


NOVEL

9



The cover art depicts a man with dark, spiky hair and a determined expression. He wears a brown, military-style jacket with silver buttons and a red collar. His right arm is a large, silver, mechanical prosthetic. He holds a wooden staff or sword hilt in his left hand. To his left, a young woman with long blue hair and blue eyes looks on. She wears a white and blue outfit. In the background, a large, white, winged dragon stands on a rocky outcrop against a sky with soft clouds and distant, jagged mountains.

THE Strange Adventure of a Broke MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine ◦ ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi

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“Mother has
requested
that we toss
this into
the flames
of a certain
volcano.”







“Noel, keep your eyes on the woman with the helmet. If she steps out of line, stop her—even if you must kill her. Do whatever you must to ensure the helmet is not thrown.”

“As you wish.”

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WRITTEN BY

Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi



Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 9

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Fantasie Geschichte von
Söldner in großer Armut

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

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Prologue:

Beginnings to Observations

THE RUMOR WAS EVIDENTLY *not* spreading—a dwarven settlement, wiped out.

That's pretty heartless. I mean, it's an entire settlement, Loren thought.

The demons seemed to have a different take on the matter.

Although the settlement in question had been in demon territory, it had been in the mountainous regions on the outermost edge. Even if it had been wiped off the map, it had only housed a few dozen dwarves, maybe less. The crux of the matter, though, was that demons generally put themselves first. As long as they personally were fine, it hardly mattered what happened to anyone else. According to Lapis, the vanishing of a few dozen—or even a few hundred dwarves—wasn't sufficiently interesting to warrant a rumor.

“Do you see it that way too?”

“I... Well, if I had to say, I'm a demon whose thoughts tend more toward the human side of things. I'm unable to compartmentalize to such a degree. Still, that's a mean question,” she replied with a tight smile.

Her response was totally satisfactory, as far as Loren was concerned.

As for where this conversation took place, it happened to transpire in a certain demon town. Specifically, they were in Lapis's house, which happened to be located within that town.

The dwarves had dug tunnels all the way through the mountains to mine ores, and Loren's party had used one of them—the grand tunnel—to travel from human to demon territory. Within the confines of those tunnels, they had been assaulted by countless spiders, and once they escaped to the outside, they'd found the settlement on the other side in ruins. To add insult to injury, they'd then run into black goblins, the spirits of the damned, and a man in black armor who, in all likelihood, had been involved with the settlement's downfall.

Although the party had managed to escape danger thanks to Lapis, they had

been caught in a clash of two great powers. Or rather, Loren suspected that Gula had shielded him, and suffered much of the damage in his place. In any case, driving the man in black away had come at the cost of Loren and Gula's incapacitation.

Luckily, a few individuals had noticed this incident, and they had happened to belong to Lapis's house. By the grace of their goodwill, Loren was now resting at her family's castle.

"How's Gula holding up?"

Loren wasn't too worse for wear, and Gula was surely sturdier than he was. He doubted it was anything too serious. However, if it was true that she had taken a blow for him, there was a narrow possibility that she was in critical condition. He had to know.

"Her wounds were lighter than yours. A few bruises, cuts, and burns."

The underlying implication was that Loren had suffered much worse than a handful of bumps. He was feeling a little out of sorts, but his body didn't seem to have any lasting injuries. It didn't really feel like he had been in a bad way. If that was proof of the extent of his treatment, he would have to thank her later.

"By the way, Lapis. It seems to me you've been a well-to-do lass all this time."

Loren and Lapis were en route to the room where Gula was resting. The corridor was so wide that they could walk side by side and hardly fill the space. Additionally, they had been walking for a good while now, but they had yet to reach their destination. It was safe to say that this building was massive; this impression was bolstered by the multiple maids they passed along the way.

The maids sent doubtful looks as they stole glances at Loren's face. Once they noticed Lapis beside him, they would immediately force themselves to put on sociable smiles and leave with polite curtseys.

And each time, Loren saw the purple in their eyes and would be reminded that some demons worked as servants. It felt rather strange to see any of that powerful race in this light.

"All this has nothing to do with me. It's only because my mother currently holds the seat of demon lord," Lapis replied, somewhat ashamedly, as she

waved her hand and nodded at a fresh batch of maids. “The title is not hereditary. It rotates based on merit, and they serve four-year terms. Although my mother currently occupies the position, she’ll have to hand it over if anyone better suited pops up.”

“How do they change out?”

“You must announce your candidacy when a term is nearing its end.”

“Do they all get together and slug it out?”

“You’re not far off. Although it doesn’t always come down to pure physical might—with some exceptions.”

Loren studied Lapis, wondering if Judie—her mother—intended for her daughter to succeed her. If that was the case, it partly explained why Lapis’s parents had stolen her eyes and limbs and hidden them around the world. They were, in short, throwing their daughter to the wolves and hoping she came out stronger at the end of it.

“Must be hard, being a demon lord’s daughter,” Loren muttered just as Lapis came to a stop in front of one of the many doors.

I guess this is our destination, thought Loren. He stopped as well.

Lapis knocked a few times and called out, “Ms. Gula? It’s Lapis. I brought Mr. Loren with me. May we come in?”

There was caution in her voice. Understandably so.

As the dark god of gluttony, the woman called Gula occasionally behaved in unprecedented, unimaginable ways. For example, she wouldn’t hesitate to expose her skin in the name of teasing Loren, and so it was entirely within the realm of possibility that she was lurking on the other side of the door in her birthday suit, for no reason other than to bother him.

This was why Lapis was so wary. For the time being, Loren decided he wouldn’t so much as glance inside until Lapis made sure the coast was clear.

After one last knock, Lapis called again. “Ms. Gula?”

There was no response.

Lapis was growing increasingly suspicious. Loren put a hand to his shoulder—only to realize the ever-present hilt of his greatsword wasn't there.

Although Lapis obstinately refused to admit it, she had stolen the white blade from this very house. It had originally belonged to Demon Lord Judie. As Judie had no recollection of ever giving it away, she had requested it be returned to her, and Loren hadn't had it in him to play dumb.

As he couldn't source a replacement at a moment's notice, he had been left unarmed. The lack of the usual weight on his back left him hesitant and a little lonely, but he kept telling himself that he'd just have to deal.

In any case, the fact that Lapis's knocking and calling had received no response was gradually starting to irritate her. "What could she possibly be doing? Is she asleep?"

Before long, those knocks had intensified into offhanded punches. Each blow made the door quiver and walls cry out, and Loren worried they would eventually give. But saying so risked having that force turned on him instead, so he maintained his silence.

"Don't you find this a bit strange?" Lapis asked.

By Loren's estimation, she was putting nearly her full strength into those knocks. Mind you, the sturdy-looking door showed no sign of denting, cracking, or shattering, so perhaps she was holding back. "Yeah, it's strange no one's come to shout at you. What with the sound. And tremors."

"Oh, that's quite common in this household."

"It... is...?"

Loren didn't know whether to be impressed with any maid who was completely fine with this racket, or with a building that could withstand this kind of assault on a regular basis. As Loren mulled this over, Lapis gave up on knocking and grabbed the handle, smoothly swinging the door open.

It's bad manners to open the door without permission, Loren thought. But he could hardly blame her. He popped his head in alongside Lapis.

"Mnn... Mmm... Mmm... Mm!"

“She’s no demon, is she?”

“Her eyes are the same color as ours... But she just feels a little different.”

They were first struck by muffled groans, then the low voices and laughter that overlapped them. Loren had a terrible premonition as he scanned the room to find several maids atop a large bed. In the gaps between the maids, he caught glimpses of blonde hair and tan limbs.

“Whatever could she be, then? It seems Lady Lapis brought her.”

“Oh, look, she’s a *riot*. I shoved another baguette in her mouth, and it’s already gone. That’s the seventh one!”

“Without any drink to wash it down?! Seven whole baguettes?! Amazing! Let’s try another three.”

“Mfff?!”

Loren watched as the person on the bed flailed their limbs with a scream, but the maids easily restrained them. Then came six baguettes—twice the amount asked for. It was a two-person job to shove them at the captive’s face.

The maids who weren’t directly participating watched on with sparkles in their eyes, as if they were observing some marvelous oddity. They stared after the baguettes as they disappeared into whoever it was they were holding down.

“Don’t you think her mouth should be drier?”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t choked.”

“Hey, why don’t we try shoving in a raw ham hock next?”

“Even after all we’ve put in, her stomach hasn’t swelled... How curious.”

What exactly are these girls trying to accomplish? Loren wondered as Lapis’s hand gently fell on his chest and pulled him back. Once he had been extracted from the half-open doorway, Lapis softly shut the door behind them—trying her hardest not to excite the attention of the maids within.

The moment the door had closed, they could no longer hear the conversations on the other side. Loren wasn’t entirely sure they could just walk

away from this, but Lapis turned to him with a resigned look on her face.



“I’m sorry, Mr. Loren,” she said helplessly. “I didn’t expect to bear witness to such a grim vision. Ms. Gula... We’ll collect her later.”

“Are you sure?”

“If we enter now... We’ll only meet the same fate.”

It might not be that bad, being pinned against a bed by maids, Loren thought. However, he didn’t know if that held true when massive bread loaves and pig legs got involved.

Gula was the dark god of gluttony, so perhaps she could manage. Loren, meanwhile, was human. For him, this was a matter of life and death.

“They’ll lose interest before long.”

Lapis knew best how things went in her own house. Loren decided to trust her judgment. He didn’t know what she’d have to say later. For now, he shut his eyes and hoped that Gula would be all right. He put his hands together and prayed that the maids would soon tire of their games.

Chapter 1:

Union to Advance

“AH, BY ALL THAT’S HOLY. I was in hell.”

The maids released Gula roughly a stound after Loren and Lapis had closed the door to her room. Just what had those maids gotten up to after they fled the scene? They had no way of knowing. They could only sit around a table and sip the tea that said maids had brewed.

The dark god’s long blonde hair was disheveled, and her clothing was in disarray. Little care had been put into returning her to her original state.

When Gula arrived in this condition, she had found Loren and Lapis in one of the guest rooms, sitting and drinking in total peace.

“So the whole time I was getting the short end of the hospitality stick, you two were havin’ a little tea party?” she asked with a glare.

“Didn’t want to intrude.”

“Splendid work, Ms. Gula. I appreciate your consideration.”

Loren welcomed her with teasing words, but for some reason, Lapis applauded Gula’s efforts. What was with that? Loren didn’t wonder for long before he hit on the reason.

The thing was, Gula was a dark god. There was no way she could have been manhandled by maids, even if they were demons, unless she had allowed them to do so. Obviously, it would have been easy for Gula to turn the tables on her attackers, but it seemed she’d decided a little compliance was in order. It had demonstrated to the demons that she was completely harmless.

“I didn’t mind it that much. Didn’t lose much for my troubles, and the food wasn’t half bad.”

“Did they really...shove a whole leg of ham down your gullet?”

“A curious demon is a merciless thing... They stuffed me with three of ’em.”

Gula looked disheartened as she took a seat beside Lapis. A maid standing by in a corner of the room soundlessly approached and presented her with a steaming cup of tea.

Loren could tell they were being closely observed. There was always a maid close at hand, which he found rather unsettling. According to Lapis, however, that was simply how things ought to be. She didn't want to have to go through the trouble of summoning a servant every time she needed something done.

"Come to think of it, Lapis, where do you sleep when you're in Kaffa?"

"I'll invite you over, one of these days."

Her evasive answer made Loren even more curious. Lapis thought it only natural for maids to wait on her, but he had no idea where in that relatively podunk town she could bear to live.

"So what's the situation?" Gula asked, interrupting Loren's train of thought. "I think I'm due for an explanation."

"I'm not sure how to answer... I suppose it's a matter of whether we'll accept Mother's request?"

"Mother? Whose mother?"

"Mine. Wait, do I have to start explaining from there?"

With a sigh, Lapis regaled Gula with the series of events that had led them to this castle. Kind of. She skipped most of the details, mostly focusing on how her mother had a job for Loren and that, if he completed it, she would reward him with the white greatsword. The story was over in no time.

"Your mother is a demon lord, then?" Gula asked, sounding quite impressed.

"Yes, for what it's worth," Lapis indifferently replied. "I suppose."

Sure, the term "demon lord" did summon an incredible image. But after hearing Lapis's explanation, Loren had started to think a "demon lord" was roughly equivalent to military generals in your typical human nation. That was still amazing in its own right, but it fell short in terms of authority and lineage when compared to your usual "lord," let alone a king.

For demons, the equivalent position was apparently the "great demon king."

“So what’s this about a request from that demon lord?”

“I did hear the details from my mother, for argument’s sake.”

Lapis sent a signal to the maid waiting nearby. Although it was just a slight nod, the maid seemed to understand what Lapis meant. She bowed deeply and walked out, though she soon returned with a round bundle of cloth. The bundle was placed on the table, after which the maid was back to her corner with another bow.

Lapis unwrapped the fabric. “Mother has requested that we toss this into the flames of a certain volcano.”

Once the cloth came undone, it revealed a black metallic helmet. It seemed to be embossed with some sort of pattern, but the uniform blackness that consumed the piece made it clear that it wasn’t meant as an intricate decoration. Having no additional ornamentation, the helmet was purely practical. It was sturdy and well-constructed, and it didn’t look like the sort of item one might receive from a demon lord.

“This thing? Into a volcano? She wants us to take out the trash?” Loren asked.

“Aren’t there better ways to melt a thing?” Gula asked.

To this, Lapis shrugged. “I did tell her she could just shove it in the furnace... But that won’t do the trick, apparently.”

According to Demon Lord Judie, the black helmet was imbued with powerful enchantments. An ordinary furnace was insufficient to dispense with it. Although its specific lineage was unclear, it had apparently been brought to this place from a human nation long ago.

“It isn’t especially interesting on its own, and it was just gathering dust in a corner of the storehouse. However, the situation has taken a turn, and it has something to do with that man in black armor—the one we met at the dwarven settlement.”

Until recently, Judie had forgotten the helmet even existed. But due to certain circumstances, someone had turned her storehouse upside down and made off with a fair few valuables. Once Judie discovered this burglar’s treachery, she had decided to do some reorganizing, and along the way, she’d found the

helmet.

“Certain circumstances, huh.”

“Circumstances indeed. I’ve been left in the dark as to the particularities,” Lapis calmly replied.

The circumstances in question began with an “L” and ended with an “apis,” but she didn’t so much as twitch when Loren pressed. Loren felt a growing desire to snark, but it was more important to hear the rest of her story. He urged her on, and she continued just as levelly as before.

On top of being imbued with powerful enchantments, the black helmet was incredibly durable. But once someone actually tried putting it on, they had received no benefits whatsoever, and so the armor had been tossed in a pile as unidentified mystery tchotchke.

Judie was aware of this history, and so once the helmet turned up in the reorganizing effort, she had given the order for it to be tossed back on a random pile. That was when someone spoke up.

As it turned out, other demon lords had noticed other enchanted items similar to the helmet in their own storehouses. The full set included a helmet, plate armor, a shield, and a longsword. Four pieces in total. Although none of the pieces exhibited any particular power individually, they each let off a similar mana signature. This suggested they would exhibit their full power once they were assembled. They were to be gathered for further research.

“Unfortunately, a bandit intercepted the pieces before they could be brought together.”

It was unclear how this fellow had infiltrated demon territory, but the bandit had sneaked into the storehouse of one of the demon lords and made off with the black armor—while claiming no other prize. With pursuers hot on his trail, he had sneaked into the storage of *another* demon lord and made off with the longsword. From there, he’d vanished.

“I hear the bandit introduced himself as Magna. He was a young man who wore his black hair knotted at the back of his head.”

It was strange for a bandit to introduce themselves, yet the man named

Magna hadn't seemed the least bit afraid to find himself chased or even surrounded. In fact, he'd boldly asserted that the stolen items belonged to him.

While he'd shaken off his demon pursuers, he was still on the run.

"That's clearly the guy," Loren muttered as he recalled the face of the man they had met all too recently.

"Presumably so. Those flashes he fired—and the physical prowess that allowed him to withstand your strikes, Mr. Loren—are presumed to be the sum of his own power and the as-yet-unknown effects of those enchantments."

Certain enchanted items were created as a set and wouldn't exhibit their true abilities until they were gathered together. It was an incredibly troublesome design. This seemed to be the case with the items that had been split among the demon lords, although this Magna fellow could seemingly still summon a fraction of the effects with only the armor and the sword.

"This only became clear after I gave my report on our encounter. At this rate, there's no telling what will happen if he manages to claim the other two."

"So they want to destroy one of the pieces before he gets to it. A bit cowardly for a demon lord, don't you think?"

Since the helmet had little effect on its own, they could simply destroy it—but this was practically admitting that they would be unable to prevent its theft. The demon lords were accepting the fact they couldn't stop Magna.

"You can look at it that way. However, I'd note that it's also partly that no one believes this item isn't valuable enough to warrant investing resources in its protection. And it'll be nothing but trouble if added to a collection, so why not just get rid of it?"

"So we're throwing it into a volcano. Can't your mom just do it herself?"

If an ordinary furnace wouldn't suffice, it did make some sense to go for an active volcano instead. And surely someone as powerful as a demon lord could complete the task faster than anyone else.

"Well, about that... There's a reason demon lords can't get near the place."

"Now isn't that convenient? But isn't it in demon territory? This volcano?"

Loren asked. *It'll be a load of trouble otherwise.*

Lapis nodded. "Yes, it's just about dead center of our corner of the world."

"That sounds kinda far, but to the point: Why can't demon lords go there?"

Lapis hesitated a moment, then realized this wasn't something she could avoid. With a troubled smile, she said, "To be honest with you...this volcano is the den of an ancient dragon."

It was common knowledge that dragons were the most powerful of all beasts—the greatest misfortune one would ever encounter, and the inevitable end of any human who did.

These dragons accrued knowledge and power, and the longer they lived, the more menacing they became. Some dragons had lived since days long past; the portion that had survived from the age of the gods were revered and feared as "ancient dragons."

Loren was well aware that it was outright suicidal to climb a mountain where one of those monsters was hanging about.

"If someone as powerful as a demon lord approaches the mountain, the dragon will likely sense a threat and attack. For this reason, demons of a certain level of power take pains to avoid it."

By comparison, Loren was an insignificant human. Meanwhile, dark god Gula could conceal her innate threat level, and while a demon, Lapis was considerably weakened by her prosthetics. The theory was that they could therefore sneak in and toss the helmet into the flames before they roused the dragon's suspicions. This was why they were selected.

"Being honest here...the reward doesn't match the risk."

The white greatsword was a formidable weapon, but Loren didn't consider it sufficient incentive to set foot on ancient dragon territory.

It seemed Lapis shared his take. She nodded. "I think we can extort a sizable bonus."

"Alternatively, we could turn down the job."

