me from the damaging effects of the holy blessing.

I swung my swordspear...no, I swung Adamas. A brilliant silver light filled the cellar as it cut through the air. A silver gleam flickered within the darkness of my magic...like a flame in the night.

Coming to the end of my sword form, I exhaled slowly, staring happily at Adamas.

Winter’s cold embrace was starting to ease. The snow was starting to melt…and so my first deployment was approaching. The attack on Evaloti, the capital of Deftelos, would soon begin.

Chapter 4: The Demon Prince Deployed

I was standing in front of the outer castle gate.

“All preparations complete!” Garunya reported as she returned.

An array of bone horse carriages packed to the brim were lined up in front of me. Warriors of all races in full battle gear and servants in ceremonial black bowed as one. The preparations had been finalized without a hitch.

“Okay then.” I turned around to face the two demons watching me from behind: the Demon King Gordogias, and Archduchess Pratifya. “I’m leaving now.”

The day had finally arrived. I, Seventh Demon Prince Zilbagias Rage, was heading for the front lines.

The Demon King nodded solemnly. “There is little need for words. Go. Demonstrate your combat ability in full. We have high hopes for you.”

I responded with a silent bow.

“Zilbagias.” Prati gave a calm smile, arms crossed while draped in a dress noticeably fancier than usual. “I anticipate I’ll hear of good things. May the gods of darkness watch over you.” For someone sending their five-year-old child off to war, she seemed pretty laid-back. In fact, there was a clear sense of pride in her. I guess that was better than a tearful goodbye. At least for me.

“I will ensure my name becomes known throughout both the demonic kingdom and the Panhuman Alliance.” Keeping those feelings concealed beneath my mask of a prince, I gave a hearty nod before turning my back to them.

Even in the short walk to the carriages I felt numerous gazes on me. Without a doubt the other higher-ups and demon heirs were keeping a close eye on me. At the edge of my vision was a band of armored demons. Each of them belonged to the Dosrotos family. Naturally Gorilacia was right there with them, watching me with a warm smile. I bowed my head in greeting to her.

I also noticed that Sidar had sneaked into the group of night elf hunters that had come to see me off. He fit in pretty well.

Apparently he had been a pretty skilled hunter in his own right before taking up his role at the prison.

Each step I took caused me to be flooded with memories of my life in the castle. Though she couldn't come out to see me off, at my last **Necromancy** lecture, Enma had been really worried about me.

"Be careful. No matter how dangerous it gets, you can never give up. If the worst happens…don't worry, I'll save you."

I had no idea how to respond after hearing something so out there. Enma was pretty much saying she would bring me back from the dead if I was killed in battle. That had to be one of the worst safety nets imaginable. It really made me realize I absolutely could not afford to die.

Claire seemed indifferent, even cold. But if she really wanted to have a living body again, she probably hated me. Thinking about it for a while, I realized Enma being so amenable to demons was quite strange. In contrast, Claire's response was pretty normal for a human girl.

"Try not to die, Mr. Prince," was all she had said.

I had to imagine the feelings she harbored were very complex. If only I could share with her that my feelings were equally complex.

Speaking of humans, I didn't let Vigo or the other slaves know about my departure. I didn't think there was much point. Or rather, it seemed in poor taste. If I told them "I'm off to go kill a bunch more humans," what would they do? What *could* they do? So I just had one request for Vigo—to play that same song for me again.

"I'm going to be away for a while. Since I won't be able to check up on you, make sure to be mindful of your health."

"Understood. Enjoy your journey."

Then I left, the strange frankness in their voices following me out of the prison.

If I were to die in battle, not only would Sidar lose his source of authority, but also no one would be able to look out for Vigo and the others. They might be used as body doubles for **Transposition**. I never expected there would be anyone in the castle I'd feel the need to protect. So in order to prevent them from dying meaningless deaths, once again, I couldn't die.

I boarded the carriage. Liliana and Layla were already inside, and greeted me with stiff faces. I imagined I probably looked

much the same. Looking through the crystal glass window, I bowed one last time to my parents.

The carriage swiftly glided into motion. Once everyone was completely out of sight, I gave a small sigh, sinking back into my seat. Liliana was clearly anxious, and Layla seemed to be at a loss for words. The best I could muster was a clumsy, awkward smile. A trip by carriage to the front lines would take us a few days. I felt like I was just baggage.

I wouldn't be able to take Liliana directly into the thick of the fighting—if the Alliance learned of her, they might try and free her from us—so I'd be leaving her behind with Garunya, Layla, and some other guards in a conquered territory west of Deftelos. If the Alliance were to take her, it wasn't like I would have any qualms with that outcome. But unfortunately, the others around me didn't share the same sentiment. Right now, Liliana was a major part of my entourage. Even if I tried to give her up, the night elves would fight to the death to keep her.

I looked out the window again. The cityscape of the castle town was flying by us.