"That's not a bad idea, but...if I am to make an argument from the angle of

common sense: Do you think we would leave here in one piece if we were to disappoint a demon lord?”

What’s more difficult? Evading an ancient dragon to reach a pool of lava, or evading a demon lord to reach human territory? Loren began to consider in earnest. Both seemed equally impossible. *We’re caught between a rock and a hard place*, he thought as he cast his eyes down and let out a deep sigh.

“And so we’ve come to negotiate for a bonus, Demon Lord.”

“Welcome! Come on in.”

“Huh? Err... Are you sure you should be so blithe?” asked Lapis.

Ultimately, Loren had decided they couldn’t turn down a demon lord’s request. And if they couldn’t decline, then the priority was eking out as much profit as possible. Thus he headed to Demon Lord Judie’s room with Lapis’s guidance.

Judie was sitting behind a large, ebony desk as she tackled paperwork, and she seemed completely unfazed by the party’s sudden intrusion. She welcomed them nonchalantly, her response taking her own daughter by surprise.

“Isn’t that better for us?” Loren whispered to Lapis.

“Umm, Mr. Loren, I don’t think I have to remind you, but we’re dealing with a demon lord here. A *demon lord*. As far as humans are concerned, they are the root of all evil, as well as the enemy of all creation.”

“Well, she’s your mother, right?”

“Yes, and I’m only saying this *because* she’s my mother. If I said it in front of any other demon lord, I’d be in for it!” Lapis stuck out her tongue and lightly chopped at her own neck.

Loren was certainly standing in front of a demon lord, and he felt like he should treat her as he would the lord of any human territory.

“So, what business do you have with me?” Judie asked from across the desk.

“It’s about the request. You need to sweeten the deal.”

“You’d say such a thing to a demon lord?” Judie asked, amused.

She looked young—so young that Loren couldn’t always believe she was Lapis’s mother. Her eyes were naturally cheerful, and given that she was sitting and he was standing, and her gestures and behavior, he would have just gone with it if Lapis had introduced Judie as her older sister.

“If you want to assert your demon lordliness, then quit it with the requests. Just give us the order. Say I’d better do what you say if I value my life.”

“A parent can’t be so unreasonable with her daughter’s friends.” Judie put a strange emphasis on the word *friends*.

Loren frowned while Lapis sullenly glared.

“Wait a second, aren’t we missing someone?” Loren asked, only now realizing.

Lapis simply replied, “If you’re looking for Ms. Gula, she was abducted by the maids a moment ago.”

Gula had been walking at the rear, and it seemed she had been carried off without Loren even noticing. Knowing these maids had the skill to abduct Gula, of all people, without tipping Loren off sent a chill down his spine.

However, he had something more pressing to say. “If you saw it, you should’ve stopped them.”

“I would have done so had it been one or two maids... But there were six, so I felt personally endangered...”

“That many?”

Although Loren didn’t show it, the prospect of negotiating with a demon lord had put him somewhat on edge. Even so, his blood ran even colder now that he knew so many maids had sneaked up on them, completely unbeknownst to him.

Lapis’s grim nod put a rather amused expression on Judie’s face. “So do you still wish to negotiate?” she asked in a testing tone.

“Oh, that’s a separate issue. Got nothing to do with this.”

Judie's point was obviously clear: Did they really have the nerve to face her when she had so many capable maids at her disposal?

Loren kept it short and to the point. If the maids were so good at their jobs, surely they could have taken care of this request—if they could. There had to be some reason the request had gone to him instead, and thus Judie couldn't lay a finger on him so long as that was the case.

"I see. You have some nerve."

"I just don't know when to give up."

Loren also saw little difference between risking his life for inadequate reward and being quietly annihilated by an irritated demon lord.

Judie stared at him blankly for a long moment—then chuckled. "I see, I see. You seem like just the man to keep by my Lapis's side."

"Mother?!" Lapis raised her voice in a panic.

Judie glanced at her. That alone shut her up, and Judie returned her eyes to Loren. "You want me to increase your reward? Is that correct?"

"We'd also like a little support. I can't imagine we'll manage a dragon's mountain as we are."

Whatever Judie was thinking, Loren knew his own limits. At the very least, he wasn't optimistic enough to think he could complete a job that might entail dragon encounters without demonic assistance.

"Aren't you asking for a bit much?"

"Then get someone else to do it. I'm not so down on my luck that I'll take an impossible job."

"Even if your life is at stake?"

This clear threat made Lapis tense, but Loren stopped her—although all she did was tug the sleeve of his jacket, and all he did was slightly raise his opposite hand. Judie could nevertheless tell what exchange had transpired.

If Lapis and Judie were to fight, Lapis would certainly fall far short. Lapis knew this all too well, and so the moment Loren was threatened, she had signaled

him to run away.



Even if Lapis was completely outmatched, there was a slim chance that Loren would escape, if they devoted everything to that end. Lapis had instantly decided to bet on that slim possibility—and Loren had refused her.

“I either croak on an impossible job, or I die here. Don’t see how one’s better than the other.”

“Your death here would be certain, but there’s no guarantee you’ll die on this job.”

By that point, Judie wasn’t hiding the implicit threat. She made no attempt to conceal what would happen if Loren denied her request.

With a light scoff, Loren looked her in the eye. “Is that how a demon lord sees it?”

“Oh, I suppose it must be.”

Then her menacing aura dissipated as if it had been a dream. As Judie smiled so softly, Loren got the feeling that she had never seriously intended to force him into a corner.

Then what was all that? He wondered. It took some time for him to muster an answer, but when he tried looking at it from a demon’s perspective, he found himself wondering if she hadn’t just been bored.

“I don’t like it when people think I’m an idiot,” said Judie.

“In that case...”

“But it’s not very demon-lordy of me to simply concede when someone says they want something. Don’t you think?”

Loren pursed his lips. He had made some tacit implications of his own: Either the demon lord truly thought that Loren’s party could complete the request with no assistance, in which case she was naïve, or she didn’t understand that they couldn’t, in which case she was an idiot.

It seemed that Judie had gotten the message, but her expression suggested that the conversation was leading in a different questionable direction.

“I don’t have any other demon lord buddies. So I don’t know what it means to

be 'demon-lordy.'"

"Then I'm demon lord friend number one. A pleasure." Judie grinned and flippantly waved.

Loren had no idea how to respond. He felt another tug on her sleeve and turned to see Lapis looking up at him anxiously. It seemed she didn't know how best to respond to this either. She could only give a troubled tilt of her head.

Judie, meanwhile, lowered her hand as her face grew more serious. "I really do think it isn't very demon lordy to just up and concede. So if you want something, you must *take* it. Isn't that the demon way?"

"A fight with you, then, Mother?" Lapis asked, thinking, *That's even more unreasonable!*

After all, this foe had claimed a title held only by those who had reached a summit after eliminating the competition. Only one of humanity's rare champions could face and steal victory from such a foe.

Yet Lapis's question was met with a shake of Judie's head. "That would be ridiculous."

"Oh, so you do understand. What a relief."

"No, but if your little boyfriend was a hero, I might have considered it."

"You're wr...ong? Ah? Umm... huh? Is that really something I should be refuting here?" Lapis murmured.

"Let me be clear," said Loren. "I'm no hero."

"Y-yes. Mr. Loren is not a hero."

Though Lapis first displayed a touch of dismay, after Loren pointed out this basic fact, she mustered a clear rebuttal. This too was met with Judie's intrigued expression. She nodded, propping her head in one hand and using the pointer finger of the other to tap the top of her desk.

"Then a demon lord would be too much for him. But perhaps he could manage one of my associates."

"What do you mean by that?"

“You desire my support as well as a bonus. I want you to take the job for as little payment as possible. The rest is simple. We will fight, and the outcome will decide just how much we can concede to each other’s position. Properly demony.”

“I’m a demon too, and I can’t say that speaks to me on a personal level,” Lapis bitterly said.

Judie shook her head. “It’s all about perspective. Don’t think about it too hard.”

She would make no more concessions. Understanding this, Lapis left the decision to Loren.

“Your representative will fight mine, and the winner will force their terms on the loser. It’s up to you to accept or not. Do what you please. Now what’s your decision?”

How would Loren respond? This, too, Judie seemed to eagerly anticipate learning as she waited for Loren to mull over the matter, and as he stared back into Judie’s probing eyes.

“Looks like we don’t got much of an option. So how do we go about deciding representatives?”

As Loren posed the question, he knew he would nominate Gula if he could. She was far and away the strongest member of their party. For one, she had complete mastery of her dark god authority, and for two, she knew enough magic to pass as a magician. Close combat also seemed within her realm of capabilities, and there was little room to doubt that.

Notably, he would also have been interested to see how Judie reacted if he sent out Lapis. Unfortunately, Judie was still a demon lord, and there was a chance she wouldn’t show mercy even to her own daughter. Seeing as there was a good possibility she’d choose an outrageously strong opponent, he couldn’t carelessly throw Lapis into the fire.

In fact, now that he thought about it, this curious, smiling demon lord was the very same demon who had stolen Lapis’s limbs and eyes. She didn’t seem like

the sort of person who would go soft on her daughter.

“You can decide however you want, but you’ll have to tell me your selection before I make mine,” Judie said, her smile never wavering.

Loren frowned.

The opponent depended on who they sent out, then. They only had three candidates to choose from, but Judie presumably had countless options. She probably already knew the best counter for whoever he chose.

“You sure we can’t have you go first?” Loren asked, though his hopes weren’t remotely high. Judie held all the power here, and if she refused, that would be the end of it.

Yet Judie assented as if it didn’t matter. “Very well. I’ll be sending a black knight. A knight in full plate armor.”

“That’s...kinda underhanded...”

Even if they’re in plate armor, it’d be naïve to assume they’re not a magician, thought Loren. The opponent would be a demon, after all. Lapis was a priest, but she could still use magic. So in the end, Judie had given him absolutely nothing to work from.

The armor itself would be troublesome as well. Full-plate armor meant it would be hard to tell who was inside. Worst-case scenario, they’d be up against Judie herself, and they would never know until she took off her helm. In the end, he might as well have made his choice first.

On top of that, donning full-plate armor was a time-consuming task. Judie could even use this preparation time to summon reinforcements who weren’t even at the castle yet.

“What will you do?” Judie asked. It was clear she was testing him.

With a slight sigh, Loren scrubbed his air and gave a resigned answer. “Who do you *want* us to send?”

“Oh, so it’s come to that.”

Judie looked surprised. Lapis looked between Loren and her mother, wondering what had just happened.

In short, Loren had realized that Judie had some ulterior motive. Basically, Judie had someone in mind, and if Loren chose anyone else, she would probably crush them without mercy.

The best course of action, then, would be to cut to the chase and ask her from the start. Judie hadn't expected this, and she was taken aback by the question.

"Honesty is a virtue," Judie said. "Although a demon wouldn't see it that way."

"Well, I'm a human."

"Hey, Lapis, do you think you have good luck with men? You chose a lovely kid to keep on hand."

"Mother...please refrain from discussing this when the man in question is present..." Lapis hung her head, her cheeks a shade of red.

Judie smiled brightly at her before turning that smile straight at Loren. "Personally, Mr. Loren, I'd just love to see you in action."

Loren had kind of expected that, so he wasn't particularly surprised. Presumably Judie wanted to see how far the mere human hanging around her daughter could go. "Do you have a spare weapon for me? I had to return mine."

Loren had his jacket for armor, but his only remaining weapons were daggers. Those wouldn't carry him in a proper fight. *She's not going to ask me to face an armored opponent barehanded, is she?*

Judie nodded. "You can borrow whatever you like from my armory. However, it must be an ordinary weapon. I will not lend you anything enchanted."

"And I'm assuming your fighter will be constrained by the same terms."

Loren was already at a disadvantage, and he didn't want it to get any worse. If he was going to use an ordinary weapon, the black knight would have to do so as well.

"That goes without saying. So what's your answer?"

"Fine, I'll do it," Loren begrudged.

If he sent Gula or Lapis, they'd in all likelihood be met with an insurmountable

foe. But if Judie was planning to study Loren, then she would choose someone who he had a chance of beating. *I'll have to bet on it*, he thought.

"Mr. Loren..." Lapis looked at him apologetically.

As Loren patted her on the head, Judie assured them, "No need to worry, I guarantee his safety. As long as he's not dead, we can fix him up good as new."

Loren supposed that if they had the means to remove Lapis's limbs, they could likely restore his own, should they be ripped off. Not that this thought was of any reassurance.

"That's plenty of things to worry about," he said.

"You know, if we find humans infiltrating demon territory, we usually deal with them on the spot. Is it not a relief to know your life isn't in danger?"

Although the demons knew that humans scouted their lands to gather intel, they didn't go out of their way to interfere. However, that noninterference fell away whenever they happened to trip over the little spies.

"It's over once you're spotted. Isn't that always the case?"

Loren had only been spared by Lapis's presence. That was the story as he understood it, and he certainly had no alternative explanations.

Taking his silence as consent, Judie stood from her chair. She passed them on her way to the exit. "Now then, come with me. Let me start by showing you to the armory."

There was no way to turn down a demon lord's offer of a personal tour. Loren followed Judie with Lapis by his side. The way to the armory once again reminded him of how impossibly large this castle was.

"How big is this place?"

Loren tried to remember the path, but he gave up before long. He didn't know if it was on purpose or out of necessity, but Judie's route took them through turn after turn. There were several three-way and four-way junctions, and despite his best efforts, he quickly found himself utterly confused.

If he ever lost track of his guide, he knew he would be hopelessly lost.

“It’s *incredibly* big,” Judie replied. “It’s the castle of the Demon Lord of the Western Lands, you see.”

“If the demon lord’s castle is this big, the great demon king’s place must be even bigger.”

Judie placed her index finger on her chin and thought a moment before saying, “Yes, it is several times larger than this one.”

Loren couldn’t even fathom a structure of that size. If the demons could construct something on that scale, then they truly were an incredible people—though he was more amazed that the great demon king could stomach living in such a place.

“I’d probably get lost trying to find my bedroom. I doubt I’d ever make it to the bathroom in time.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that,” said Judie.

And then they had arrived. It was certainly a typical armory. The numerous weapons on display were exceptionally well-crafted, but as Judie had mentioned, they were of ordinary make. They certainly didn’t look enchanted to Loren.

‹*Yes, they do seem to be unremarkable. I don’t detect any mana signature.*›

Judie was watching over them, and perhaps because of this, Lapis was silent. Thus the one who spoke up was the Lifeless King, Scena, who resided within Loren’s soul. She borrowed his sense of sight to inspect the weapons for any spell sequences or signs of strange workmanship. He thanked her internally.

After spending a bit of time looking around, he decided it would be best to pick something close to his usual arms. His hand reached for a hefty greatsword.

“Are you sure about that? Do you need armor?”

“I have my own.”

The greatswords in the armory were all roughly the same quality. It thus didn’t really matter which one he chose, so he had arbitrarily picked the nearest and gripped the hilt, testing its weight.

This blade was lighter than the one he had wielded in his mercenary days, as well as the white blade he'd returned to Judie. There wasn't much he could do about that. Somewhat resigned, he inspected the edge and found it well-sharpened.

"These aren't training swords?"

"How are you supposed to learn with a bladeless weapon?" Judie asked in all earnestness.

Loren was at a loss for what to say. Admittedly, one had a different mindset when swinging training weapons and real ones. Someone who knew how to handle a fake could still hesitate when it came to the real deal.

Regardless, Loren wouldn't be using the weapon for practice. It was no exaggeration to say that his battle would be very real indeed, and he determined it would be a waste of time to dull the blade or wrap it in cloth. He ultimately stuck with the first sword he had picked up.

"I'm fine with this one."

"Really? Then I'll lead you to the arena."

"Is it going to be another long walk?"

"Well... Yes. But it is what it is. Please just think of it as a warm-up."

Can I really wander around the castle with a sharp greatsword? It doesn't even have a scabbard, Loren thought. But Judie didn't seem to mind. She took on her guide role again and pressed on down the corridor.

Sure, Loren had Lapis on hand. But if he lost Judie, he knew he would be hopelessly disoriented. He didn't even have a rope with which to hang the greatsword from his back, so he was forced to lean it against his shoulder as he chased after her.

Chapter 2:

Transit to Departure

NOW ARMED WITH a new weapon, Loren was led down hall after hall until finally, he arrived at a circular arena within the castle courtyard.

What's something like this doing inside a building? Loren wondered. But in short, it was just part and parcel of the structure's overall grandeur. At least that was what he told himself. In any case, a demon lord had soldiers who served beneath them. *Maybe they used this place for training?*

As if she could read his mind, Judie said, "We have a separate training ground for the soldiers."

"Then what do you use this place for?" He couldn't see why else one would keep an arena. Was it that the castle was so spacious that it had an excess of unused space, and a random facility had been constructed to make it look less empty? When Loren posed the possibility, Judie's gaze drifted to the distance. Her face was stiff, and she refused to answer.

Right on the money, then. However, though this appalled Loren, that feeling immediately dispersed when he laid eyes on the individual standing at the center of the theater.

Waiting for him there was the person the demon lord had called a black knight. Their entire body was covered in plate armor, though they carried no shield. Their hands rested atop the pommel of a longsword as though it were a cane; the sword's tip was planted in the ground and it rose to about chest height. The best word to describe their air was "imposing."

With his greatsword propped against his shoulder, Loren glared at the knight with narrowed eyes. "Hey, ain't there something strange about that one?"

"Whatever could you mean?"

"Really, Mother. I can sense there's something off as well..."

As they stepped onto the raised platform at the center of the arena, Loren

and Lapis stared at the unmoving, black-armored figure at the center. They were a fair distance away, but there didn't seem to be anything else that might confuse their vision, and it didn't seem to be a trick of the light either. The fact of the matter was that Loren's opponent was gigantic.

"They're even bigger than me."

"If it looks that way to you, Mr. Loren, then there's no mistaking it."

Loren himself was considerably tall for a human. His height contributed to the force of his greatsword. However, the black knight standing at attention before them was at least two heads taller.

Naturally, a long vertical height tended to be accompanied by considerable horizontal breadth. All in all, the black knight was so large that Loren had to look up to take him in. The sword, which reached his chest, was roughly as long as Loren was tall.

"That's way too big, ain't it?"

Loren tried to make out his opponent's face, but the black knight's helmet was the sort that completely enveloped their head. It was impossible to see their expression. He could just glimpse a pair of purple eyes through the visor; that alone didn't indicate if he was up against a man or woman, or even how old they were.

"Did you always have such a large associate, Mother?" Lapis quizzically tilted her head beside Loren. She was shorter than him, and thus the knight looked even more massive to her. "I do believe I remember most of your subordinates."

"That there is my ace in the hole. I guarantee they'll give you a run for your money," Judie chuckled as she patted the black armor. The black knight remained completely still, staring at Loren with those eyes beyond the visor.