"I will ensure my name becomes known throughout both the demonic kingdom and the Panhuman Alliance."

That was my declaration, and I meant it. I had decided I would show no mercy in the battle to come. Whether it was Alliance soldiers, heroes, priests, Swordmasters, Fistmasters...no matter how many stood in my way, I would kill as many as possible. Any attempts to spare them would just result in my "allies" cutting them down in my stead.

So I'd take that power for myself. My great feats on the battlefield would pay dividends toward improving my rank in the demonic kingdom and giving me leverage to eventually topple it. I would commit any number of taboos to bolster my power. And of course, if the opportunity presented itself...I'd take down a few demons along the way.

I wouldn't hesitate. I couldn't.

Liliana whined, ears drooping as she hopped up beside me and started rubbing her head against me.

"Dear..." Layla said, hesitant but eventually taking and squeezing my hand. It was warm.

Normally I would just laugh it off and make some quip. But today was different. My face was stiff, like it had been covered in

plaster, and my throat couldn't make way for my voice. I felt like a statue.

And yet without sympathy, without mercy, the bone horses continued to run, sending us hurtling toward the front lines.

†††

"And there he goes," Gordogias murmured as he watched the carriage peel off into the city.

"Yes, there he goes," Pratifya echoed with a small nod.

"He's quite brave. Usually first deployments leave people quite disheartened. He's really something else."

"He is. He really, really is."

Though a bit stiffer than usual, Zilbagias's incredible resolve and determination had been on full display. There had been no sign of fear or cowardice in him at all. Though it made Pratifya proud, it was also somewhat sad.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe he's really my son. Oh, I didn't mean it like that." Gordogias laughed. "I've heard tales of my father's childhood. And as unprecedented as he was during that time, he pales in comparison to Zilbagias. Just thinking back to when I was a child, I was much more…ordinary. Zilbagias must get that strength from your side of the family."

"I…don't know about that." Pratifya gave a conflicted smile. "I was very ordinary compared to him as well. Maybe it is the Dosrotos blood. Ever since he was granted more freedom, he has gained an unwavering competitive spirit and a certain self-assuredness. But…once he came back from the Abyss, he changed. Not just his appearance. His whole personality. It is quite terrifying how quickly he's growing up." Pratifya laughed to herself.

"True enough," the king responded gently, putting an arm around Pratifya's shoulders. "So no doubt he'll be fine. No need to worry about him."

That earned a brief look of awe from Pratifya as her eyes widened before a bitter smile took over her face. She couldn't hide anything from him, could she? Certainly not that she had crossed her arms to hide her trembling hands.

The king tapped one of his horns against hers. It was exceptionally rare for Gordogias to be so openly affectionate in public.

“You’re right,” Pratifya responded, her shoulders finally relaxing.

And then, as much as they hated to do so, they parted ways so the king could return to his governmental affairs.



Head held high, chest puffed out proudly, Pratifya marched back to her living quarters. The mothers of the other heirs occasionally popped out to glare at her as she passed, but when she responded with merely a composed glance, they retreated without a word.

Returning to her room, she walked up to her usual sofa—and right passed it, to kneel down at the window.

Looking up at the sky, at the moon that served as the symbol of the dark gods…

“Please…gods of darkness, please…” Closing her eyes, she clasped her hands together. “Bring him back…bring my son Zilbagias back home safely…”

And, with all her heart, she prayed. She prayed, and prayed, and prayed…

Epilogue

My hometown was blanketed in flames as I walked through it, endlessly wandering. Vague recollections of that dream were all that remained as I opened my eyes to be greeted by the ceiling of my tent. It was dark. Only a faint glow from the setting sun peeked its way through the door.

"I see you are awake," Ante spoke softly.

Yeah. That dream was terrible, but at least I'm well rested.

I sat up in bed. Just outside my tent were rows and rows of other tents, all populated by demons. Solid black flags representing the demonic kingdom stood alongside similar looking black flags bearing three silver slashes which represented the Rage family. They billowed in the wind everywhere the eye could see.

Here I was, at the front lines of the demonic army's advancement. The capital city of Deftelos—Evaloti.

†††

As vexing as the few days of being locked up in a carriage were, they passed by in the blink of an eye. We took a break in an area already conquered by the demonic forces in western Deftelos before setting out once again until reaching the front lines just yesterday.

Liliana, Garunya, and Layla were all staying behind in the city. It seemed like everyone wanted to come with me. Liliana of course seemed worried about me, but as much as Garunya had slipped into the role of her caretaker, the maid was originally supposed to be exactly that: my maid. She was clearly quite reluctant to be left behind. It went without saying how worried Layla was. I could easily tell she felt the situation was somewhat unfair considering her dragon form could come in handy should things get dicey. But honestly, them being safely away from the fighting put me at ease.

"Are you awake, Your Highness?" Virossa, in his Swordmaster mode, poked his head in from where he was standing guard.

Last year, when the Izanis forces were attacking Deftelos,

Emergias's camp was ambushed by a group of heroes and Swordmasters. In order to avoid falling for the same trick, security had been tightened up throughout the day.

"I will get you something to drink."

"Thanks," I quietly said with a nod.

The tense air was hard to miss. It was hard to act like my usual self. But entirely unbothered, Virossa gave a smart bow and stepped away.

Cracking my neck with a sigh, I started doing some light stretching.

The Rage family forces consisted of the demons, comprising soldiers not just from the Rage family but also from other closely affiliated families, totaling about four hundred troops; about eight hundred night elf hunters; and the beastfolk and ogre day troops, coming in at around twenty thousand. Beyond them, we had devils who had made pacts with demons in the army (a few hundred?), a communications squad of Izanis messengers, a squad of engineers from the Corvut family, and a group from the Vernas family responsible for keeping our supplies refrigerated.

Standing against us was the Holy Church's reinforcements, an army of three thousand (including heroes, priests, and Swordmasters), and a conglomeration of humans and beastfolk totaling around ten thousand. While that defensive army was primarily made up of Deftelos's own forces, they had been joined by those of neighboring countries, including nobles, along with the remnants of forces from nations already destroyed by the demonic forces. If you counted the militia, the total would probably be in the neighborhood of twenty thousand. There were likely soldiers from the Sacred Tree Alliance and the Dwarven Federation too…

"Lord Zilba, I've brought something to eat and drink." Sophia popped into the tent.

"Thanks." Taking the meal from her, I had a quick bite to eat before she helped me get equipped for the day.

I slipped into my boots with their protective enchantment, donned a thick cloth under my armor, then put on my dragon scale armor Syndikyos. I tightened my belt, strapped Adamas to my waist, put on my gauntlets made from the bones of those human soldiers, and then fastened my shin guards.

The final piece was something I had had the dwarves work on over the winter—my helmet. It was both lightweight and pretty

sturdy thanks to the alloyed metal frame covered in leftovers of Faravgi's scales. And of course, the magic resistance provided by a white dragon's scales was second to none.

Atop the helmet were slits that allowed my horns to protrude unimpeded. It was similar to the hats and helmets the beastfolk wore that let their ears slip through. Since all demons' horns grew quite differently, all headgear and the like had to be custom-made. Compared to the simple bucket-like helmets humans wore so that anyone could slip one on of a similar size, it was slightly less convenient. With those thoughts in mind, I slipped my horns through the slits and donned the helmet. As expected from dwarven craftsmanship, it fit perfectly.

I did a few hops in place. *Good. Everything's nice and snug.*

Though, I had to say, being a denizen of the dark clad in all white armor made me want to burst out laughing. After all, it felt kinda in bad taste. But the light magic resistance it granted me was pretty great.

With my preparations complete, I stepped out of my tent. The sun had almost vanished below the horizon. The sky was barely clinging to the last traces of red, even that slowly giving way to darkness.

"All right! Time to fight!"

"I'm dying to get started!"

"I'll make a name for myself this time for sure!"

Like me, other demons were starting to emerge from their tents. Men and women alike were in high spirits, like they were about to set out on a picnic. These were the warriors of the Rage family and their close allies. I got the impression many of them were pretty young.

"Your Highness!"

"It's finally time!"

"We're ready!"

The voices of the three idiots called out to me from behind. Though my expression was as cool as ice…

"Hey. I'm getting kinda nervous. How about you guys?" I joked.

"Wait, even *you* get nervous?!" Seiranite all but shouted.

"Of course. I'm only five years old."

"It's all over if you talk like that, Your Highness."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Our casual chat continued as we walked.

At the center of the encampment was an open area serving as a parade ground. The soldiers and warriors gathered there as they finished their preparations.

Night elf hunters stood in formation according to their units, methodically inspecting their knives and bows. Demons stood scattered about, gathering in disorganized friend groups. Of course, Kuviltal and his four men that were serving as my retainers were among them. Messengers from the Izanis family stood ready to deliver messages to the front. Devils lounged about at their leisure, floating sleepily in the air or playing card games, even less organized than the demons.

“It’s finally time, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Just like before, I had little to say in response to Kuviltal’s comment. At this point I guess there wasn’t much to talk about.

“Lord Zilbagias.” Heavy footsteps resounded behind me.

Turning to look, I was greeted by a solidly built and quite elderly demon. He had deep wrinkles, red eyes, and a scar above his left eye due to holy magic that not even **Transposition** could heal. He was Marquis Beteranos Rage, a man who carried himself like a real veteran. Since he had the highest rank and most renown out of all the soldiers in the camp, he was effectively the acting commander.

“I hear this will be your first battle. Are you ready?” he asked, voice hoarse.