"I'm supposed to fight them?"

"That's right. If you surrender, or are unable to continue, it'll count as your loss. Nice and simple, right?"

"I guess."

Gesturing for Lapis to back off, Loren readied his borrowed greatsword. The weight was unfamiliar. Usually, he found some reassurance in the sensation of holding his sword, but when he looked at the blade the black knight held and the evident difference between their weapons, he found himself less confident.

“You’re allowed to attack your opponent when they’re down, but no killing blows. Even we lack the ability to revive the dead,” Judie said, backing away from the knight just as Lapis had retreated from Loren.

The black knight slowly lifted their sword out of the ground until they held it upright before their chest, offering the blade to the heavens.

Realizing this was a salute, Loren returned with the only salute he knew. He held the hilt with both hands in a reverse grip, the blade pointed down.

“Can I at least know your name?” Loren asked once they had both paid their respects.

He didn’t expect a response. Yet he heard some murmuring from within the black knight’s helmet. Even so, the sounds that reached Loren’s ears weren’t meaningfully discernible.

“All right, begin!” Judie announced.

Loren rushed in at the first opportunity. He bounded with speeds unimaginable for his large frame. Though he found himself suspicious of the black knight’s somewhat sluggish response, he took a large swing and hammered it into his foe’s left shoulder.

The shrill sound of grating metal echoed through the air. As if to demonstrate the might of Loren’s attack, sparks scattered from the site of impact. However, it was Loren who leaped back, scowling.

Loren summoned strength into his aching arms. He managed to prevent himself from dropping his sword, but he couldn’t ignore the pain racing down his wrists and shoulders. Worse yet, he had left only a faint scratch where he struck. It didn’t look like the force had truly reached the armor.

“What...?” he muttered in disbelief.

Upon seeing the black knight draw back their sword for a horizontal swing,

Loren held his own blade vertically to defend himself.

At nearly the same moment, the knight stepped forward, and his sword clanged against Loren's. The impact jolted through Loren's entire body—it was too much force for him to bear. He was thrown to the side like a doll, and he rolled across the floor of the arena.

Fearing a follow-up attack, Loren shot up with his sword at the ready. But the black knight was still exactly where they had last been, frozen at the end of their swing. The knight watched Loren stand and slowly got back in stance.

My hands are so numb, I should be thankful I didn't drop the sword, Loren thought. All the while he wondered why the knight hadn't given pursuit when presented with the perfect opportunity.

Loren had lost his stance and been unable to properly swing his sword. That could very well have been the end of the match. Yet the black knight hadn't even tried to close the distance.

Are they toying with me? Loren wondered. But they'd only had the one exchange; it was too soon to draw conclusions. He readied himself and took another slice at the black knight.

This time, the knight reacted. They swung upward to meet Loren's swooping blade. After a clash of sparks and sounds, it was Loren who lost the contest of strength. What's more, it had been considerably one-sided.

Loren's falling sword was pushed back to where it had been before the swing, and he stumbled backward, feeling as though his shoulder had been dislocated. This time, the black knight pursued, but Loren didn't try to fight their momentum. He rolled a few times and slipped out of the black knight's striking range.

Loren took a horizontal swing to keep his foe back, preventing their approach. As he stood, he heard Scena's voice in his head.

«Do you need my support?»

The thought had already crossed his mind—with the power of a Lifeless King, perhaps he could do something about this black knight, who had yet to use any magics or blessings. The watchful eyes of Judie on his back drove the notion

from his head.

There was no telling what Judie would do if she caught him using Scena's power. Even if Scena worked as subtly as possible, he suspected a demon lord would see through their deceptions.

«There's no way around it, huh? Then I'll just lend you some of my mana.»

Typically, Scena used her energy drain ability to suck life force from others and funnel it to Loren. If that was for whatever reason not an option, she could give up on the siphoning and supply him directly with her own power. As Scena herself existed within Loren's soul—as she explained it—it would look as though Loren was tapping his own innate reservoir.

«How about you use your self-strengthening and try slashing again?»

With Scena's encouragement, Loren circulated mana through his body and activated the sequence to strengthen it. Sensing that his power had grown, he hoped it would turn the tide. Once again, he charged with his greatsword at the ready.

Weapons clashed between the two combatants. With a dash from Loren's enhanced legs and the might of his enhanced arms, the confrontation wasn't as one-sided as before. For a moment, their blades were locked against one another.

Then Loren's feet slid back, and he could tell he was set to lose. Apart from speed and brute strength, perhaps the difference came down to build and weight.

The black knight realized their victory was close at hand and continued to push, but Loren was quick to change tactics. He shifted the angle of his blade, deflecting the black knight's might. He pressed forward, passing the knight while swinging his sword at the back of their knee—which he expected was a weak point.

“Hard!”

Due to the way plate armor had to be constructed, the backs of joints were typically the greatest vulnerability. At least, this was what Loren was hoping. Alas, the black knight's armor was properly fitted with chainmail and metal

plate. Loren heard the unpleasant sound of scraping metal, and he was unable to get through.

As Loren's blade caught the longsword that soon came after him, he found he once again couldn't withstand the force. He was repelled a good distance—but this time he was ready for it. Instead of rolling, he landed safely.

Still, the knight's raw strength, which allowed them to casually unleash such a powerful attack even with an awkward posture, sent a chill down Loren's spine. As he braced himself, the black knight slowly drew back their sword and sluggishly turned toward him.

"There's something strange. About Mr. Black Knight, I mean."

Lapis had been watching Loren's battle with the black knight. When he attacked, he was blocked, or he barely managed to scratch the surface of the knight's armor. The black knight, meanwhile, took no damage from Loren's attacks, and when Loren managed to meet their blade, the knight demonstrated such power that they literally blew Loren away.

To Lapis, the black knight was the strange one. If they were so strong, surely they should have initially closed the distance and taken the initiative. But as far as she had seen, the knight hardly moved from the point where they had started the match.

"He won't move?" she murmured. "Or he *can't* move?"

"Oh, I should have expected you would notice."

Before Lapis knew it, Judie was right beside her. She glanced at her mother sullenly before returning her eyes to Loren. If she had noticed something, she had to tell him. He needed as many advantages as he could get.

Thus she didn't have the time to deal with Judie and blatantly ignored her—not that Judie seemed to mind.

"You didn't used to have such a large friend, right?" Lapis asked.

"Who knows? My memory fails me."

"They're experienced with a blade... Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to

swing such a heavy weapon.”

Though the black knight didn’t move much, they did defend and counter Loren’s attacks. Their attacks had proper edge alignment as well—they were meant to cut. Whoever it was, they weren’t blindly swinging their sword around.

It was common for an inexperienced swordsman to fail to properly swing even a generic sword. Compared to a novice, the black knight was considerably adept.

“They have the brute strength to send Mr. Loren flying when he defends... So they’re most likely a demon.”

Though male and female demons did slightly vary in physical strength, all demons could utilize powerful self-strengthening techniques that essentially overrode their base abilities. Lapis was sure that pretty much anyone who served at the demon lord’s castle would have the strength to throw around a man of Loren’s size.

“I can’t narrow it down with those parameters... If I just knew who it was, I might be able to think of countermeasures,” Lapis mumbled, gritting her teeth.

Loren—locked in the midst of combat—was thinking roughly the same thing. Unlike Lapis, he wasn’t familiar with the demons who frequented the castle, so it would have been pointless for him to try to identify who was in the armor. He didn’t even consider the mystery, though he did sense something strange about the black knight’s movements.

“You haven’t moved far,” said Loren.

Given the length of the knight’s sword and that of their arms, they had considerable range. That was a threat in and of itself, and whenever Loren intruded upon that range, he had to take a dramatic leap to escape a counterattack.

Once he had calmed down and analyzed the black knight’s movements, though, he’d noticed that the knight hadn’t gone far from their starting position. When they did, it was by one step at a time, and only when their blades were locked.

Whenever Loren blocked one of the black knight's blows and was sent staggering back, defenseless, the black knight never gave chase. Additionally, whenever Loren circled, searching for an opening, the black knight would only follow him with their eyes. If Loren entered their blind spot, they wouldn't turn to face him and leave their back unguarded.

"I guess that armor's too heavy for you to move," Loren said aloud.

The black knight did not respond, but Loren caught a slight wavering in their purple eyes. He could tell he had guessed correctly.

In short, the black knight before him enjoyed absurd levels of defense, but they hadn't mastered the black armor that lent this defense to them. They were unable to keep up with Loren's movements. Given their purple eyes, the armor had to be so incredibly heavy it could hamper even a demon's strength.

If the armor was so heavy, it was understandable that Loren couldn't cut through it, no matter how much he hacked away. On the other hand, unlike Loren, who was running in circles, the black knight only had to swing their sword to match his blows. Although they couldn't give chase, they seemed to think they were perfectly fine stuck where they were.

"You're the sort of foe I would run from if I could."

Ironically, the black knight's restricted movement would have rendered them a lesser threat on the battlefield. If he abandoned this fight in those circumstances, Loren could easily outmaneuver and outpace them—most likely, anyway. He didn't know if they were hiding any other tricks. If he carelessly exposed himself, he couldn't rule out the possibility that he'd eat a surprise attack.

"The thing is, I can't run."

If he did, Judie would take it as Loren's loss. It would render all his efforts pointless. But he didn't have the means to overcome the sheer defensive force on display.

When he glanced at his own greatsword, he saw the chips and nicks that decorated its length, courtesy of all the times he had smashed it against the black knight's armor.

The value of this sort of weapon didn't lie in its cutting edge, but if the edge got any duller, he could abandon all hope of getting through that armor.

While lingering outside the black knight's range, he pondered what to do. A moment later, he had his answer.

"It's worth giving it a shot." Loren patted the back of Neg, who was clinging to his shoulder.

Neg had clung to him motionlessly, just like an accessory. He shifted ever so slightly as Loren patted his back. Then Loren's hand shifted from the spider's back to its belly. He cast aside his greatsword and ran at the black knight unarmed.

Although the knight seemed momentarily taken aback, they immediately launched an attack on Loren's neck.

With that strength, I'm dead the moment it hits me. Doesn't matter if I have a weapon or not, Loren thought.

But before the edge reached him, he slid, evading the slash—and barely grazing the knight's leg in the process. By the end, he was behind the black knight.

Having swiftly raced out of the black knight's range, Loren's hands now clutched a white thread of decent thickness.

"When did he manage that?" Judie murmured. *He didn't have that string when he ran at the knight.*

But before she figured out where it had come from, Loren was running circles outside the knight's range, thread in hand.

By the time the black knight realized what he was doing, Loren had restricted their legs by wrapping the spider thread around them. The knight hurriedly swung their sword to sever the string, but that was what Loren had been waiting for. He scooped up his greatsword and lunged to protect the threads.

His strike connected with the black knight's swing, and as before, the force sent Loren tumbling back. The strings remained intact. The knight swung again—which Loren met with a one-handed thrust.

This exchange repeated again and again, all while Loren continued wrapping the knight's legs in spider silk, until finally it was covered in a pure white membrane. The spider threads were many, layered, and sturdy—thick in width, expelled as they were from a spider of Neg's substantial size. They couldn't be torn from within nor severed from without.

Until then, the black knight had been able to change direction with a slight shift of their step, but now even that was difficult. They tried their best to remove the entangling threads, but Loren continued obstructing them. Between each interference, he added more and more rounds of silk binding.

Once the black knight's legs were completely tied, Loren lunged from behind. The knight desperately flailed to reach him with their sword, but Loren promptly delivered a kick, which collapsed them face-down on the arena floor.

"Hey, isn't that cheating?" Judie asked.

After thinking for a moment, Lapis replied, "Are you going to cry foul over assistance from a *spider*?"

"Well..."

Demonkind were blessed with exceptional inborn abilities. They often saw other races as being beneath them. Even if Judie weren't a demon lord, she would have been reluctant to cry foul by suggesting an inferior human had bested one of her own with the help of a mere spider—especially not when that same demon lord had personally arranged this fight. If she deemed the tactic unfair, it would imply she kept company with someone who had failed to overcome the combined effort of lesser beings. This would besmirch the name of her office.

"In the first place, Mother, it's your own fault that this little trick immobilized your knight. You put too much emphasis on the armor's size and strength."

The fallen black knight tried to stand on their own, but couldn't. They struggled and failed again and again.

"Oh, I suppose it's too heavy to lift once you've toppled over."

"Are you sure you don't want to put a stop to this?"

Despite the disappointment in Judie's voice, she hadn't yet declared it Loren's victory. The match went on. Loren, with a dulled greatsword in hand, placed his foot on the fallen knight's spine and prepared to swing at the back of their head.

It didn't matter how thick one's armor was, or how hard it was to pierce—repeated blows to a vital point would surely have some effect. And so, Loren had set his sights on the knight's cranium. If he smacked it enough times, then some of the impact would make it through and mess with their ability to think.

"Honestly, who's in that armor, anyway?" Lapis asked as she watched Loren start in on a powerful flurry of blows.

After staring long and hard at Lapis, Judie absentmindedly said, "Your papa."

"Father?!"

"Well, he was making such a fuss about wanting to meet the man his daughter brought, see. So I shoved him in this armor and put him in platform boots."

"Huh? No, wait! Mother! He's beating Father to a pulp!"

The armor was thick, and the impacts were dulled, but the violent, ceaseless battering was doing damage. The desperate movements of the knight, who was unable to escape Loren's foot, gradually grew duller.

"Should I stop them? But it will be annoying to declare my own loss."

"You're worried about that *now*?! Just call it already!"



“Yeah, yeah. I suppose that’s that. The victor is Mr. Loren.”

As soon as Judie offhandedly declared it so, Lapis rushed out to shield the black knight’s head from Loren. Loren, who sensed the battle was over, didn’t pursue the matter any further. He gazed at the somewhat dented helmet of the immobile black knight and let out a sigh.

“My, oh, my, you really got me good there. You’re strong...for a human.”

An affable-looking man scratched his head with a cheerful laugh. He was an elegant man, with hair combed in a gentlemanly fashion, garbed in the black ensemble of a butler. However, his jovial eyes were purple, and a rough, hefty longsword hung at his hip. He was clearly no ordinary servant.

In terms of his appearance, he looked to be just short of middle age. It at least wasn’t odd to hear him introduced as Lapis’s father—or at least, he looked the part more so than Judie did her mother.

His name was Oz Arland. His last name differed from Judie’s, as Judie’s surname represented her demon lord status, while Oz’s was the family name.

“Does that make Lapis’ full name Lapis Arland?”

“It does if she succeeds the house. Otherwise, she doesn’t have to call herself Arland if she doesn’t care to. She’s really just Lapis.”

This conversation was taking place on the plains near the castle. The maids were busy at work, loading a wagon with supplies and materials. This was, of course, the support that Demon Lord Judie had lent Loren’s party to complete her request. She had also arranged for the wagon.

“You can abandon it if you need to,” Oz said casually.

Loren couldn’t figure out what the man was so happy about, but he had been all smiles ever since being battered about the head. He’d been a little afraid that Oz was so beyond angry that all he could do was smile, but this conversation suggested that wasn’t the case. He seemed genuinely happy about something or other.

“That helmet is enchanted so that Judie always knows its location. If you

manage to successfully toss it into the lava, the enchantment will be dispelled. Judie will be aware of that too, so you don't even have to return if you'd prefer to carry on from there."

"Then we won't get our reward."

"Then here it is in advance. This is what you're after, yes?"

Oz held out the demon lord's weapon: the white greatsword Loren had been using all this time. It had already been prepared for him, with a cloth to wrap it and a tether to hang it from his back.

"Are you sure about that?"

"She doesn't mind. She even said you can skip the whole request and run off, if you like. Although if you do, you'll have to reconsider your relationship with our daughter."

Oz's smile hadn't changed, yet the nature of it had shifted. Loren decided that Oz's face was actually somewhat intimidating.

Loren looked him straight in the eye. "If you need me to be clear, I'm tagging along with her because she asked me to."

Lapis had been the first to suggest they work together. As for how their feelings might or might not have developed since then, Loren didn't intend to comment. He simply delivered what he knew to be a cold, hard fact.

Oz still seemed unfazed. "Hm, in that case... As for consequences, let's just say I might decide my daughter's got no eye for men, and that as a parent, I would kindly ask you to cease associating with her."

"Yet you're the reason Lapis has no eyes these days," said Loren. "Or am I wrong about that?"

To date, Lapis's eyes were still missing. Her eye sockets were instead filled with intricate prosthetic organs.

"I suppose I take your point..."

"Umm, I'm going to cry here. I really am going to cry," Lapis protested, placing a hand on Loren's shoulder and shaking him back and forth.

I should let her have her way for a bit, Loren thought. While she was shaking him, he dropped the subject and turned his attention to the maids' work—at which point he realized something. "How far is the volcano, anyways?" he asked Oz, who had joined him in maid watching.

"You'll be camping out for a night, even with the wagon. I'm sure you already understand, but...wait until marriage."

"Really thought this through, huh...?" But there was another matter that Loren wanted to discuss. "Anyways, you should know some folks will consider us dead if we're not back by the morning of the day after tomorrow."

The instant he brought it up, Oz had appropriate measures in place. "Oh, yes, I heard there was a party who infiltrated with you—one of those investigation teams? Very well, I'll send a message through the dwarves. They'll hear that you had a spot of trouble, so you've taken refuge at a dwarf settlement until things settle down."

"And what about any assistance, combat-wise?" Loren asked as he hefted the greatsword back to its usual position.

Although Oz's smile did not change, his tone dropped a touch as he answered, "Sorry. Judie decided you were better off without that."

"Hey, now..."

This isn't what we agreed on, Loren wanted to protest.

But Oz pacified him with his next offer. "You're getting material support instead."

With that, Oz handed Loren what looked like a chicken's egg. In appearance and size, it truly seemed like nothing more than an egg. For all that, when Loren gripped it, he did feel it was a little harder than the standard variety.

"What's this?"

"A one-use artifact that erects a defensive barrier. Try crushing it."

As instructed, Loren put some power into his grip. The eggshell cracked just like an eggshell would, crumbling in his hand.

Not a moment later, Oz had drawn his sword and taken a swing at Loren's

neck.

“Don’t be so surprised.”

Oz had acted so fast that not even Lapis had the time to react. Although the attack had been on a course to separate Loren’s head from his body, it stopped a fair distance from his neck. It was like it had collided with an invisible wall.

“It creates a defensive barrier around whoever crushes the egg. I’m sure it could block even a dragon’s attack—at least once.”

“It must be quite something if it can block your swing, Father,” said Lapis.

Loren had maintained a poker face, but he felt a chill at his core and was desperately trying to contain it. Oz’s attack had been terrifyingly sharp and intense. “That wasn’t payback for the beating, was it?”