“Yes sir. Though I would be lying if I said everything felt normal. I feel surprisingly calm.” I replied in a flat and even voice. Though I was a prince, I only possessed the rank of viscount. On the battlefield, rank was all that mattered. Out here, I was only a tiny bit more special than a rank-and-file soldier.

If I had been a human prince, I likely would have been kept at the rear to lead from afar, basically a figurehead. So being in the thick of things as a prince was as demon as you could get.

“Very good. The attack is planned to launch momentarily.” Beteranos looked up at the sky.

The sun had completely set, the sky fully dark. Looking down from our elevated position, it seemed like the numerous bonfires marking the human camps were watching us with bated breath. The Alliance was well aware that we’d be attacking tonight. Not only had they been greeted by the daytime forces, but before

that dragons had dropped leaflets warning of the impending assault all across the city.

Under normal circumstances, one would assume it was an attempt to force the enemy to surrender. However, that wasn't the mindset of a demon. Instead it was a simple declaration that their attack would soon be underway, urging the defenders to mount as great a defense as they could manage.

The dragons could have dropped jars of oil across the city. All it would take was a single flame to bring about unbelievable damage in their wake. But such tactics weren't the demons' style. Prematurely killing their enemies meant fewer chances to make a name for themselves.

My fists started to tighten. While the Alliance was making a desperate last stand, the demons were giddy like this was some hunting trip. *Go to hell...!*

I took a deep breath. Getting angry here was pointless. So pointless in fact that it was almost comical.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen!" Beteranos raised his voice, bringing the chatter across the parade ground to a halt. "It is time. The assault on Evaloti is upon us. Before we depart, I would like to ask Prince Zilbagias to say a few words. Attention!"

I wasn't the least bit surprised as he had given me a heads-up beforehand, so I stepped forward. Hundreds, no, thousands of eyes floating in the darkness turned their attention to me. They were all staring at me—Zilbagias, the seventh demon prince.

"The day is finally here. We're attacking Evaloti. I'm sure plenty of you are sick of waiting." I flashed a bold smile, gauging the reactions of my audience. "Yeah, me too."

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd at my joke.

"I was given a parting message for you from His Majesty the King." My next words returned the crowd to silence. "'Go. Demonstrate your combat ability in full. We have high hopes for you.'" Sure, the message was originally meant just for me, but the declaration seemed to land pretty well with the crowd.

"So, as proud warriors of the demonic kingdom, there is only one thing for us to do." Drawing my weapon, I lifted my swordspear high above my head. "Take Evaloti! And ensure our names and power are known throughout the entire continent!"

The gathered demons roared as one, spears held high. The night elves in my entourage nodded along while the devils accompanying us started to break out in excited dance.

Ha. Of all people to deliver a rousing speech to an army of demons…

“How ironic,” Ante commented.

I guess you’re the only one I can trust around here, Ante.

Seeing the demons get so full of themselves sure made me happy. Maybe they’d charge in blindly and recklessly to their deaths.

“Move out!”

Thousands of voices shouted in reply to my order.

Our victory, the collapse of the kingdom of Deftelos, was all but assured. But even so, in my own way, I would put my prowess on full display.

“Let’s go.”

Together with my retainers, I started toward the battlefield.



†††

“Looks like it’s about time,” Barbara muttered, looking up at the deep red sky with a strained expression. She was stationed at Fort Thaad in the southwest, one of six built around the capital. Just a few days ago they had learned an attack was imminent, and tonight was the night. So even with plenty of time to rest, it had been quite the struggle to do so with the looming threat.

Now as that moment drew closer, Barbara felt herself start to tremble. If a Swordmaster like herself reacted in such a way, she could only imagine how ordinary soldiers of the militia felt.

Though I guess in the eyes of high-level demons, I’m just another soldier.

She quickly changed her tune. No matter how skilled she was with a sword, she lacked the means to defend herself against magic. All she could do was pray that the protection provided by the priests and elven mages stationed at the top of the fortress would hold out for as long as possible.

Trying to ease the tension in her shoulders, Barbara looked around. Soldiers lined the walls to her side. If one of them popped their head out at the wrong time, they’d likely be met by a night elf arrow. Typically those on the defensive had the advantage in regards to combat, but when it came to the Demon King’s armies, that didn’t always ring true. Dodging magic from demons and arrows from night elves while fighting beastfolk and devils climbing your walls wasn’t exactly easy. And the moment your defenses showed the slightest of cracks, the demons would come pouring in like an avalanche.

Though I guess this is preferable to trying to ravage a fortress they’re defending.

In any case, the demons were really strong. Barbara wryly smiled at that simple conclusion.

Fort Thaad was among the three fortresses the Alliance anticipated would be on the receiving end of the brunt of the assault, and so it had been filled to the brim with elite soldiers. So even if every soldier here looked down at the demons’ camp with pale faces and cold sweat, not a single one was vomiting like some greenhorn.

They were all regulars in the Deftelos military. Each and every

one of them had experience in real combat and had come out the other side. Even the militia was made up of ex-soldiers and those with combat experience. They also had the heroes and priests of the Holy Church, and, though not many, some forest elf mages too. In a battle against the demons, she couldn't have asked for a better collective army...though it was hard to say whether it would be enough.

The wind carried the sound of demonic war cries over the battlements.

"Here they come." Adjusting the single-horned helmet that had been passed down to her, Barbara peeked over the edge of the wall.

"Lady Swordmaster?!"

Ignoring the hysteric voice of the soldier at her side, she peered into the darkness. Though they were in the middle of planting season, all the fields around the capital hadn't been touched in the slightest. Four hundred paces of barren earth, then walls of stone set up by the demons for their impromptu camp. Barbara couldn't help but feel irked at the fact they could accomplish such defenses even for a temporary encampment.

Beastfolk soldiers and night elf hunters were scattered all about.

Then came the sudden, sharp sound of an arrow cutting through the air.

"Uh-oh." Tilting her head forward, Barbara deflected the incoming arrow off her helmet before hurriedly crouching back into cover. "Looks like they're really raring to go."

"Lady Swordmaster, please. That was terrifying." The wealth of experience the soldier at her side possessed wasn't enough to keep his expression from tightening up at what he had just witnessed. He couldn't stand to see one of their most important fighters, a Swordmaster, get taken down before the fighting even started.

"Oh come on, it was nothing. Some measly arrow isn't enough to take me down," Barbara responded with a fearless grin. "Even though I could have unsheathed my sword to block it, I instead chose to use my helmet."

"Oh? Why would you do that?"

"Those night elves are probably laughing up a storm right now, saying something like 'That idiot human accidentally showed their head and only survived by the skin of their teeth.

They're probably pissing their pants.'" Barbara's smile turned malicious. "It'll make it all the more satisfying when they trot up here just to be cut down by my blade."

There was nothing to be gained by showing off her abilities as a Swordmaster here. Upon knowing who she was, the denizens of the dark would surely change their tactics when in her vicinity. Barbara would play the fool as bait for the time being, luring them to lower their guard, so she could return the favor when the time was right.

"I see, I see. That's a great idea!" Apparently the soldier saw the logic of her plan as he replied with a low laugh. A ripple of laughter went through the other soldiers around them as well. "My, you sure are calm for being so young."

"I don't think 'young' is an accurate description at this point," Barbara grumbled as she rubbed at her face, earning a bit more laughter. "Hey, what's so funny about that?"

As much as she pretended to be angry, she could feel the tension starting to leave her.

Still far from relaxed.

Her self-assuredness as a Swordmaster, her dignity as a noble, her pride as a warrior of humanity, her feelings toward those she had lost…if not for all of those, she would have been the first to flee.

Guess I can't really blame Char, can I?

No matter how much the others had urged her to retreat, Barbara had chosen to stay. She couldn't be too hard on Charlotte for making the same decision. In the end, Charlotte had ended up at a defense point only a short distance from the front lines.

I wonder if we'll meet again.

Honestly speaking, it would be incredibly difficult to hold the line at the fortresses. Within the first few hours of fighting, one or two would likely fall. Sticking it out at that point would only result in them getting surrounded and annihilated. So depending on how the battle developed, they were prepared to retreat and drag the fighting into the city itself, miring the demonic forces in urban warfare.

But who would pull the losing ticket and be first to fall? Would it be Barbara's Fort Thaad? Hessel's Fort Sikind? Or Old Master Dogasin's Fort Shiks?

No…this lottery doesn't really have any "winning" tickets.

Barbara shook her head, dispelling the gloomy thoughts. “Speaking of being young, did you hear? There’s a nineteen-year-old among the soldiers who awakened as a Swordmaster.”

“Ah, I heard some rumblings about that. So the rumors are true?” The old soldier clearly had his doubts.

“One of my friends met him, so that seems to be the case. Kids these days are overflowing with talent, it’s kind of scary.”

Shocked voices resounded from the soldiers all around her. As much as they had heard the story, it seemed they hadn’t put much stock in it. Many of them probably thought it was some sort of “leaked” rumor from the higher-ups in an attempt to boost morale.

“It’s crazy. Nineteen? He’s not even in his twenties, can you believe it?” Hessel had reported the other day scratching his head, both excited and perturbed, as if he couldn’t believe his own words. *“And people called me a genius for awakening as a Swordmaster as young as I did. Very few reach that in their late twenties. And then there’s a certain woman who stole my thunder not long after by doing so in her early twenties…”* Hessel had said, giving her a meaningful look.

“I didn’t have much choice. It was either that or die.”