“Who’s to say?” Oz didn’t admit it outright, but the way his lips loosened made Loren question the man’s intentions all over again. “We have agreed to provide support. However, sending someone too strong with you might incite the dragon’s wrath—that is Judie’s concern. Notably, the eggs will offset magic attacks as well. Do a bit of testing, if you want. You can keep any eggs you have left over as a bonus. Please don’t let them enter the human market, though.”

We can’t make any money off of them, but they’re still quite powerful, Loren thought. If used at just the right moment, they could save his life, and quite a number of eggs had been loaded onto the wagon. *I’ll gratefully make use of them.*

He’d hoped for at least one more comrade-in-arms, but the demon lord had made her call, and it was probably best to just go along with it.

“Where did Gula run off to?”

The last time he’d seen her had been by Judie’s room, and he’d heard she’d been kidnapped yet again. He asked Oz, hoping he knew something, but Oz only gestured toward the back of the wagon.

“Our maids loaded her in with the rest of the cargo.”

“Please don’t bully her too much. I get that she’s a rarity, but...”

Gula had been reduced to a toy for the demon lord’s maids to play with. If

she'd been loaded up like cargo, she was probably unconscious, and Loren couldn't help but be just a little curious as to what the maids could have done to a dark god to leave her in such a state.

"I'm guessing you looked into her, right?" he asked. "Did you find anything out?"

"The dark god, you mean? Honestly, we weren't too intrigued, so we don't have much in the way of detailed information."

Oz identified Gula's true nature so casually that Loren almost missed it. Lapis put some pressure on his shoulder, and he focused up to listen more closely.

"We know she's a creation of the ancient kingdom. They conducted experiments to make demons subordinate to humans, or research to turn humans into demons... There were various rumors, but the truth is unclear. There's no guarantee she knows the full truth either."

"That's gonna be hard to ask her about."

"I understand your plight. Well, either be patient with her or just forget about it."

In the end, Oz's tone made abundantly clear that he considered this someone else's business. Loren lightly clicked his tongue before adding one more question.

"Do you know where Lapis's eyes and legs are?"

"Now, now. That's a secret. You're fine with that, aren't you, Lapis?"

Lapis firmly nodded.

Loren felt somewhat displeased with this, but as long as Lapis didn't mind, he convinced himself he didn't have to pry any further.

"You can leave the horse and wagon in the location Lapis is using as a base in your territory. The wagon is equipped with a few of our technologies, so I wouldn't recommend putting it on the human market either."

"How are we supposed to get it across the mountains?"

"There's a route that'd get you across, but...if that's too much of a pain, you

can sell it to the dwarves. Consider that part of your bonus too.”

How generous, Loren mused.

“The way there shouldn’t be too dangerous. Leave it to Lapis to deal with demons. If you depart now and camp for one night, you should reach the mountain by noon tomorrow. I’ll pray for your safety. And, well...look after my daughter.”

Before they knew it, the maids had finished their work. All that remained was to board the wagon and depart.

“Look after my daughter”? He says some profound things, Loren thought. He followed Lapis as she released his shoulder and climbed up to the driver’s seat.

As Oz saw them off, Loren found himself compelled to ask a rather mean-spirited question. “If you’re so worried about her, why’d you tear off her limbs and gouge out her eyes?”

“Because I saw no value in an eternally sheltered girl. It was only necessary to ensure she would gain experience in the human lands. I still worry for her as a parent. Is that strange?”

A question for a question, and Loren had no response. After all, Loren had never been a parent himself, and he knew nothing about his own parents either. The closest thing he’d had was the leader of his mercenary company. Had the chief ever seen Loren that way? Yet another unknown.

It seemed Oz hadn’t expected a response, and he wasn’t disappointed by the lack of one. He looked up at the two aboard the wagon. His mouth opened to say something—at which point one of the maids quietly approached him and whispered something into his ear. For the first time, the man’s face clouded over.

“Before you depart, there’s one thing I regret to inform you,” Oz said.

“Sounds like something I don’t wanna hear...”

“Alas, you ought to. The shield was stolen.”

Of the black set of enchanted items in the demon lords’ possession, the man named Magna had previously taken the sword and the armor. Only the shield

and the helmet—that Loren’s party was transporting—had remained.

If the shield had been taken, that meant the helmet was the only thing left to go. It was almost guaranteed Mana would be on their tail.

“You demons are pretty lax on security.”

“Management was careless, owing to a lack of interest... But I can only really apologize.”

“Well, not much you can do. I’m sure it’ll work out if we can junk this thing.”

The helmet had been loaded in the back with all the other supplies. It had been packaged to make it harder to detect via magic, for what that was worth. Not that they expected this to ward off Magna, who had already managed to obtain three of the items.

“If you succeed, I’m sure you’ll be granted free passage through all regions ruled by Demon Lord Judie. Good luck.”

“That’s not the reward I was looking for, but if my friend’s mother is asking, sure. I’ll do the job as long as I’m paid.”

“Please, sincerely—very sincerely—look after our daughter.”

“Like I said, if you’re that worried, just let her be sheltered...”

Next to Loren, Lapis silently whipped the horse. Her cheeks were bright red. Presumably, she didn’t want Oz to say another word. However, as they left, she sent more than a few glances over her shoulder at her father and the maids.

Loren whispered in her ear, “We can stop by on the way back. Now that we don’t have to worry about Ritz and his crew.”

“I’ll...consider it.”

Lapis’s face turned even redder. Upon seeing that, Loren realized that some things weren’t so different between humans and demons.

Chapter 3:

Journey to Discovery

THE PATH WAS QUITE SMOOTH after they set off from Judie's castle.

Loren found himself surprised that the highway was actually paved. In human territory, the larger roads were maintained, to a degree. But it was par for the course for routes like this one to consist of bare dirt and nothing more. Smaller paths were often only paved by the travelers and wagons who'd traveled over them so many times that they had stamped the ground flat.

However, the roads in demon territory weren't made of dirt, dust, and time. They were pieced together from hard stone.

According to Lapis, most roads within the territory were similarly maintained. Each year, the demon lords calculated a budget for new roads and for the upkeep of the old ones.

"That's a bit funny," said Loren. "I heard over on our side of the mountains, we let the roads erode to ensure armies can't move too easily during war."

"Doesn't that sword cut both ways? That sounds inefficient for friend and foe alike."

"It mainly affects the enemy. Allies can move as slow as they want, so long as they're placed where they should be beforehand. You just gotta be sure you station your troops in the numbers and places where you're likely to need them."

The idea was to stall enemy invasions—at least that was what Loren remembered learning during his mercenary days.

Lapis scoffed at this human excuse for common sense. "That strategy would be less than meaningless for us. There are certainly minor skirmishes between the demon lords, but the great demon king stands above us all. We never have to mobilize large armies either—the lords or the king can make their moves all on their own and solve just about anything through sheer force."

As such, she explained, rather than worrying about enemy movements, they were more concerned with how ill-maintained roads would slow trade.

That made sense. If a single unit could leverage the force of an entire army, stalling tactics were pointless. It was therefore more efficient to ensure peace-time road usage.

Another thing that took Loren by surprise was the performance of their borrowed wagon. Yes, the roads were nice and smooth, but the stability of the ride couldn't be explained by that alone. According to Lapis, it was related to some sort of secret with the axle and chassis. Loren was no expert, so even when he inspected the area, he couldn't quite understand what he was looking at.

Even when the horse pulling the wagon broke into a gallop, the wagon barely shook. Loren was impressed, so much so that he found himself sincerely considering how he could possibly get the wagon back to Kaffa.

"Perhaps I should ask Mother if she can covertly leak the trick to the humans."

On a long journey, adventurers usually rented a donkey to carry their bags while they walked the distance on foot. Otherwise, they might rent a wagon. However, walking was incredibly tiring, and wagons made them sick and stiff with all the shaking.

This borrowed wagon's stability would certainly reduce the chances of motion sickness, and it would undoubtedly reduce the strain on their buttocks. Lapis thought it worth considering.

"Mother will probably give us permission if we just plan to use it ourselves, rather than circulating the engineering technique."

"I guess we really do have to stop by the castle after completing the request, then."

The stability of this wagon ride had indeed convinced Loren to return.

"I, for one, never wanna go there ever again," muttered Gula from her place among the luggage.

When they'd left, she had been loaded into the back, rendered unconscious by the maid offensive. Only a while after they set off had she wormed her way out, her arms bound to her body with rope.

Loren swiftly produced one of his spare weapons—a dagger hidden inside his jacket—to cut her free. However, the maids had put Gula through a gauntlet, and it seemed the experience had left a scar on her soul.

“No baguettes. No raw ham... I want some real food...”

“Is that all those maids ever gave you?”

“I imagine they had a mountain of pantry stock that was about to go bad. It happens, from time to time. Sometimes, the menu goes unchanged for days on end. The maid in charge of that can be a tad scatterbrained,” Lapis said, with just a hint of anger on her face.

That sort of thing came down to the lord of the estate. Judie was pretty easygoing—or rather, sloppy when it came to those things—and she never scolded the staff too harshly. Thus they had no incentive to improve.

“If that's the case, I guess we can splurge a bit tonight,” Loren said, feeling pity for Gula and her stomach.

The wagon had been loaded with a wide variety of food, and it didn't seem like they'd be in trouble if they used a large portion. Lapis didn't object, and Gula was over the moon.

In this way, they proceeded down the road. They set up camp once night fell—but come the second day of the journey, they ran into more demons on the road, and they found themselves stopping more often.

Unlike human towns, which were surrounded by walls and moats, demon towns seemed to radiate from singular central buildings, with residential homes and shops spreading from that point. The density of buildings thinned out the farther they got from the center, and the outer border was undefined. Thus, even after traveling a whole day from the demon lord's castle, they had technically only just left city limits.

Now that they were in the wilds, as it were, they found themselves encountering soldiers on patrol. The soldiers usually set their sights on the

human, Loren. It was up to Gula (who had restored her purple eyes) and Lapis (whose eyes were black, but who was known in those parts as a demon lord's daughter) to resolve the situation before it got out of hand.

It never did get far. The white sword on Loren's back served as a sort of passport.

"For having been shoved in storage, this greatsword seems pretty famous," Loren noted.

They had just been stopped by soldiers yet again, and he had been acquitted the second he showed them the sword on his back. Knowing there would probably be another soldier before long, he'd taken it off his back to let it rest on his lap.

"It seems like it. I never realized," Lapis replied with her hands on the reins. A thought seemed to strike her. She stuck a hand in her breast pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. Unfolding it, she began to scan the letters that spanned its surface. For a while, she was absorbed in reading.

"What's that?"

"Father handed it to me before we left. It is the sword's instruction manual."

This wasn't an official text, to be clear. Judie had just written down what she had learned about the weapon during the time she'd wielded it herself. Perhaps the demon lord had felt concerned about rewarding Loren with a weapon that he didn't know how to use... But then why had she given these notes to Lapis? He cocked his head quizzically.

"Maybe it's insurance to make sure you don't run away with your prize?" Lapis said.

If Loren shrugged off Judie's request and ran away with the greatsword, then he'd be leaving behind both Lapis and her information—and it would be up to her whether she shared it with him.

"Looks like they don't trust me."

"They don't know you well enough to trust you. I trust you, though," Lapis added and promptly began summarizing what she had read. "To put it simply,

the sword is very hard—it doesn't break easily, and it doesn't need to be maintained. Also, it's so sharp that it cuts through magic."

"That's it?"

More accurately, the manual had explained the enchantments cast upon the blade—as well as the metals used to forge it—in great detail. But even if Lapis explained all that to a swordsman like Loren, she doubted he would understand. So Lapis skipped the technical stuff and tried to convey only what was necessary.

"The synergy between the spell sequence and magium creates an unusual effect: the mana and life force of the wielder—and those of the beings it slices—are absorbed and translated into a sharper and sharper edge. Furthermore, it is imbued with spell-sequence destruction capabilities, shape-memory, and self-repair. Did you get all that?"

"Sorry, my bad."

The moment she began digging into the nitty-gritty details, Loren recognized his own fault and apologized. Even if she went on, he'd reach the end of the lecture no more informed than he'd begun.

"It can apparently convert life force into flames."

"Sounds fun. Maybe I can play at being a magician?"

Magic swords that could produce fire were nothing new—they were among the enchanted weapons one could expect to find if one looked hard enough. But they were still powerful, and they went for a fortune on the open market.

Loren had never expected he would ever wield such a blade, and he was thankful to have it.

"However, it has no limiter to account for its wielder's safety. Worst-case scenario, the sword will siphon all your life force, killing you."

"What crazy person thought that was a good idea?"

The truth was that even if the sword drained a demon as powerful as a demon lord to the limit, they could walk away from the experience with only a deep sense of fatigue. This was written on the paper, although Lapis had

omitted it. She hadn't lied—she could tell this was the case from a glance at the spell. More importantly, if a mere human like Loren used the blade's power without considering his limitations, he faced certain, unavoidable death.

“Also, while minor, it provides a few support abilities. Increased recovery, increased defense, enhanced strength. You've probably already been using those without realizing it, so that doesn't really change anything.”

“I'm still glad to have 'em.”

“Finally, now that you've officially been registered as its user, it looks like there's a new function...”

Here, Lapis balked. Wondering what had happened, Loren took a peek at the paper, but the words were illegible to him. He couldn't tell where she had tripped up. “Is it bad?”

“This is what my father wrote: ‘Have fun finding out.’”

Lapis sent him a troubled look, but Loren shrugged. It wasn't a warning. Whatever it was probably wouldn't suddenly threaten his life. Not that he felt any motivation to use a function that Oz—a demon who had wed a demon lord—described as “fun.”

“Does it at least say *how* to use it?”

“For what it's worth, yes... Although the method is dubious at best.”

Lapis hesitantly drew closer to Loren's ear, putting a hand over her mouth and whispering as though someone might be listening. Once he heard what had been written, Loren's expression turned into a scowl.

“Are you serious?”

“I can't exactly tell you to give it a go.”

Although Loren committed the process to memory, just in case he was left with no other options, his first priority was *not* finding himself in a situation where it would be necessary.

“Whenever something like that pops up, you always end up using it eventually...” Lapis noted.

“Don’t jinx it.”

But considering where they were headed, Loren couldn’t deny the possibility that they would find themselves driven into a corner. Seeing as the demon lord had paid him the sword in advance, he suspected she suspected it might.

“M-Mr. Loren. I’ll do my best to make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

“Yeah... I’ll be counting on you.”

Lapis clenched her fist as she brought the topic to a close. Loren, meanwhile, had half resigned himself to his fate as he patted her on the head.

Before long, they arrived at the base of the mountain.

They had been quite far away when Loren first saw the volcano. *It can’t be that one, right?* he thought. His fears proved themselves all too real as he stared up at the mountain towering over him, and he let out a deep sigh.

“Are we seriously supposed to climb this?” Loren muttered, understandably.

In short, the mountain was entirely composed of rock, rock, and more rock. Several other mountains dotted the region, but Loren’s eyes were on the one that was tallest, and by a large margin.

“Are you kiddin’ me? We’re climbin’ this?” Gula crumbled with palpable cynicism. She clambered out of the carriage and looked up at it beside Loren.

It was a rocky mountain, a desolate wasteland with no hint of vegetation. The slopes were steep, but not to the degree that they couldn’t be climbed. The problem was the height.

The rock face seemed to soar endlessly from the base, and when Loren craned his neck to look higher, he found that thick, dark, low-hanging clouds blocked his view of the summit.

The wagon wasn’t going to be able to scale the sheer face with them, and so Lapis got to work tethering and concealing it in a small wood nearby.

“If we’re going for the caldera, that means we have to get to the top of this thing, right?”

“Yes, that sounds about right,” Lapis replied as if it was simple and obvious. She had finished camouflaging and had produced bread and drinking water from the cargo. She handed a portion of food to Loren. It was around noon, and she was most likely telling him to eat lunch. “As for Ms. Gula, we have some baguettes and raw ham.”

“This is harassment!”

It was rare to see the dark god of gluttony reject any food given to her. Loren bit down on the hard loaf he had been given. It was a rather tasteless meal, but it nonetheless filled him up. He tore off another piece as Lapis came to stand beside him. She had forcefully foisted baguettes and raw ham onto Gula and was now holding the same sort of bread as Loren.

“This is called Mt. Sverg—the mountain of the sleeping king.”

“I don’t need its backstory.”

“The king it refers to is the ancient dragon.”

“Sounds even less important.”

Knowing this tidbit wouldn’t help him whatsoever. And staring wasn’t getting them anywhere, so Loren resolved to start the climb.



“If we get going now, we won’t reach the summit by nightfall.”

“It’s not just about when we start. I doubt we’ll scale that in one day regardless.”

“So we’re supposed to camp out on the exposed mountainside?”

“Let’s have Ms. Gula dig a hole with her authority.”

The mountain face consisted almost entirely of bare rock. Digging a hole in that usually required hammers, and pickaxes, making large sounds all the while, and it would cost a great deal of time and labor.

However, Gula’s authority could presumably dig swiftly and silently. What’s more, they wouldn’t need to deal with the stones the digging produced.

“Aren’t you bein’ a bit mean to me?” Gula complained, chewing the baguette she had reluctantly accepted. Not that she actually turned down Lapis’s proposal.

Even if they didn’t get Gula to do it, they would be fine as long as they found a cave along the way.

After a drab lunch, they took the supplies they thought they might need from the wagon, stuffing them into sacks to carry. These sacks had also been prepared by Judie. They were quite sturdy, a huge upgrade from what an ordinary adventurer might use. The production capabilities of the demons seemed to far exceed anything possessed by humanity.

“We should be fine using these even after we return, right?”

“You’d be able to get bags like these in human territory if you paid enough. It should be fine.”

Lapis shouldered a sack full of food, medicine, and clothing. With his greatsword on his back, Loren was unable to sling a sack over his shoulder. Instead, he held the shoulder strap in hand.

“Let’s get this mountaineerin’ party on the road,” said Gula, whose bag was somewhat larger than Loren’s and Lapis’s. Though her voice was as casual as she could muster, she looked terribly unenthusiastic, her eyes trained on the enshrouded summit.

Mountain climbing was tiring in and of itself. On top of their equipment, they were carrying about three days' worth of supplies, and their stamina would deplete in proportion to the weight of their load.

On top of this, they had to remain wary of the resident dragon while en route. It would be a miracle if they weren't thoroughly exhausted by the end of all this.

"It doesn't matter how vigilant we are. The moment that thing spots us, it's over."

Since the mountainside was all bare rock, there was no place to hide. Sure, there were some larger rocks they could duck behind—but though that might hide them from monsters on foot, it wouldn't obstruct the overhead view of a flying dragon.

That said, Loren could sense no monsters in the vicinity. Presumably, the fact that the strongest variety of dragon had claimed the territory meant that other monsters didn't even attempt to encroach on it.

"Seems like it would be a better idea to hurry rather than proceed with caution. What do you think?"