“I’m not complaining.” Hessel had given her a wry smile as Barbara jabbed him with her elbow. *“But still, a teenage Swordmaster. It’s incredible, but…”* Hessel’s expression had clouded as he looked up at the sky. Barbara had known exactly how he felt.

The more the demonic armies advanced, the younger the Swordmasters that emerged. Not all that long ago the expectation was a Swordmaster wouldn’t awaken until in their fifties or sixties, but both Barbara and Hessel had done so in their twenties. And now there was one in his teens. It was encouraging, but at the same time, kind of terrifying.

Was humanity that close to the edge? Wasn’t that proof that humanity was on its last legs?

“Anyway, having more Swordmasters is great. Since we’re weak against magic, we can use all the manpower we can get, right?”

“Yeah!” Hessel had replied after a long pause. *“Anyway, he’s a serious and dependable guy. His swordsmanship is clean and crisp too. It was great to see. I’d love to see how he grows,”* Hessel had said with a grin. *“Once things die down, you should meet him. How about we all grab a drink together?”*

“Sounds good to me. If you see him again, say hi for me.”

With that they had gone their separate ways. That had been yesterday.

“The youngins are really giving it their all nowadays. We’re going to have to work hard to keep up!” Barbara grinned again, earning wry smiles from the soldiers all around.

“Great, now a Swordmaster the same age as my daughter is lecturing me.”

“Guess we really have to do our best, huh?”

The gloomy, depressed atmosphere was slowly starting to dissipate.

“That’s right. It’s going to be a long night, after all.” Barbara looked up at the sky, dusk quickly fading. “But the sun will rise again. So we gotta stick it out. We’re going to make it through this, right?!” Barbara lifted her masterwork rapier above her head, where it glimmered in the night sky. “Death to the dark!”

“Death to the dark!!!” the soldiers echoed her shout with a resounding roar.

Can we really make it through this?

As the men around her began to take back some semblance of energy, Barbara was still stirring with some doubt. What would even count as victory here? Repelling the demonic army? Defeating their commander? Defending the fortress to the death? How many times did they have to do that?

According to what she had been told, this army of demons was being led by the seventh demon prince. The *seventh*. It was laughable. So even if they somehow managed to strike him down, there’d still be six others left to face before even sniffing the Demon King. And add to that their lifespans that were much longer than humans’. Together with the reality of Swordmasters awakening younger and younger, it was an ominous premonition.

Why do I care, though? She gave a ferocious smile.

No matter how it happened, she’d die long before the demons. However, humanity by far outnumbered them. In that case, eventually…

We will *win.*

They might lose this battle. This might be the day Barbara loses her life. But humanity would never lose.

So I’ll fight ’til my very last breath.

Fist tightening around her rapier, Barbara silently stared

straight ahead. How many demons would she bring down? How many would she cut down before she fell?

Countless war cries resounded from beyond the walls.

The final battle to decide the fate of Deftelos, the battle for Evaloti, had begun.

Encyclopedia of Demonic Bloodline Magics (Excerpt)

Icemolding Curse—Vernas Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Vernas family, from which First Demon Prince Aiogias hails.

It can freeze water in an instant, then shape the resulting ice as if it were soft clay. This curse also grants them impressive cold resistance. Their armor of ice makes them incredibly resilient both physically and magically, earning the Vernas family warriors renown as among the strongest in the kingdom.

Its origin lies in the harsh winters of the sacred ground. After hiding in caves from the elements, one of their ancestors eventually left said caves to go hunt in the snow after running out of food. Stranded in the middle of a blizzard, starvation and extreme cold led to hypothermia. Feeling strangely hot, he stripped off his furs and used magic to drench himself in water.

Normally such a predicament would lead to one simply freezing to death, but he was one of the rare demons of his time to be exceptionally magically gifted. Deciding the change made him “comfortable,” the laws of nature bent to accommodate that perception. From then on, even when covered in ice, he could act at his leisure. Thus began the history of the **Icemolding Curse**. The ability to survive harsh winters without freezing to death was a great boost to the strength of the Vernas family.

It is said children of the Vernas family inheriting that curse are quite shocked to learn of the poverty and madness of their ancestors.

Wildfire Curse—Rivarel Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Rivarel Family, from which Second Demon Princess Rubifya hails.

It is a magic that can set fire to things even if they would ordinarily never burn, like stone, metal, earth, and water. As long as the caster’s magic reserves persist, the fires will continue to

burn. Dousing the flames with water or burying them underground isn't enough to extinguish them. Once unleashed, they will continue to perpetually wreak havoc across the battlefield.

Its origin lies in the harsh winters of the sacred ground. In the middle of winter, an ancestor of the Rivarel family was left shivering in the cold after exhausting his supply of firewood. Trying to scrounge up any hint of warmth he could, he used magical fire to heat the nearby stones.

"If only it would keep burning."

"Is there no way to make it burn?"

"Oh, this isn't a stone. This is leftover firewood!"