"Indeed. We have nowhere to hide, after all, so we might be better off focusing on gaining distance."

"I don't want to face off with a dragon either," Gula muttered.

Even the dark god wanted to avoid dragon encounters, so everyone quickly agreed that they would see to their business with all due haste and leave. They immediately got to work climbing. Unfortunately, there was so much ground to cover that the sun set before they had gotten far.

"Ms. Gula. The hole, if you will."

"Now look here, Lapis. I'm still a dark god, for what it's worth," Gula timidly protested, but she seemed to understand the necessity. Predator—her authority—began eating away at the mountainside where Lapis pointed.

Many mouths, usually invisible, gnawed at the rock, swallowing down the shattered fragments. In no time at all, there was an opening in the cliff—one big enough for three people to lay within, side by side.

“That’s convenient.”

“Most convenient.”

“Can you stop using me for your own convenience?”

Not only could Gula dig without exertion, she also dispensed with the material she dug out. *Maybe we should ask her to do this more often*, Loren thought as he inspected the end product.

Then instinct put a hand to the back of Loren’s neck, and his eyes scoured his surroundings.

Gula had been the first to hop into the hole, having been the one who dug it. Lapis would have followed right behind her, but she noticed Loren’s unease and looked around with him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“No... I think I’m just imagining it,” Loren replied. In his head, he asked Scena to use her eyes.

There were no plants or animals anywhere on the mountain. Scena’s senses were able to detect nearby lifeforms, so she would have known if something were there. But according to her, nothing of that ilk fit the bill, so Loren rubbed his neck, pondering the sensation that had struck him.

“Mr. Loren?”

“It just felt like someone was watching me. Looks like I’m being paranoid.”

If Scena didn’t sense anything, there wasn’t anything to sense.

Even so, Lapis’s expression turned a tad grim. She took another look around.

If a Lifeless King doesn’t sense anything, do you really have to be so wary?
Loren thought.

Lapis seemed to think differently. “It is possible to suppress signs of life force via magic. The spell is called *Seal*, and it does what you might expect. However, the gaze that sets off your intuition—that’s the one thing magic can’t cover up. It’s important to trust your senses,” she insisted.

Once again, Loren stared out from the edge of the hole. He still couldn’t see

anything. “Before we worry over nothing, who’d chase us all the way out here?”

“Why, the individual who desires this helmet, of course.”

Lapis produced the black helmet from the bag on her back. Only one person who would go to such lengths to claim it—Magna, the man in black armor.

“You mean he’s already here?”

“Even if he isn’t, we shouldn’t assume he’s working alone.”

Loren thought for a moment. “So you’re saying he has a collaborator?”

“Perhaps. And if he does, perhaps he instructed them to watch this place. There’s a reason a demon lord asked you to throw the helmet into the crater of this specific mountain,” Lapis explained.

Basically, Judie must have determined that it would be impossible to destroy the helmet, or any other part of the set, by any other means. Magna seemed knowledgeable about the black set, so if he didn’t want it destroyed, it would make sense for him to survey all potential threats to its existence.

“You think they’ll attack?”

If their watchers wanted to retrieve the helmet, the quickest way to do so would be to eliminate Loren and his party. He didn’t know how many collaborators Magna had. If they had a numerical advantage, a straight-up assault wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“That depends on their numbers. For now, the problem is whether this collaborator exists.”

Lapis thought it likely, but she had no definitive evidence. It was equally possible that Loren had just imagined the stare, and that Lapis was feeling a bit high-strung.

“If they didn’t show up on Scena’s scan, they’re trouble.”

“Quite. But as long as they don’t have any demons on their side, I can’t imagine they have many exceptional fighters. Their numbers are less than or equal to our own.”

“And they’re going to try to get in our way with those odds? How do you

figure?”

“Well...” Lapis turned her eyes to the mountain above them. The sun had set, and the curtain of night was descending. Yet the thick looming clouds were still visible, clear as day.

“They could make a ruckus to alert the ancient dragon...” Lapis murmured.

As far as the ancient dragon was concerned, anyone who entered its territory—with few exceptions—was an intruder, end of story. Human, demon—didn’t matter. So if these unseen foes could draw the dragon’s attention and then conceal themselves, the dragon would turn its ire on Loren’s party.

“In that case, having more people on their side won’t work in their favor.”

If it was one person working alone, then they had only one person to hide. But Loren’s team of three would need to conceal all three people from a dragon, which would be no easy task.

“So if they attack us, they’ve got more people. If they do anything else, we can assume they’ve got less. That sound about right?” he asked.

“That’s one way to look at it.”

If Magna’s collaborators really were here, what were they planning? *Let’s just hope they don’t exist*, Loren thought.

But as if intent on directly betraying his hopes, a crimson bolt of light raced through the descending darkness.

It was sudden and came without warning. The bolt collided with the rock slightly above their current position, and it burst into crimson flame with a massive boom.

“I applaud your sharp senses, Mr. Loren.”

They knew the direction the bolt had come from, but not the exact point of origin. Expecting one of the next shots might hit them directly, Lapis cast a *Protection from Magic* blessing. The second hit closer than the first, similarly scattering into flames.

Such a massive sound on an otherwise empty mountainside was going to attract attention whether they liked it or not. Loren found himself staring

cautiously up into the dark, low-hanging clouds above.

“What?! What just happened?”

Gula tumbled out of her hole, startled by the ground-shaking explosion. She almost rolled on down the mountain itself, but Loren hurriedly caught her. He shoved her back into the ditch and swiftly scanned the area.

“Where did they shoot from?!”

“That direction, I think,” Lapis pointed toward the light shot’s origin. Loren strained his eyes, but it was growing dark, and visibility was bad. He couldn’t pin down the shooter.

“Do you think they’re trying to hit us?”

“Not intentionally. Given the rate of fire, there’s only one.”

Before she had finished, another shot came flying and burst near the hole. Loren raised his arm to shield himself from the blast and the fragments of rock it brought. He’d confirmed the trajectory of the attack—it did indeed come from the direction Lapis had pointed—but he once again failed to locate their attacker.

“Did you see them, Lapis?”

“Unfortunately, no. I guessed their numbers by their means of attack.”

If there were multiple foes, they wouldn’t have fired individual shots. They would have preferred to coordinate a far more effective multipronged attack. However, this unseen assailant was firing one blast at a time, and with a long interval between them.

“The enemy is a magician, or something similar. Their skill in magic isn’t exceptional. I don’t mean their accuracy. I’m saying that *Fireball* is intermediate-level at best, and this is the best they can do with it.”

“I’ve got no insight there. But is it possible they’re limited because they’re keeping another spell going at the same time?”

“That’s...not impossible. Maybe they’re not hiding, they’re just concealing

themselves. On top of *Seal*, they would have to be using *Invisible* or *Camouflage*. Then *Fireball* on top of all of that? I rescind my previous assessment. They are a first-class magician.”

“Quit praising the enemy,” Loren groaned as yet another bolt of light collided nearby, followed by a burst of wind, fire, and rocky shrapnel. “What happened to the usage limit on spells?”

“They’re probably padding themselves out with scrolls.”

The number of spells a magician could cast in one day was limited by the abilities of that magician. It also depended on the difficulty level of the spell itself, but it was hard to imagine a single magician could fire so many shots of even a novice-level spell.

However, if a practitioner used scrolls that had been produced beforehand, they could activate magic without relying on their own stamina. Magicians generally had less to carry than other party members, and they were expected to carry around several magic scrolls at all times.

“Anyway, we need to crush this practitioner before we attract unwanted attention.”

“How? When we can’t even see them?”

Scena’s senses had yet to detect any life signals outside of the party. Even if Loren strained his eyes, the setting sun made for poor visibility. To make matters worse, all the nearby explosions had prevented his eyes from adapting to the dark, and the sounds were wearing on him.

We’re getting nowhere, Loren thought with gritted teeth.

Scena’s voice crossed his mind: *⟨This calls for a large-scale energy drain.⟩*

Before Loren could ask her, *How large do you mean?* he felt the Lifeless King’s presence swell within him. Gula—still in the hole—and Lapis widened their eyes, wondering what had happened. The presence of the Lifeless King swept out in front of Loren, in the direction of whoever was attacking.

“Is that...” Lapis was understandably dumbfounded.

Midway through its flight, the next shot of crimson light flickered out like an

extinguished candle.

Then it was like the mountain's surface aged a century in a second. Years upon years of weathered rock face fell away as dust. Finally, at the center of this transformation, they heard the faint scream of a woman.

"There they are!"

Loren still couldn't see them, but Lapis could. Gula, who had similarly enhanced senses, bounded out of the hole like a hunting dog, while Lapis shot a *Lighting* spell to illuminate her path.

Only with this spell could Loren's eyes finally make out their attacker. A fair distance away, in a slight cavity on the mountainside, a figure crawled on the ground.

"What are they?"

The figure looked nothing like anyone Loren had ever seen before.

Although their armor was leather, it wasn't the sort a mercenary might wear. It had been crafted to fit snugly against the lines of her body. Loren was also surprised by her hair and skin. In the magic light, the woman's skin was a deep indigo, while her hair was a transparent white that fluttered in the wind. The ears between the fluttering strands were sharp and long, like daggers, and brought to mind a member of the silver-rank adventurer party who had traveled to demon territory with them.

"An elf?"

"How rare, Mr. Loren. She's of an endangered race—a dark elf!"

What do you mean by endangered? thought Loren. Before she could ask, though, Gula had pounced on the dark elf woman. Evading Gula's swinging arms, the dark elf drew two daggers from her hip, holding them in a reverse grip as she ferociously sliced back.

Even from afar, Loren noticed a peculiar gleam on those blades. "Gula!" he shouted. "Be careful! Those are poisoned!"

"Does poison even work on a dark god of gluttony?" Lapis asked idly.

Loren frowned.

Certainly, Gula seemed like the sort who could completely ignore poison—he'd seen her eat the decidedly non-edible plate beneath her food as though it were perfectly normal. Perhaps his warning had been misguided.

"All right, so what's an endangered race?" he asked, changing the subject.

Also ready to drop the subject, Lapis obediently answered, "It means her people are on the verge of extinction. Dark elves are persecuted by elves and hunted by humans. Their population is in decline."

According to Lapis, dark elves were despised by the rest of elf-kind for their indigo skin. They'd tried to band together into a unified army several times in the past, but they had always lost to the superior numbers of their elven brethren.

They were, fundamentally, identical to other elves. They shared the same beautiful features, and so humans often hunted them down to capture as prizes. Their numbers had since declined, and now it was rare to see them anywhere.

"I think you'll understand if you see one up close. Unlike Ms. Nym and the rest of her race, their proportions are closer to humans. As for what that means specifically, I will hold my maiden tongue. Suffice to say, they're uniformly beautiful, and the other elves don't complain if you chain them up."

"That's pitiful."

"They have a long history of expertise with poison, and they're skilled at concealment. They're gifted in the arcane as well, so they are prized as assassins. Their people used to capitalize on these traits."

"*That's* troublesome."

A dark elf's indigo skin helped them blend into the night. On top of that, they had the characteristic nimble footing of an elf as well as a mastery of magic and poison. *It's like they were born to be assassins*, thought Loren.

And the dark elves had accepted this—they'd even made it their calling. So perhaps it had been inevitable that they would be hunted. But driving them to extinction was going too far.

“Well, she’ll be no trouble for Gula. Although I’d like to capture her alive.”

Calmly catching one of those poisoned knives in the palm of her hand, Gula closed in on the dark elf. The dark elf didn’t seem the least bit confused that her attack had failed. She slipped through Gula’s swings, accurately cutting at her stomach and leg.

However, the blade still failed to pierce Gula’s flesh. The point slid over her exposed midriff, and it didn’t even leave a scratch.

Gula seemed to be protected by powerful magic. Considering that the blades were poisoned, they were likely run-of-the-mill daggers without any arcane enhancements. They were therefore unable to harm the dark god.

“Why spare her?” asked Loren.

“Her race is dwindling as it is. Do you truly see a need to lower their numbers even further? Besides, there’s no telling what effects total extinction of a species may have on an ecosystem as a whole.”

“All right, so what’s the real reason?”

“There is monetary value in scarcity—wait, what are you trying to make me say?”

It was unclear whether Lapis had unintentionally let that slip or whether she was just playing along. In any case, she had a dejected look as Loren tapped his fist against her flank.

Loren continued to observe Gula, who took the dark elf’s attacks without guarding. She was gradually pushing her foe into a corner. Seeing as she wasn’t using her dark god authority—and instead subjugating the dark elf with pure physical force—it seemed she didn’t intend to kill. The dark elf, with no effective means of attack, desperately wove through attacks, but her fatigue was beginning to show. Her movements lost their vivid sharpness.

It was only a matter of time before she was captured, and Loren began to wonder whether he should start preparing a rope. But as if it meant to suppress these thoughts, his ears were blasted by an overwhelmingly tremendous roar.

“Wh-what?!”

“Oh, we might be done for.”

Loren and Lapis clapped their hands over their ears, searching for the source of the scream. The monstrous sound had reached Gula as well, who froze—providing the chance the dark elf needed to flee.

Her escape was a splendid one. By the time Gula realized she should give chase, the dark elf had slipped past the reach of Lapis’s magic light and had blended into the darkness of night.

Gula hesitated a moment, wondering if she should chase anyway. But a second roar sent her scrambling to where the rest of her party stood. “What’s up with the yelling?!”

“Well, there’s only one thing on this mountain that could make such a ruckus...”

“Yes, it seems like it’s noticed us,” Lapis said, her voice tense as she looked to the sky.

Loren and Gula looked up as well, just in time for the master of the roar to break through those ever-looming dark clouds.

Chapter 4:

Contact to Meal

*I*T'S SMALLER than I expected, was Loren's first thought.

When he heard the words "ancient dragon," he had pictured an entity so large that its spread wings would span the sky. Now that he thought about it, he realized that if something so massive existed, its den would have to be massive as well.

The mountain they stood on was large, to be sure, but it wasn't exactly big enough to house something of such magnitude. Still, as Loren looked at the sky, the dragon flapping its wings as it made a slow descent had the *presence* of something that warranted being called an ancient being.

"Think we can get away?" he asked no one in particular as he watched the beast descend from above the clouds. He didn't care who answered.

It was ultimately Lapis who replied: "Not possible...I imagine. There's no way to hide here, and even if we try to run, we won't outpace it."

Back in Loren's mercenary days, he'd considered dragons nothing more than fairy tales. He had never seen the real thing. Those picture book creatures had no place in battles between humans. Old instincts compelled him to ask if it was the real deal. Just in case.

Lapis nodded. "The sheer force of presence all but confirms it."

Loren had no idea what the difference in presence was between a common and an ancient dragon. But if Lapis said it was a thing, it probably was. "We fighting?"

"If necessary. Although we'd have a better chance if we sent Ms. Gula to stall while we got away."

"You sound hell-bent on abandoning me!"

Gula clung to Lapis's waist to ensure this would never come to pass, and Lapis

silently lowered her elbow on the girl's brow. It gave off quite a splendid sound, and Gula quickly found herself on the ground, cradling her head. Not that Loren had the time to deal with this.

The dragon opened its mouth as it hovered above them. "So you are the ones who disturb my home."

This was horrifically eerie. A creature that clearly looked like a lizard was manipulating human speech, and Loren was taken aback. But he also realized he had to reply.

"We're not the ones who blew it up!" he managed, wringing out his voice. The last thing he wanted was to take responsibility for the explosions.

The dragon was still far off, so Loren wasn't sure if his voice had reached it. Yet the great beast seemed to pick up every word. "Indeed, that was the dark fairy who ran off a moment ago. I thought I had seen the last of her, but it seems she obstinately clung to life. What a pest."

It sounded more like the dragon was describing those dirty little black things that lurked in the kitchen than an elf.

Loren raised his voice again. "If you want to chase her, go ahead. We've got nothing to do with her!"

"She is certainly unpleasant. However, she is not the reason I have come."

Was it not the explosions that had attracted the dragon's attention? Maybe not. *Then what's got her so pissed?* Loren wondered. There had to be something else... And once he realized what it could be, his face stiffened. "Don't tell me..."

"What exactly are you? In all my years, no one has ever tainted my den in such a rich essence of death."

Lapis had suppressed her power, and Gula had suppressed her authority. Both were thereby contained and probably hadn't been poised to put the dragon in a foul mood. But in order to force the dark elf into the open, Scena had used her Lifeless King powers without a hint of restraint.

The large-scale energy drain had devoured the dark elf's concealment magic,

but it had also expressed the kind of power that could erode a mountainside and turn a whole swath of rock to dust. It would have been stranger if the dragon *hadn't* noticed.

"It is a grave transgression to carry such an unpleasant essence into my home. Now, why don't you sit there and atone?"

"Wait! We didn't have a choice—"

"Save your excuses for the reaper."

It sounded like an excuse even to Loren. It was true that the Lifeless King Scena resided inside his soul; it was also true that she had recklessly exercised her power. Regardless of what Loren had to say, the dragon wasn't about to lend a sympathetic ear.

"Mr. Loren! Dodge!" Lapis shouted as Loren readied his sword.

Only a moment later, he realized how pointless this was against an attack from above. It was natural to raise his sword in a fight, but he had no experience fighting an airborne enemy. By the time he realized his misjudgment, myriad blazing spears had manifested around the beast. There was no time to run.

As the night sky was dotted with fiery light, Loren noticed the red sheen of the dragon's scales. He strengthened his grip on the blade.

"It's not using its breath?!" Lapis cried out in surprise.

The flaming spears were unleashed. They left tracks of red light as they flew, and Loren swung the white greatsword. When blade clashed with spear, it was the blade that won—and the victory was uncontested.

"Hmm, that's no ordinary sword..." the dragon mused as it watched its attacks scatter in bright red sparks. Then its voice turned doubtful. "Oh? Yes, that's Fiamma Unghia, isn't it. The sword of Demon Lord Judie."

To think that this ancient dragon knew of it. *Must be quite the sword*, Loren thought, glancing at the blade in his hands.

The dragon's next words sent a chill down his spine. "I see, so this is her doing. I see, I see... Whatever is she after this time?"

“Oh, dear... It sounds like Mother is no stranger in these parts.”

They couldn't interpret the dragon's expression, but it clearly knew Lapis's mother. Worse yet, the impression seemed unfavorable.

“Well, so be it. Her plans are irrelevant. Your fate is set in stone.”

“So negotiation's not even on the table,” Gula grumbled.

As they watched the dragon's every move, Loren cried out, “It's charging!”

“It loses the advantage if it comes down,” Lapis said. “But...we don't really have the means to impede its mass.”

Their foe swooped toward them with immense speed. It likely intended to crush them flat. And so, they fled as fast as their legs would carry them. As far as Loren could tell, having the dragon on the ground would make it a hell of a lot easier to fight, at least compared to a one-sided bombardment from on high. Lapis's opinion seemed to differ.

“I was sure the dragon would use its breath from the start,” she said.

The dragon collided with the point where they had been standing moments before. The earth shook as the impact cratered the mountain's surface, and as the dragon landed, it roared to manifest a great wall of fire. It wasn't going to let them get away.

“But for some reason, its first attack was a spell,” Lapis went on. “*Fire Lance*, to be precise. Do you understand why it chose a weak spell at the time?”

“I can't exactly think like a dragon.”

“It's because firing its breath from that angle would destroy the mountain. That dragon would have foolishly blown its own home away—so it held back.”

Loren sliced through the wall of flames. The moment the blade passed through the fire, the wall lost shape and was extinguished. But beyond it lay yet another flaming wall. The dragon could manifest them seemingly endlessly, and it took no more than an instant for the flames to surround them once again.

“Now that it's at our level, it can deploy its breath without concern for collateral damage.”

“Can you keep it short?!”

“From now on, that dragon will unleash its breath—the strongest weapon a dragon possesses—and it will do so relentlessly.”

“Gula!”

“Don’t look at me. I ain’t never eaten an ancient dragon’s breath before.” Gula sounded less than confident, but she had already deployed her authority in a protective array in preparation.

Loren saw this through the eyes he shared with Scena. But beyond the Predators, the ancient dragon’s mouth was open wide. Glistening power coalesced in its maw. All words left him.

It was a radiance like unto nothing he had ever seen. The power was so overwhelming that his body quivered at the mere sight of it. He felt like he had been reminded of his own weakness, of the utter insignificance of his existence, and he unknowingly lowered the tip of his greatsword.

⟨I’m sorry, Mister. It’s because I didn’t think before I used my power...⟩

Just as Loren was on the verge of surrender, Scena’s apologetic voice brought him back. He readied the greatsword again. “Don’t sweat it. I didn’t stop you, so we share responsibility.”

⟨Mister...⟩

“It’s coming, Mr. Loren.”

The tension in Lapis’s voice grounded him. Beyond Gula’s authority, and beyond a protective blessing Lapis had deployed, he saw the torrent of blinding red strength.

Loren’s legs nearly seized, but he gripped his sword and dug his feet into the ground.

He just had to block one blow. After that, his foe would still be on the ground, within range of his blade. Loren couldn’t let this chance slip by. He had to find the perfect chance to attack.

At last, he watched as the dragon released its gathered energy.

It shines, Loren thought. And in that moment, he neither attacked nor defended. Instead, he dodged out of the way.

Perhaps it was a premonition. The moment the dragon let loose what he could only perceive as pure light, a clear and vivid image crossed his mind. If he remained standing where he was, he would die.

Lapis seemed fully intent on blocking the shot, while Gula looked less convinced. Instantaneously activating his self-strengthening sequence, Loren grabbed them both by the waist and leaped to the side.

The weight of two extra people on top of his sword inevitably slowed his movement, but he knew they were doomed if he held back even the smallest bit. This grim image in his mind allowed him to push his body harder than usual.

Simultaneously, the radiant white breath from the dragon's mouth swallowed Gula's Predators. It tore furrows in the ground as it shot forward, and the barrier gave it the briefest pause, and seconds later, it burst straight through.

The breath attack passed them by and made impact on the distant horizon, the sight of which sent a shiver down Loren's spine. He couldn't even tell how far away it was. All he could see was the pillar of pure white light rising toward the sky from the impact site.

Unable to believe what he was seeing, Loren looked down to Gula. Smoke rose from her mouth.

"No good. It burned me before I could swallow..." she grumbled as she breathed out a sigh that smelled of charcoal.

Loren didn't know what to say. Should he be surprised that Gula managed to take in even a bit, or concerned about her stomach? What could have happened to it that would have her breathing smoke?

"Perchance I underestimated our foe. The force of that breath...is harrowing." Lapis's tone had changed, and there was a sharpness in her eyes. That just went to show how dangerous the attack had been.

Something crumbled out of Lapis's hand. She had used one of the defensive

tools they had received from the demon lord. Loren scanned the surroundings and saw they were so hot that the air shimmered. The ground that the breath had passed over now oozed with fire, red and molten.

An attack of such unfathomable heat inevitably caused outrageous collateral damage. If Lapis hadn't used the egg to protect herself—and everyone in contact with her—then what would have become of the mere human carrying her? Loren didn't even want to think about it.

There was no guarantee he would be able to avoid the next one. Worse, Gula now hung limply in his arms. She couldn't be counted on for whatever came next.

We're screwed, aren't we? Loren thought as he turned to the dragon. For some reason, its mouth was still wide open. It was like it had frozen on the spot.

Thankfully, it wasn't coming after them. Yet the dragon had been so close to killing them, and it was strange to see it fail to finish the job.

"Does it have to recover after an attack like that?" Loren asked as he set his comrades down.

That sort of thing happened to swordsmen as well. After Loren swung with all his might, he inevitably left a slight opening. Maybe a dragon's breath was similarly compromising. But it had been immobile for so long that this seemed unlikely.

But what other reason could there be? He couldn't think of any.

"How about we run while we can?" Loren asked.

"That sounds good to me," Lapis agreed.

Then the dragon closed its mouth. It shut with such force that they heard its teeth snap together. For some reason, it stared fixedly in the direction it had exhaled. Soon, its eyes flicked to Loren, who watched cautiously.

"Now you've done it," it growled.

"I haven't done a damn thing..." Loren retorted, and truthfully so.

All he'd done was grab Lapis and Gula and jump out of the way. And yet the dragon was staggering. It looked like it had suffered damage as it trudged

toward them.

“Now I *need* to capture you, no matter what it takes.”

“You’ve lost me. You think I’m just gonna let that happen?”

Gula was still smoldering, lying limply on the ground. Lapis closely studied the dragon, but without a weapon, it didn’t look like she could go toe to toe with the thing.

Then it’ll have to be me, Loren concluded. He bounded across the burnt ground as he charged the beast.

“Just let me take you!” the dragon snarled.

“Hell no, idiot!”

The dragon took in a great breath of air. Loren thought it would shoot its breath again, but the dragon didn’t let out a white torrent. Instead, it emitted a tremendous roar that ripped through his ears.

Though Loren was unaware of this, weak-willed foes who heard a dragon’s roar were stunned, left unable to take action. The dragon attempted to use this to petrify Loren, but Loren powered through it. One of the dragon’s forelimbs raised with its roar, only to be met with the white blade.

Scale screeched against metal. White sparks flew, and Loren’s face twisted in shock as he realized his blow hadn’t reached the dragon’s flesh. Meanwhile, although the dragon’s sturdy scales had blocked the swordsman’s slash, it was startled by the impact that rattled its leg.

“To think you could unleash a slash of such might!”

“Shut it! I’m already losing confidence here!”

On the return swing, he attacked the forelimb again. Like the first, this blow ended with only a handful of sparks scattering off the surface of the scales. But though Loren knew this wouldn’t work, he wasn’t about to give up.

“Let me *take you*!”

The dragon pushed off the ground to rear upright in an attempt to hammer its forelimbs down upon Loren. If he took a blow from the dragon’s full weight,

even a swordsman as skilled as Loren—even clad in his excellent armor—would be mercilessly crushed.

Loren understood this. Yet he took a stance with his sword against his shoulder. He meant to catch the dragon's talons with the length of his weapon.

"Don't be *stupid!*" it snarled.

"Aw, shut up!"

Loren's knees nearly buckled under the weight that fell upon him. But with his innate power and his self-strengthening, both at full throttle, he mustered resistance.

«*Mister! Let me help!*»

Scena's voice echoed in his head and the Lifeless King's mana poured into his body. Loren channeled it toward his self-strengthening, and he stopped the blow just short of crushing him flat.

"What?!"

"Surprised already?!"

Loren's body grated under the incredible weight. He released his right hand from the greatsword and stuck it into his jacket. There he kept the Dragonslayer dagger, an enchanted item he had claimed during another job.

Once he grasped the handle, he quickly drew it and stabbed it into one of the claws shoving down on him.

This dagger's enchantment imbued it with peerless potency against any draconic foe. Loren's greatsword hadn't even scratched the dragon's scales, but though he felt resistance at first, the short blade slid slickly past them and into the flesh that lay beneath.

The dragon had never expected a paltry swordsman to possess the means to harm it. It howled in pain, retreating a step as its forelimbs recoiled.

"There's more where that came from!"

"Wait! Let's talk!"

Loren's opponent had flinched. Now was the time to press. Loren did just that

—until the dragon’s plea made him balk.

This was a foolish mistake, one that would have spelled death had it been a ruse. But the dragon didn’t seem keen on betraying its own word. Even as Loren’s stance faltered, it did not approach. In fact, it stepped respectfully back.

“You wanna talk it out?” he asked. “*Now?*”

“That’s correct. This will be in your favor too. You don’t think that a single dagger would deal me a fatal blow, do you?”



“That...depends on how I use it,” Loren said, mostly for the sake of saying it. He would have considered his chances better if the dagger were at least a longsword. But if a measly dagger could cut through a dragon’s scales, it couldn’t inflict serious injury, and he was well aware of that.

“You might be able to do me more injury, but there’s a high chance you would die in the process. Do you still wish to continue?”

Once the dragon spelled it out, Loren had to give it real thought.

When he did, he remembered that he’d assumed the dragon was upset by the dark elf. However, it turned out that he and Scena were the ultimate source of upset. That realization, in conjunction with the fact that the victim was requesting this discussion, made Loren feel like a bit of a heel for wanting to settle things through force. He lowered the dagger.

“So you understand?” the dragon asked. “Then let us speak.”

“Our only business is with the volcano. Let us go, and we won’t ask for any more.”

“The volcano? Are you throwing something away again? My home is not your midden.”

In other words, this wasn’t a first. The demons had come to rid themselves of trash that only a volcano could incinerate before.

Are there really so many dangerous items in demon territory that they’d brave an ancient dragon to discard them? Loren wondered.

“Very well, then.” There was a hint of discontent in the dragon’s voice as it conceded. “I have but one request.”

“If you want to eat someone, the deal’s off,” Loren said preemptively.

The dragon shook its head. “You will mediate between me and Demon Lord Judie.”

“What?”

“To be more precise, I wish to meet Demon Lord Judie so that *she* can mediate between me and the great demon king. That little girl used to get up to

all sorts of mischief on my mountain. She's done me countless wrongs... If we add those transgressions to my mercy in this instance, she cannot refuse me."

Loren couldn't keep up—what did a demon lord and the great demon king have to do with this? He frowned at the dragon for some explanation.

The dragon ashamedly scratched a claw on its neck a few times, then mumbled, "That breath before... I haven't had to deal with intruders for a long while, and it seems I went a bit hard."

"Real pain for us."

"It's your fault for filling my house with all that death. That aside, I might have come a little too close to being serious with that attack..."

"Too close to being serious"—meaning that hadn't been its full power. The same chill ran down Loren's spine again, but the dragon's next words left him dumbfounded.

"When it missed...it landed in the proximity of the great demon king's castle."

"Huh? Oh...I see." Loren suddenly understood why the dragon had been petrified after releasing its breath. Long story short, the beast had caused a little accident.

"I don't know what damage it left in its wake, but there must be some. I don't want them seeking excess reparations."

"So you want me to smooth things over with a demon lord who knows the circumstances."

"And perhaps then we can call it even?"

Loren still couldn't read the changes in the dragon's expression. The impression it gave off, however, was that of an incredibly troubled individual.

It was quite an anticlimactic tale, but a cheap price to pay for avoiding a fight. He looked to Lapis, who nodded to let him know that she emphatically agreed.

Once the truce was called, Lapis produced an inkwell, a pen, and several sheets of paper from her sack. Under Loren and the dragon's watchful eyes, she

patiently composed a document and signed her name at the end. After allowing the ink to dry, she rolled it up and handed it to the dragon.

“I wrote a letter to Mother. She should comply if you show it to her.”

“You’re Judie’s daughter, then?” The dragon had determined they had ties to Demon Lord Judie due to Loren’s greatsword, but it was apparently unaware of Lapis’s relation to her.

“Yes, I am Judie’s daughter, Lapis.”

“I see, that’s a godsend... But will it really be all right if I visit the demon lord’s castle?”

Sensing a touch of anxiety in the dragon’s voice, Lapis shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I don’t know what happened between you two in the first place.”

“Do you wish to?”

Lapis thought a bit before nodding. “If it’s not a bother.”

“Well, let’s see. Ah, one time...”

The ancient dragon went on to describe Judie’s deeds, which made the demon lord’s daughter scrunch her face in turn.

The least-offensive tale was of the time Judie challenged the dragon head-on to test her skills. Then there was the time when, while the dragon was sleeping, she snuck into its den and tore off several dozen scales, thinking they would be a good ingredient for who knew what. Then there were the multiple times she had dumped waste into the volcano to which they were headed, and the resultant fumes that had been so noxious, so hazardous, that they had polluted the entire mountain—so much so that they threatened even draconic constitution. And those were only the beginning.

The dragon couldn’t count the times that Judie had attempted to steal its eggs to make a large omelet. When she’d heard that dragon tail was delicious, she’d hunted down one of the dragon’s less-powerful underlings and minced up that very appendage. When she’d heard a fairy was born on the mountain, she’d abducted it to keep as a pet in her castle. Once, upon declaring that she required sulfur and other such things, she had covered the mountain with

holes.

“Her behavior was so dreadful that the fire spirit living in the caldera became enraged and evolved into an ifrit. And ever since the volcano’s guardian became an ifrit, no one has been able to approach the caldera.”

Ifrits were high-ranking fire spirits. They were violent entities of pure destruction that took on the form of giants, and some humans worshipped them as gods. Knowing Judie had created one through sheer wanton indifference sent Lapis past the shores of irritation into the land of straight-up amazement.

“That said, if you have business with the volcano, you’ll need to do something about that ifrit.”

“My mother’s been a horror show...”

“No, there’s no reason for her daughter to shoulder the blame. I let the blood rush to my head. Please forgive me.”

Lapis had fallen to the floor, kowtowing for forgiveness, and the dragon bowed its head in turn. What a rare and surreal sight this was. Loren scratched his head as he wondered how to resolve the situation.

Demon girl and dragon stayed like that for a while, heads lowered, but eventually raised them at about the same time. The dragon skillfully took Lapis’s letter in its talons and spread its wings.

If only it could have taken them higher up the mountain and saved them the climb... But the dragon had caused damage near the great demon king’s castle, and if it didn’t get this settled quickly, there was a chance the great demon king would pay the mountain a little visit. Loren had already had his fill of the ancient dragon. The great demon king would just complicate things. And besides, this was a matter best resolved with all due haste.

On the other hand, it was nighttime, and it was unclear if the dragon would get the chance to meet Judie even if it did stop by her castle. At least now it could claim that it had tried to take action as soon as possible.

“My apologies,” said the beast. “I’ll return as soon as I talk it out. As a dragon, I’m not given to throwing my lot in with either humans or demons, but I

promise to compensate you for the trouble I've caused."

The dragon kicked off. It moved with unimaginable grace for its hulking build, and Loren couldn't help but feel that something was off about the way it hovered in place while barely flapping its wings. His thoughts must have made it to his face.

"Dragons don't actually fly with their wings," Lapis whispered into his ear. "They do it by means of something similar to magic. If something that large and heavy flew by flapping its wings, it would cause quite a lot of damage every time it took flight."

"Is that how it works?"

"I'll be going, then," the dragon called. "We will meet again."

With those parting words, the dragon took off high into the sky. It presumably headed to Judie's palace after that, but these were the concerns of a world beyond the clouds.

Once it was gone, Loren muttered, "That dragon was female."

Its voice and gestures had been mostly ambiguous. Loren had thought its voice might be a bit high-pitched, but he hadn't been concerned with discerning its age or gender. He only concluded this after reflecting on the dragon's words.

"She did talk about her eggs, after all," said Lapis.

"Eggs... I'm starvin'. Everything inside me burned up."

It seemed Gula had been left in that state not because she'd consumed the dragon's breath, but because her authority had been burnt to a crisp. Her mouth was still smoking because her insides were still smoldering. Loren was a tad concerned that she seemed perfectly fine despite the fact a fire was literally burning in her stomach.

"First..." Loren groaned. "Let's sleep. It's still night."

"So it is. All right, Ms. Gula. Please dig another hole."

"Urgh... You want me to shove stones into an empty stomach? You bully."

"Then would you like to get in some baguettes and raw ham first?"

“You still have some?!”

Gula frantically restrained Lapis before she could produce them from her bag.

I guess even the dark god of gluttony can get sick of something after a while, Loren thought.

Somehow or another, Gula managed to stop Lapis, but she continued complaining under her breath as she used her Predators on the mountain’s stony surface. Once again, she excavated a tunnel wide enough to sleep three.

However, it took her longer to complete digging the hole than it had before the dragon attack. It seemed the ancient dragon’s breath had inflicted considerable damage on Gula’s power.

“I’ll keep watch,” said Loren.

“Ah, don’t worry ’bout it. Me and Lapis’ll do something about that. Just sleep.”

“I can’t imagine the dark elf will return, but I can’t rule it out entirely. I’ll set up some defensive spells and blessings. But Mr. Loren, my dear human, you just fought an ancient dragon. Please rest.”

When Loren thought about it, it was rare to face even a common dragon. Many a lesser adventurer had drawn their last breath doing just that. But here he had jumped straight past that stage and fought the greatest of beasts—an ancient dragon. Even if she hadn’t been giving it her all, he had managed to get in a few good hits.

That was a pretty preposterous experience, he realized.

At last, all the fatigue that had been building in Loren’s body started to feel real. He was assailed by an immense drowsiness.

He teetered slightly as he leaned his greatsword against the wall of Gula’s hole. By the time he pushed his body into the sleeping bag that Lapis had laid out for him, his brain was barely functioning. Just like that, he fell into sleep’s embrace.

Loren only woke once it was morning, when the sun had already risen quite high in the sky. Lapis had to shake him to get him up. Up to that point, he had

been in the sort of deep sleep that lay beyond dreams.

As for what sort of lookout duty Lapis and Gula had arranged, Loren didn't know. Lapis had built a fire and was preparing breakfast with an idle expression. Gula watched over her, occasionally scanning their surroundings. Their behavior suggested that the night had been uneventful after they parted ways with the dragon.

"Good morning, Mr. Loren. Did you sleep well?" Lapis asked. She had fashioned a basic stove from fallen bits of rubble, then lit a fire with a viscous substance that she had taken from her bag. Something simmered in a small pot over the flame. "Breakfast will be ready soon. Today we're having a bean and salted meat stew. It's a little plain, but there's not much to do about that, given the location."

"Doesn't sound like nearly enough," Gula complained.

Lapis silently held a thick, long baguette out to her.