Constant exposure to the elements deteriorated his mental state, and the delusions it bore ended up twisting the laws of nature. Before he knew it, the stone was burning bright and merry. That was the beginning of the **Wildfire Curse**. The ability to survive harsh winters without freezing to death was a great boost to the strength of the Rivarel family.

It is said children of the Rivarel family inheriting that curse are quite shocked to learn of the poverty and stinginess of their ancestors.

Lightning Cloak Curse—Gigamunt Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Gigamunt family, from which Third Demon Prince Daiagias hails.

It is a kind of enchantment that can infuse lightning magic in a physical object for a prolonged period of time. Infusing magic into an object is something anyone who possesses enough power can accomplish. However, the art of having that magic persist long after the caster has let go of the item is a feat few, such as the dwarves, have demonstrated. Thus, the **Lightning Cloak Curse** is one of the few forms of "production" that has manifested among the demons.

Its origin lies in an ancestor of the Gigamunt family being struck by lightning. As he hunted under cloudy skies, while his spear was held high lightning happened to strike his spear. Miraculously he was able to take control of the lightning bolt, likely due to him already having proficiency in lightning magic. However, the power was far too great for him to absorb, so he immediately redirected all of it into the spear in his hands. The

spear began to spark with electricity, an effect that persisted for years. That was the beginning of the **Lightning Cloak Curse**.

Originally, the curse manifested as a result of a very difficult ritual in which the entire family gathered and unleashed every ounce of magic from their bodies and souls into a burst of lightning, then attempted to seal said lightning within a physical object. This process has become much easier thanks to the rapid growth of magical strength afforded by the devilish pacts modern demons have access to. Such a resource has allowed individuals to use this magic much more casually.

However, learning the magic in and of itself remains extremely difficult, as it still requires the learner to wield and control power on the level of a natural bolt of lightning.

Curse of Transmission—Izanis Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Izanis family, from which Fourth Demon Prince Emergias hails.

It is a magic that allows the caster to use the wind to carry their “voice,” lacing their words with power.

Normally the maximum distance a curse could reach is about a hundred paces (due to resistance from the world and interference from other sources of magic), but users of **Transmission** can extend that range to their entire field of view.

Its origin lies in the ancestors of the Izanis family using wind magic to transmit their voices over long distances to coordinate hunting and combat efforts. Unlike the other Bloodline Magics discussed thus far, no singular event occurred resulting in the sudden emergence and development of the curse. This magic was built up thanks to both effort and time.

Back in the sacred ground, it was useful for hunting large birds that flew too high for other demons to hunt. The ability to communicate over long distances on a whim also taught them the importance of information early on. This led to uses such as transmitting abuse and insults between hostile families, fanning the flames of conflict. In the aftermath, the Izanis family would be opportunistic in taking advantage of the other families’ exhaustion to assert their own dominance, a kind of sly cunning rarely seen among the savages of that era. This cemented their reputation as master strategists and tacticians, which was instrumental in their rise to power within the demonic kingdom.

Hunting Ground—Sauroe Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Sauroe family, from which Fifth Demon Princess Spinezia hails.

By simply drawing a circle, no matter how they go about doing so, they erect a barrier that exhibits any number of different effects. Things like “barriers that block attacks from the outside, but permit attacks from the inside,” “barriers that block all sound and scent,” and “barriers that prevent anyone inside from leaving” are all within the realm of possibility. It has incredible versatility and is exceptionally easy to activate.

Its origin lies in the hunting methods of one of the ancestors of the Sauroe family. Many of the members of the Sauroe family can wield multiple elemental magics. One of their ancestors was a woman who had the ability to wield every element except light. Lying in wait for prey while hunting, she drew a line in the ground and created a barrier of wind to shelter her from the elements. She then made a wall of earth to hide from her prey, used dark magic to camouflage herself further, and fire magic to keep herself warm, and so on. This accumulation of varied types of magic led to the basis of the **Hunting Ground**.

In the modern era, the general level of magical strength of its users has continued to grow, thus expanding the range of applications—so much so that it is approaching the level of enchantment-type magic.

Stoneshaping Curse—Corvut Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Corvut family, from which Sixth Demon Princess Topazia hails.

The magic allows them to shape stone like clay, making it applicable not only in areas such as architecture and infrastructure, but also in battle, with the ability to do things like create stone walls or destroy the ground beneath their opponent’s feet.

Its origin lies in the harsh winters of the sacred ground. Back then, the most luxurious home afforded to a demon was a large, natural cave. The sacred ground lacked the wood necessary to construct buildings, and the demons had not developed the technology for firing bricks. That meant their only option was to

use the natural caves as shelter from the rain and snow. However, the large families had a domineering hold on the caves suitable for habitation. Smaller, weaker clans had no choice but to dig holes in the ground like animals.