Where did she get that from? Loren wondered.

Gula...silently took the loaf. She added nothing on top, nor did she sandwich anything in the halves. She only chomped down and tore a piece off with her teeth.

She must have dealt with that joke so many times she got sick of it, Loren thought as Lapis handed him some stew from the pot.

It was indeed a simple stew, consisting of a couple types of beans with diced salted meat, boiled with a few herbs. Even so, either the ingredients were good, or Lapis's skills were excellent, as the instant Loren's wooden spoon brought the first taste to his mouth, he was refreshed. He chewed slowly, taking time to relish the flavor.

After Lapis had poured her own bowl, the rest of the pot was handed to Gula. Seeing her pouring it down her throat directly from the pot did diminish their own appetite, but all in all, it was a peaceful breakfast.

Chapter 5:

A Restart to a Conversation

WITH THE MORNING MEAL out of the way, Loren's party swiftly packed their things and collapsed the hole they'd slept in before resuming the climb. They had made some progress, but the summit was still far off, and the higher they went, the steeper the slope grew. It was unclear how long the trek would take, and thus they decided to set off as soon as they could.

"It looked tall from a distance... It's even taller up close," grumbled Gula. Her mouth was no longer steaming. It seemed her burned authority had recovered somewhat. It had taken time, but she seemed to be back to her usual self.

"If we were to climb any other mountain, the scenery would change everywhere we looked, and there would be plants and whatnot to distract us... A dreary, desolate rock like this feels so very unrewarding," Lapis added to the list of complaints.

Indeed, they were surrounded by naught but rocks, with no green in sight. There was nothing resembling a path, leaving them to search endlessly for any means to get just a little higher. Feeling discouraged was inevitable, but pausing only delayed reaching the peak. If they wanted this monotonous task to be over and done with, then their only option was to walk.

"Couldn't we have gone right to the top if we rode the ancient dragon?" asked Loren. He didn't know the speed at which the dragon could fly, but given its size, it certainly went far faster than these three landbound beings could walk. It could probably carry them with no issue.

Lapis sighed and shook her head. "There's no way a dragon would let us ride on its back."

"That not a thing they do?"

"No, not even common dragons—let alone an ancient. If you ask, she might take insult and blast you to smithereens."

According to Lapis, dragons were renowned as the strongest of beasts, and their pride matched their massive size. They would never agree to be treated like horses or cows, and the mere suggestion sent them into a rage.

“Don’t even hint at it, all right? I’d rather not go toe-to-toe with a dragon over something like that.”

“I’m glad I asked.” If Loren hadn’t, he might have unknowingly asked the next time they encountered the great creature. He let out a relieved breath.

“Still, this is some depressing scenery,” Gula grumbled once again, looking up at the sky.

The mountain they were climbing was an active volcano, so they could see the smoke billowing from its summit. Although not entirely related to its volcanic nature, there was also a thick layer of clouds that stuck to the mountaintop, and Gula didn’t seem too encouraged by their dark hue.

“Complaining won’t get us any closer.”

“I know, I know. We’ve just gotta climb, right?”

It seemed not even a dark god had the power to scale a mountain in a single bound. Even if Gula was able to do something like that, she evidently couldn’t bring Loren and Lapis with her. They were stuck walking.

“Do you think that ancient dragon will get the situation under control?” Loren asked Lapis. If there was no enjoyment to be found in the sights, then conversation was all they had to distract themselves from their predicament.

After thinking a bit, she slightly tilted her head. “I’m not sure. Well, I doubt we’ll have to prepare for the worst.”

“What would the worst be?”

“The great demon king descending.”

Her curt, matter-of-fact response put a glum look on Loren’s face. The fact remained that an unspeakably powerful breath attack had landed right next to the great demon king’s residence—albeit not by design. If the king determined this to be a targeted attack, it wouldn’t be strange to see them meet it directly.

“So, worst-case scenario, the ancient dragon and the great demon king will

face off right over our heads? Give me a break.”

“Personally, I’ll be runnin’ the hell out of here if it gets that far,” Gula joked.

“I doubt you’ll be safe in human territory either,” Lapis said calmly.

Unsure of what she meant, Loren and Gula peered at Lapis’s face.

“It would be a battle between the great demon king and an ancient dragon,” said Lapis, as if sharing a common fact. “It could well turn into a legendary confrontation. The land of demons will most certainly be devastated, and the mountains would likely be leveled in an instant.”

“We couldn’t do a thing about it, then.”

“Precisely. If someone told me this would bring about the end of the world, I would believe it.”

A battle so great that it destroyed demon territory alongside the mountains that contained it, huh? If Loren imagined that grim future, it wasn’t hard to accept that the end of the world would follow soon behind. At the very least, if that battle extended across the mountains into human lands, he couldn’t think of anyone who could stop it.

“The world ending because of a misfire... Well, I guess that’s at least an amusing way to go.”

“I don’t think amusement’s our priority here,” Gula chastised Loren with a frown.

A gust of wind swept over them. It wasn’t strong enough to lift anyone off their feet, but it was still rather powerful. Gula’s hair billowed in the breeze, while Lapis’s ponytail and vestments were ruffled. An enormous shadow hung right above them.

“I wouldn’t want to be the reason the world ended either. Not for that, at least.”

They looked toward the voice from above to see the ancient red dragon hovering overhead, looking down at them. Loren was sure he should have noticed something that massive flying about. It was as if the dragon had appeared out of thin air.

“Where did you come from?” he asked.

“Your sort often don’t notice when something approaches from directly overhead. I flew at an altitude too high for you to perceive and descended right above you.”

Humans were generally landbound, and their response to flying foes could be terribly shortsighted. They were especially slow to respond to objects directly above them—outside their field of vision. Evidently the ancient dragon had used this trick to skillfully sneak up on them.

“And why’d you do that?” Loren asked. She could have just approached normally. He had to wonder if there was some reason the dragon had gone out of her way to spook them.

The ancient dragon grinned with her draconic mouth. “You were surprised, right?”

He certainly was. Mostly by the fact that an ancient dragon of all things could be such a tease.

“So did you finish discussing stuff?” he asked with a frown.

“I’ll explain once things settle down. Don’t you think you should be a bit more careful?” the dragon said, looking at the sky above.

Loren followed her eyes, wondering what she was looking at. All he could see were thick, dark clouds. He didn’t notice anything that warranted caution.

“What’s there?”

“Haven’t you ever heard how quickly the weather changes on a mountain?”

“For what it’s worth. That’s just how mountains are.”

“Then have you heard that storm clouds mixed with volcanic smoke are prone to discharging lightning?”

That he hadn’t heard before. Loren frowned at the dragon. She seemed to realize his ignorance and tilted her face toward the clouds.

“Smoke is like a mass of fine, powdery soot. When it rubs together, it generates lightning.”

“It does?”

Loren hadn't the slightest idea about this sort of thing, but the dragon said it with such confidence that it had to be true. What did that have to do with her warning to take care?

“Each individual collision generates only a small amount of power. But when those collisions gather en masse, they will rain down upon the ground in powerful bolts.”

Loren looked up again. The hefty clouds hanging low over the summit were gradually spreading, and they now hung over the party as well. If those dark clouds were storm clouds...and if powerful lightning was building within them, what exactly was going to happen next?

Loren's question was answered nigh immediately. There was a thunderous boom as a ray of light struck down upon the mountainside only a little farther up the rock face. The air crackled, and a moment later, a portion of the mountain broke off, shattering into fragments.

“That will happen more often the closer you get to the summit.”

“We're dead meat if that hits us.”

“How fragile you are. When those strike me, I'm only a bit numbed.” The dragon sounded a little like she was bragging. Loren stared back at her grimly.

The difference between human and dragon physique was like the difference between heaven and earth. Even though she sounded proud, to Loren, it merely sounded like a natural fact of life.

“Hey, ancient dragon,” he said.

“It's Emily.”

“What was that?” Loren had to ask. The name she suddenly shared was so feminine that it took him by surprise.

The ancient dragon stared straight at him as she opened her mouth again. “That is my name. Emily. ‘Ancient dragon’ is rather a mouthful.”

“I see. Then, Emily, could you lend us a hand? Specifically, would you be able to fly slowly toward the summit beside us?”

“You want to use me as an umbrella to block the lightning... Very well. Flying slowly isn’t so bad, once in a while.”

If Emily was fine taking lightning strikes for them, and they could proceed while beneath her, they could keep damage to a minimum. What’s more, from Emily’s perspective, she only had to take a leisurely flight. She wouldn’t have to go out of her way to provide assistance—or at least, she could justify it to herself like that.

Emily the ancient dragon nodded shortly thereafter, not seeming at all put off by Loren’s request.

For being an ancient dragon, Emily was not as large as Loren had first imagined. But she was still so colossal that three people walking side by side had a hard time ever leaving her shadow.

For a dragon that large to be gliding so slowly almost seemed like some sort of joke. Walking beneath her like this was quite a singular experience, and for some reason, Loren felt incredibly tense the whole time.

The thing was that Emily had to fly above them—but not too far away, lest she fail to block the lightning. So she was hovering at a rather low altitude.

I doubt anyone’s ever stared at an ancient dragon’s belly this closely and lived to tell the tale, Loren thought. He kept these thoughts to himself as they gradually climbed higher and higher.

As Emily said, the higher they went, the denser the dark clouds hanging over them became—and the more frequently the lightning fell.

“It’s pretty flashy,” said Lapis as she watched the aftermath of a bolt that had hit a little too close for comfort.

The lightning was striking far too close, and at quite a high frequency. The sounds had all but numbed Loren’s hearing, but he managed to pick up her voice. Enduring the ringing in his ears, he said, “I don’t think that’s the issue.”

Flashy, plain—whatever. One strike was a matter of life or death.

Unlike Lapis, Loren had no intentions of admiring the lightning. He simply and

silently focused on staying within Emily's shadow.

"I can deal with the explosions just fine," Gula said. "How about you have some more fun with this?"

However, the way she'd worded that seemed to imply she couldn't deal with a *direct* strike. Loren didn't feel in any way reassured.

"Well, yeah, the lightning itself's a bit much," said Gula. "Too fast."

"It moves so fast that once you've seen it, it's too late to block," said Lapis. "But I can't keep my defensive spells and blessings up forever."

Whether it be spells or blessings, each was only effective for a certain amount of time. It didn't matter how powerful the given technique was, it would dissipate after a specific stretch of time and have to be cast again. They didn't know how long it would take to reach the summit, so it was too risky to preemptively summon their defenses.

"On that note, at the speed you're going, you won't reach the summit by nightfall," said a voice from above. They looked up to Emily, who went on, "You'll have to rest another night along the way."

"Is it that far?" Loren said in an irritated tone.

Emily's eyes shifted farther up the mountain. "It is far, and you are slow. The road will only grow more precarious from here."

The mountainside wasn't so sheer that they had to get on their hands and knees, but it was still quite steep. What's more, they occasionally stopped due to the lightning strikes, slowing their advance. From the perspective of a dragon who could ignore both the slope and the elements, they were certainly moving at a snail's pace. They were still going as fast as they could.

"Another night, in this weather?"

The lightning wouldn't stop at nightfall. They could ask Gula to dig another hole, but that slight cavity would easily collapse if it took a direct hit. Loren couldn't possibly sleep under these conditions.

But they also needed to consider the guardian of the caldera, as well as the dark elf who had made a temporary retreat. There was no guarantee she had

given up yet. Either one would be troublesome to face without sleep.

Loren frowned, troubled. When he looked up, his eyes met Emily's.

"Can you do something?" he asked.

"What a vague request."

Loren thought for a moment. Emily had already been somewhat accommodating, but he got the impression that she wasn't interested in overtly aiding them. She would probably turn down a request for direct support. So what request could he make?

Loren thought for a moment more, then said, "Do you know any place beyond this point where we can safely spend the night?"

This wasn't a request for action, but rather a plea for information. Perhaps Emily would consider it acceptable to answer.

"I do," she instantly replied. "Do you want me to lead you there?"

Loren nodded sincerely. At the very least, he doubted they would find such a place if they searched without her guidance. In this situation, Emily's knowledge was their most reliable lead.

"Very well. Do not leave my shadow." Emily didn't change her flight speed, but she did slightly shift her trajectory. She was flying, and yet her movement was oddly slick, like a fish swimming through water.

They walked a while longer. Whenever they glimpsed the sky through the clouds, they saw it had grown redder. Loren hungrily eyed the summit, which didn't seem to be any closer. At length, they arrived at the mouth of a sizable cave.

Emily could enter the cave with room to spare, and as she did just that, Loren asked, "Is this the place?"

"Yes. This is at once the most dangerous and safest place on the mountain. I guarantee it."

That sounded like quite the contradiction, and Emily got a curious look from every member of the party. But after only a passing glance, Emily made her way in.

They hurriedly followed behind her and hadn't gone far at all before they ran into a dead end. Loren was about to ask Emily what she was up to when she lowered herself until she barely hovered over the ground. She pointed her right hindleg at them, confusing them even more.

"What?" Loren asked.

"You must have a rope, yes? Then tie it to me. Once you're done, you must all hold it firmly."

Loren had a vague idea of what she intended and quickly brought out a rope. He bound it to the dragon's outstretched leg. After tugging on it a few times to make sure it was tied fast, he held on tight. Then Lapis, who had waited for him to finish, got behind him and latched onto his shoulders, while Gula clung to his hip.

"Hey, now..."

"It is a pleasure doing business with you."

"Thanks for the lift."

Loren's questioning look was met with two deadpan faces.

Emily's leg seemed sturdy enough for three people to dangle from on one rope—or even for three people to hang on three individual ropes. *Isn't there any other way?* Loren couldn't help but think.

"Are you ready?" Emily confirmed.

"Yeah, go ahead."

While unable to find an immediate solution to his situation, Loren also felt it would be bad to keep a dragon waiting. He begrudgingly nodded.

At this, Emily slowly began to rise. With her body blocking the way, Loren couldn't see the ceiling, but it seemed the cave swiftly became a vertical shaft. With Emily pulling them up, they slowly rose through walls of stone.

Not that they had any light to see by. Perhaps Emily could see just fine, but Loren quickly found himself in pitch blackness. With his eyes out of commission, all he could perceive was the touch of Lapis on his back and of Gula on his waist—and the feeling of his own hands holding the rope. Lapis must have sensed his

anxiety, as she summoned a magic light to her fingertips, finally allowing him to take in their surroundings.

They rose a while longer, until a part of the wall opened up and they reached another horizontal tunnel. Emily glided along it, and beneath her, Loren was met with a startling sight.

“Is this...your den?”

Under the glow of Lapis’s fingers, he saw the tunnel give way to a wide, open space. A muggy heat blew over them.

Emily descended. Once Loren’s feet touched ground, he let go of the rope, while Lapis and Gula let go of him. After receiving Emily’s permission, Lapis condensed her light in her hand and fired it at the ceiling.

This small light proceeded straight up. The instant it collided with the rock, it increased in radiance, illuminating the entire space. The sights it revealed left Loren at a loss for words.

The room itself was simply a cave; the walls were mere rock. His shock came from what was spread over the entirety of the floor. The white magic light was reflected in glory by mountains of treasure—more than Loren could fathom.

There was gold, of course, and silver as well. And swords, suits of armors, and shields—all intricately ornamented. There were gemstones of all colors alongside necklaces and bangles, as well as military medals from some knightly order he did not know. They all overflowed with the glimmer of precious metals.

“I heard...that dragons were taken by things that sparkle. But this is truly something.” Lapis’s surprise was not as great as Loren’s, but her eyes had widened as well.

The only one left out was Gula. It wasn’t that she *couldn’t* eat these treasures, but they definitely didn’t look appetizing. She let out an uninterested yawn.

Paying no mind to their reactions, Emily slowly flew through that gilded space until she took her spot, lying atop the carpets of riches. “Make yourself at home. This is my den. The safest and most dangerous spot on the mountain.”

“Yeah, even if you say we’re good... Are you sure?”

This meant they would be spending the night in a dragon’s den. As long as Emily didn’t attack them, it was certainly the safest place to be. Of course, with it being a *dragon’s den*, it could also be called the most dangerous.

“My den is vast. I can overlook a handful of visitors, now and then.”

Even if Emily wasn’t going to give them explicit permission, she would at least pretend she didn’t see them.

Here, it didn’t matter that a storm raged outside. They were protected by thick rock. Emily herself had probably done something to fortify it as well, seeing as she’d chosen the place to be her den. It wouldn’t crumble so easily.

We’d be hard-pressed to find better conditions than this, Loren thought. He gratefully took the dragon up on that offer.

“This is incredible, Mr. Loren.”

They immediately prepared to make camp, and Loren pulled out a tent, among other things. Lapis’s eyes, meanwhile, were fixed on the treasure beneath Emily. She was on her knees, picking pieces up one by one, and letting out a longing sigh at each.

They were in no hurry to prepare, nor was there much work to do. As long as Emily didn’t mind, Loren figured he’d let Lapis do as she pleased.

“There are loads of amazing things lying around my family’s storehouse, but this place is even more impressive.” Lapis let the excitement creep into her voice as she cradled a palm-sized transparent gemstone.

Sure, it’s valuable, thought Loren. Not that he knew which gems were more valuable than others. He glanced at Lapis’s find, making sure he didn’t stop working himself.

Loren’s unenthused response made Lapis pout and puff out her cheeks. “You’re not surprised?”

“Well, I guess it’ll fetch a pretty penny if it’s that big.”

It would be worth a fortune if it could be brought out of Emily's den. But Loren didn't feel inclined to give that a test. He didn't think Emily would permit this transgression, and it felt disrespectful to even try to steal from someone who was letting them stay in her home.

"It's a sight for sore eyes, Mr. Loren. You can't find something like this even in a royal treasury."

"Really?"

"I mean, this is pure diamond. Have you ever heard of a diamond this large?"

Loren took another look at Lapis's hand. The light she had shot up to light the place had already passed its expiration date. Now they had secured their vision with a lantern he had pulled from the bag, alongside a fire raised with some dried logs Emily had offered them.

Even in this feeble light, the clear, colorless jewel had a luster that caught the eye. Lapis held it carefully in both hands, her eyes sparkling even more than the gemstone.

"This alone is worth a nation's entire annual budget."



“Looks too big to put on a ring or necklace, though.”

A ring with that gemstone would break fingers under its weight. As a necklace, it would most certainly leave its wearer with stiff shoulders.

Loren’s cold, hard analysis made Lapis pout more furiously, but as far as Loren was concerned, it didn’t matter how many gemstones there were if he couldn’t claim any. In fact, he didn’t really understand what had gotten Lapis so excited.

With that on his mind, he continued his work. Something tapped against his jacket, and glancing down, he noticed that Neg was asking for attention from his post on Loren’s shoulder.

Loren was sure that the small spider was asking for something. It was most likely food.