One particular year, an especially harsh winter smothered those weaker families in a heavy layer of snow, causing many to lose their lives by freezing to death. Trapped by the snow, the man that ended up becoming the ancestor of the Corvut family desperately dug at the surrounding stone to create a shelter for their family. Wielding magic far greater than usual for such a weak family, he poured it into a large stone face. Much to his own surprise, his spear was able to carve through it. He used this newfound ability to carve a new cave to make a dwelling for his family. Thus was the beginning of the **Stoneshaping Curse**.

It is said children of the Corvut family inheriting that curse see visions of their ancestors huddled together for warmth in a cave, sharing happy smiles. Perhaps the underlying feelings of the curse are responsible for the relatively gentle nature found in members of the Corvut family.

Curse of Transposition—Rage Family

The Bloodline Magic of the Rage family, from which Seventh Demon Prince Zilbagias hails.

It is the one and only magic in the demonic kingdom capable of healing.

Its origin lies in a mother's love. Seeing her child gravely injured, a mother's desperate prayer mixed with hatred toward the wound caused said wound to turn into a "curse," which was stripped from her child and moved to herself. Thus began the **Curse of Transposition**.

Although its original function was to allow the caster to take on the injuries of only a relative, it grew in flexibility as it further established itself as a Bloodline Magic. This allowed it to affect not just relatives, but anyone.

It then became a curse to "switch the bodily health" of two targets, making it possible to pass one's own wounds on to one's enemies. Suddenly, this curse was incredibly powerful.

Considering food was hard to come by in the sacred ground, let alone medicines or medical treatments, it went without saying how terrifying the Rage family's ability to force injuries on

others became. They then began to take injuries from others onto themselves to pass them on to a third party, making it a “healing magic” of sorts, albeit one that required sacrifices.

For better or for worse, this catapulted the Rage family to a position of great power in the demonic kingdom.

With that as its origin, the curse’s easiest application is to take on injuries or illnesses from a blood relative and granting them your health in exchange. On the other hand, the curse’s most difficult application is moving a wound from an unrelated third party caused by someone else and shifting it to yet another unconnected person. The weaker the connection between the practitioner of the curse and the injury or the “patient,” the lower the success rate.

On top of that, seeing as it was not a divine miracle but simply a curse born from a race of mortals, a high magical resistance on the part of the patient can nullify its effects, even if the target is entirely willing.

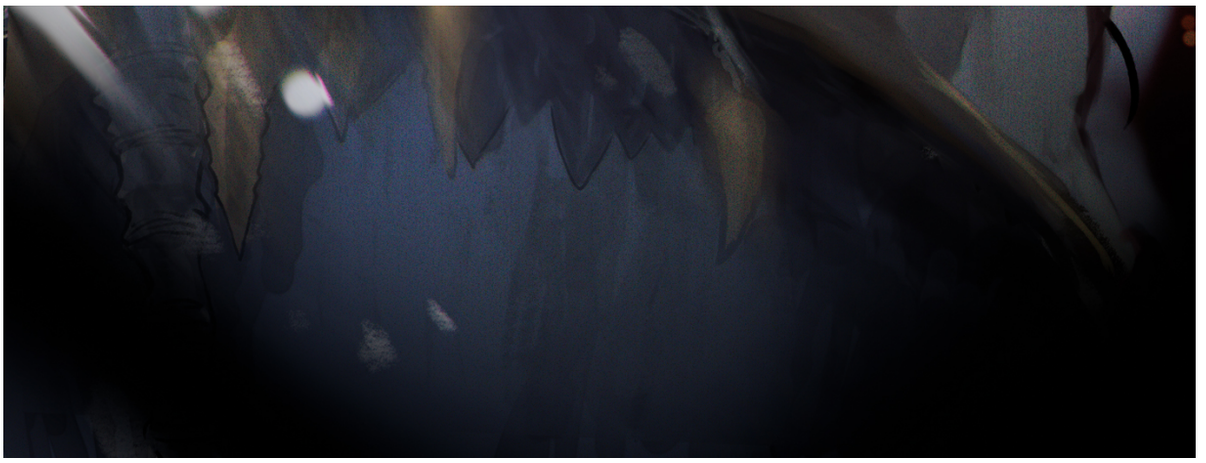
Such an incident occurred with the first Demon King, resulting in him succumbing to wounds suffered from a human hero. No matter how many practitioners of **Transposition** they brought in with any sort of familial connection to the king, his magical resistance was too great for them to remedy his wounds.

Some say that if there had been someone with blood relation to the first Demon King who not only possessed power on the level of an archduke but also had access to **Transposition**, they would have been able to save him…

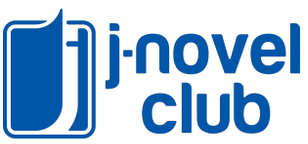
However, only tests could potentially prove the veracity of that claim.











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by Tomoaki Amagi

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