Come to think of it, Neg hadn’t eaten anything since morning. He was alive, and thus had to consume nutrients to remain so. If he was hungry, he naturally spoke up. *But what am I supposed to feed him?* Loren wondered.

An ordinary spider ate insects, but he couldn’t describe Neg as an ordinary anything. Still, he had to offer something. Loren took a bit of dried meat from his bag, tore it up with his hands, and held it out.

Neg gingerly took some scraps with his forelimbs. He dexterously wrapped them round and round with threads, producing something like a cocoon, into which he sunk his fangs. For a while after that, Neg remained unmoving. *I guess he likes it*, Loren thought, relieved. He was about to resume working when he noticed Gula was nowhere to be seen.

“Mr. Loren, look! This sword was fashioned by the ancient kingdom! It doesn’t have any notable enchantments, but just look at the intricate design elements! It would undoubtedly fetch an outrageous price on the market!”

“Hey, where did Gula go?” Loren asked, ignoring Lapis’s excitement. He did take note of her discontentment, and so he inspected the sword she was holding as she had prompted him to. As far as he could tell, the decorations would only get in the way during a fight. The slender blade didn’t look sturdy enough to really rely on.

“Ms. Gula, is it? If you’re looking for Ms. Gula, she is over there.”

Lapis pointed at a corner of Emily’s vast den, where Gula seemed to be chasing something around.

What’s she after? Loren wondered, and narrowing his eyes to peer, he identified several animals about half his size. They ran around on four legs. He might have described them as “large lizards.”

Gula seemed to be having the time of her life chasing them, but once she finally caught one, she happily raced over to Loren and Lapis with it dangling from her hands. “Loren! Finally found something edible!”

“No, hold up.”

Gula was holding it up by its armpits, and Loren brought his face close to inspect it. The horns protruding from its head in places made it hard to dismiss it as a mere lizard. The claws on its legs looked terribly sharp, and it had two protrusions on its back that were quite possibly wings. It didn’t have the vacant eyes of a lizard either. Those eyes looked like they held some level of intelligence—and specifically, like they were pleading with Loren for rescue.



“Hey, did you find this thing here?”

“I did! There were around ten of them. I can catch more if you want.”

They hadn’t run into any life forms on the desolate mountain, save for Emily. Although Loren was struggling to accept the identity of the lizard-like thing, he did notice Emily watching them closely. Thus, he gently removed the creature from Gula’s hands.

“Don’t you think, just maybe...”

“If you wish to eat that, I will consider it a declaration of war.”

Emily’s subdued voice prompted Loren to place the lizard on the ground. Once its legs hit solid rock, it made off in a hurry and dived into the mountain of gold beneath Emily’s belly.

“Ah! And I worked so hard to catch it!”

“You fool! If you’ve got a death wish, don’t drag me into it!”

Despite Gula’s protests, Loren snapped at her and brought an unrestrained fist down on her head. A loud, dull sound filled the air. Gula silently squatted, holding her head and quivering.

But Loren offered no aid. He loosened his fist and let out a deep sigh. The being that bore a marginal resemblance to the lizard watched them cautiously.

“Is that what baby ancient dragons look like?” Loren asked.

Heads were popping out here and there to peer at Loren’s party—those of the creature that had dived into the treasure, alongside the ones Gula had failed to catch. It was unclear how long these creatures had to grow before they were worthy of being called “dragons.” Loren just hoped they wouldn’t hold a grudge that long.

“They are dragon nymphs, to be more precise. A common dragon becomes an ancient dragon over the course of years. Would it not be strange if they were ancient from the moment they are born?”

According to Emily, ancient dragons weren’t a distinct race unto themselves. They were simply the evolved form of dragons, and thus her children were the

common sort. However, she also explained that very few dragons survived long enough to qualify as ancient. Very few earned the right to be called the strongest of beasts.

“Lifespan, injury, illness—too many things could end them before that.”

“What do you mean by lifespan? Can’t they survive as long as nothing gets to them first?”

“If that were so, there would be more ancient dragons. The typical dragon lifespan is two hundred years at most.”

That sounded like more than enough to Loren, but it apparently wasn’t enough to make a dragon truly ancient.

“Then how old are you, Emily?”

“Presumably over a thousand.”

As Emily explained, a dragon had to live for at least five hundred years to become one such as she. That was generally the point at which the evolution took place. As this information came straight from the horse’s mouth, it was probably reliable.

In other words, a dragon had to hold on for more than twice its original lifespan to reach that point.

“They must be pretty amazing, then. Ancient dragons, I mean.”

“If you’ve lived for over a thousand years, would you happen to be knowledgeable about the ancient kingdom?” Lapis asked Emily as she continued fishing through the treasures. She suddenly sounded intrigued.

Loren had heard bits and pieces about that long-gone kingdom ever since he entered the adventuring business. Perhaps the old dragon knew something about it as well. But with a frown, Emily betrayed Lapis’s hopes.

“Do you mean the large nation that flourished in human lands three hundred years ago? I’m sorry, I’ve lived in the vicinity of this volcano all my life. I rarely venture into human territory.”

She only knew about the places that were hers, and her domain did not include human lands. Lapis looked a touch disappointed, only for Emily to add,

“But I could point you to some of my brethren who do live in human lands.”

“Are you sure you should be telling us that?”

“I don’t mind. But you must approach them with caution. Do not assume you can speak to them whenever you please. Not everyone is like me,” Emily said as she stuck a claw into the piles of treasure beneath her. She dexterously extracted a bundle of scrolls. Once again using only the tip of her claw, she pulled at the thread holding them together. Then she carefully selected one and repackaged the rest, tucking them away.

“Do you have something to write with? I will talk you through their locations, so place a mark where I indicate,” Emily said, pushing the paper toward Lapis.

Once Lapis took it, she scanned the scroll and let out a whistle. “It’s a map of the continent. Although...the shape is a little different from what I’m familiar with.”

Loren was surprised to see the map in the first place, then surprised again by Lapis’s words. At the very least, no human nation had managed to map the whole continent. They didn’t have the information to chart such a thing. But apparently, these maps were commonly circulated among dragons and demons.

“It is old, so some things may have changed. But even if the terrain shifts slightly, you should be fine if you know the general location.” With that, Emily began pointing with her claw, explaining various things on the map. Lapis had taken out a pen, which she used to fill in all sorts of details.

I can probably just leave her to it, Loren thought. He got back to setting up camp while Gula remained at his feet, squatting and twitching, holding her head.

Chapter 6:

From Rise to Advise

THE NEXT MORNING, Loren awoke to a hefty weight on his chest. The night before, he had eaten a simple supper in the den of Emily, the ancient dragon, and as none of his party had thought they needed to keep watch in a dragon's abode, they had all slipped into their sleeping bags. They had to preserve their stamina for the coming climb.

When he was still with the mercenary company, Loren had regularly slept in a huddle with his comrades. Some among them had been poor sleepers, and they had caused a great deal of trouble for the rest. Loren assumed this weight was due to some similar trouble, and he opened his drowsy eyes.

As he looked down at his chest, he saw that the strings of his sleeping bag had been loosened. Then he was met with the blissful face of something that was a little too spiky to be a lizard.

For a moment, Loren blinked, not quite understanding what he was seeing. When he stripped the bag away and sat up, the dragon nymph—Emily's child—dangled from his shirt by its claws. Even as it swayed left and right, it didn't look about to wake up. He inspected it as he considered the situation.

Usually, the nymph would have slept in the crevices of the treasures beneath Emily. Tonight, it had spotted a softer and warmer alternative. When Loren was asleep, it had pulled his sleeping bag loose and squeezed in.

"Well, I don't personally mind."

Loren was a little surprised, sure, but considering the fact that he was in a dragon's den, finding a lizard in his sleeping bag was to be expected.

Once he had that thought, he realized that while his bag was soft and warm, there was another bag that was likely both softer and warmer. What state was it in? He turned to Lapis, who was sleeping nearby.

Loren had set up the tent, for what it was worth. But with a roof over their

heads, they had all felt it would be better to just pick a random spot to lie down on rather than squish into the cramped tent interior. Lapis had done just that, and Loren feared she had been swarmed by dragon children. Unlike Loren, however, the mouth of her sleeping bag was as tight as it had been before, and she was sleeping soundly.

They just went to me, then? But Loren quickly realized that this was not the case. The evidence: several cocoons of white thread, each around half as tall as Loren, lay about the ground where Lapis slept. These cocoons wriggled, indicating their contents were probably still alive, and Loren could only assume that they each contained a dragon nymph.

As for who could have wrapped them up, only one culprit came to mind.

“That your doing?”

Loren’s thick jacket was not the most comfortable garment to sleep in, so he had taken it off before tucking himself in. In short, he had removed Neg along with it. Loren’s eyes wandered, searching for the spider. After a moment, he spotted him in an odd location. He was, it turned out, right on top of Loren’s bag.

Neg had separated from the jacket and ambled over to Loren’s supply sack, which he’d pulled open with his front legs. Then he’d dived straight in, rummaging in search of something.

When he next emerged, he had brought a lump of dried meat out with him. This lump was then skewered on his eight legs and torn apart. Loren hadn’t imagined the dried meat could be shredded by a mere spider, but Neg’s legs were so strong that it had been nigh impossible to remove him from Loren’s jacket.

While it was slow going, Neg succeeded in tearing a small piece off of the greater chunk. He looked satisfied as he wrapped the torn shred in his threads. Eventually, he made a decently sized cocoon, which he bit into.

Spiders often ate by injecting their digestive fluids into their prey, which melted the body’s innards for them to suck down. It seemed that Neg’s eating process was similar. He dissolved the meat once it was contained and slurped it up.

Loren was considering these mechanics when his two eyes coincidentally met Neg's eight. The spider had been caught sneaking a bite. Neg froze on the spot. Loren nodded, implying that this was all right, and Neg cautiously continued his meal.

Loren was shocked by Neg's intellect. Not only had he figured out how to open the supply bag on his own, he'd also taken out only what he needed. Loren already knew Neg was no ordinary spider, but he hadn't thought too much of it.

At the same time, it was likely Neg who had cocooned the dragon nymphs surrounding Lapis. Those dragons had probably attempted to sneak into Lapis's sleeping bag. Loren considered this maneuver downright suicidal, but the dragons couldn't have known better. Neg had stopped them before they could complete their objective.

As for the one that had gotten into Loren's sleeping bag, Neg had either missed it or had decided Loren wouldn't mind. In any case, the dragon had managed to spend a warm night in the bag, so that decision wasn't wrong.

"As for Gula..."

If Lapis had been targeted, he could assume Gula had been as well. At least, that was Loren's initial thought. But when he looked in the direction of Gula's sleeping bag, he saw not a single white cocoon in her vicinity. None of the dragons had gone to her, and in retrospect the reason was clear.

"She almost ate them, after all."

It would have been pointless to seek warmth with her, only to be devoured in the process.

What's more, Emily had made her displeasure clear when Gula had chased them. But if they approached Gula of their own accord, Gula could argue that they'd made their own beds. Either the young dragons had realized this, or they had acted on pure instinct. Either way...

"They're a clever bunch."

Loren gently removed the claws digging into his shirt and softly set the dragon on the ground, making sure not to wake it. When he looked toward the

treasure pile, he saw that Emily was curled up, asleep.

This was his chance to release the nymphs Neg had captured. To avoid any trouble down the line, Loren peeled out of his sleeping bag and reached for the closest cocoon.

The fact that the child hadn't suffocated meant that Neg had left sufficient gaps in the threads, but he would have to destroy the cocoon to free it. *Can I break it with my bare hands?* Loren wondered, pinching the web and pulling it in both directions. The thread seemed too durable to break. A minimal flex didn't damage it at all. Its texture was close to silk, but it was far stronger. No matter how he pulled, it showed no sign of tearing.

Loren had heard that spider threads were sturdy, but he hadn't expected them to be *that* tough. After a good while, he finally gave up. He considered using a blade, but could he guarantee he'd cut only the cocoon, leaving the nymph untouched? He was reluctant to experiment. One misplaced slice and he'd be on Emily's bad side. The chances of him leaving the den alive after that would be terribly low.

And so, Loren sat and got to thinking in front of all the white cocoons.

Then a voice came from overhead. "Leave that to me."

Emily had approached and had drawn her face close to peek at what he was up to. Loren stepped aside, conceding the job to her. Emily touched her claw against one of the cocoons and gave it a light tug.

Just like that, the threads fell apart. As Loren watched them split, he was startled by the sharpness of a dragon's claws. He watched the dragon nymphs scramble off, one by one, fleeing into the treasure horde.

"Is it morning already?" he asked Emily.

"If you're talking about outside the den, then yes. The sun has just started to rise."

It was early, then. Loren got to work preparing breakfast. He didn't know how far they had to go to the crater, but they would set off as quickly as possible. He wanted the job done fast and proper.

“You’re in a hurry,” Emily mused as she saw Loren deftly get to work.

“We don’t all have a thousand years,” Loren answered without pause.

Emily snickered. “Is that cynicism I hear?”

“If it sounds that way to you.”

Mind you, Loren hadn’t meant it that way. He just thought that someone like Emily, who had lived for over a millennium, wouldn’t really understand what it meant to hurry.

“I won’t stop you from making haste. Having said that, I don’t think you have to worry about the path to the peak.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s a straight shot from my den to the caldera. It takes a while, but the road isn’t difficult. Not that I’ve used that path myself.”

How did she know it was there if she’d never used it? Loren couldn’t quite grok this, and his curious look prompted Emily to explain further.

“I told you about Demon Lord Judie’s nefarious activities around the volcano, yes?”

“So you’re saying that’s how the demon lord gets there?”

“So it seems. I’ve only heard stories, but I presume it is still usable. You will pass through the mountain’s interior, so you don’t have to worry about whatever is happening outside. The demon lord must have maintained it, to a degree, so it should be a smooth journey.”

This was a great boon to Loren. However, knowing it had been forged for the demon lord’s mischief, he didn’t know whether he could be too sincerely grateful.

“I’ll tell you where it is. Follow it, and you should reach the crater by noon.”

“You’ve been a huge help.”

Whether or not he was grateful to Judie, Loren happily thanked Emily for the information.

Around the time Loren finished making breakfast, Lapis and Gula wormed out of their sleeping bags. By then, Emily had already collected the spider threads, so no traces remained of what had happened while they slept.

Loren distributed the meal as Emily told them about the path to the crater.

Lapis seemed to feel slightly awkward when she heard what the path had been used for, but once the question was posed, she answered, "If Mother used it, it should be fine."

It was still a bit worrisome, but it would be safer than traveling outside.

"I cannot follow you beyond this point. I will pray for your safety, but I can provide no further assistance," Emily said.

By then, breakfast had finished, and they were ready to depart.

As far as Loren was concerned, he was already in Emily's debt for affording them a safe night of rest. Emily sounded apologetic, but he expressed his gratitude as sincerely as he could before setting off.

"Demon lord's daughter, I suggest you leave behind the gold in your pocket. And you, incomprehensible girl: release what you have in your sack. It is not too late for me to forgive you."

"Grr... As expected of an ancient dragon..."

"She saw right through me."

"You two... I guess it's just what you get from a demon and a dark god, but..."

Although Loren had to lower a fist onto both Lapis's and Gula's heads with a sigh, they left without any major issues.

"You returned all of it, right?"

"I don't want to take a breath to the back."

"Me neither... But don't you think it's a waste?"

"If I could take something, I would," Loren admitted. "But I can't."

It wasn't like Loren was free of greed. When he looked at Emily's bed of gold, a part of him did want to make off with a bit. However, his fear of the ancient dragon superseded his desires. He wasn't going to do anything that he knew

would lead to certain death—at least not when money was the only thing on the line.

“In that sense, I’m amazed you two had the nerve.”

“Oh, no, I was never under any illusions as to my chances of success. I knew I wouldn’t get away with it. But I thought I could at least give it a try,” Lapis answered, looking as serious as could be. Translation: she had used herself as a test case to see if it was even possible.

Come to think of it, Lapis could have taken any one of the thousands of far more valuable items, but she had only attempted to take as many gold coins as she could fit in her pocket. Lapis had a modicum of skill as an appraiser, and it would have been simple for her to find something smaller and more prized. The evidence seemed to back her claim.

“What’s the point of finding out if you’re going to die?”

“I thought she’d let me off just once—out of respect for you, Mr. Loren.”

Lapis smiled, not the least bit guilty. Loren could think of no response and just shrugged.

It was plain to see that Emily had taken something of a liking to Loren. Given that, he could understand her at least giving Lapis’s theft due consideration. When it came to actually putting this theory into practice, though, there was clearly something wrong with his partner. Her brazen willingness to dance through minefields where one wrong step spelled death might perhaps be blamed on her demonic nature.

“I thought I might pull it off, myself,” Gula conceded, awkwardly scratching her head.

Getting a good hit on the back of her skull, Loren declared, “You’re too optimistic,” and got back to walking.

The path Emily directed them to would be devoid of inclement weather or enemy encounters. The one thing they wouldn’t be spared was the distance. They still had to walk to reach their destination. What’s more, now that they were proceeding through the mountain interior, the scenery was even less inspiring, and they had to rely on lantern light. It was disheartening work.

“Thankfully, it’s easier to walk. As expected of Mother.”

“Although I have to wonder what your mother was trying to do, coming all the way to a dragon’s den.”

“Well, she was just maintaining the road, don’t you think? It’s of great benefit to anyone who has business with the volcano,” Lapis proclaimed.

That said, Loren couldn’t imagine anyone apart from the demon lord ever using the path they were walking on. The only entrance was in the dragon’s den. The only exit was at the crater. It didn’t matter which side you started from—any visitor would have to come face-to-face with the dragon at least once, and on top of that, they’d have to cross her den.

No one normal would be able to use that path safely, Loren thought.

It didn’t seem that way to Lapis, however. “I think it would be possible to sneak through the den.”

“If you fail, you’ll be burnt black or reduced to ash.”

“Ms. Emily was quite perceptive, so it would be a tad difficult... But it might be possible to fool her with proper preparations...” Lapis mumbled as she fell into her thoughts.

Loren decided to leave her to it. She was harmless as long as she only considered her plans and didn’t act on them. Even if Lapis developed new ambitions, they had already left the den behind. The issue would be if Lapis decided to test those theories on the way back. But Loren could worry about that once they had finished what they had come for.

And so the party proceeded, taking only a few short breaks along the way. The tunnel seemed to continue on and on, but eventually, they spied the light at the end.

Loren didn’t think it particularly likely that anyone was lying in wait for them, but there was always a chance. They stopped for a moment and snuffed out the lantern. Loren ventured to the entrance alone.

He had been in the dark for so long that the light stung his eyes. It took some time to get used to it. Fearing an attack in that span of time, he waited to adjust

in the cave entrance before hazarding a peek.

Surprise, surprise, he saw nothing but rock. There was a slope, so still a slight climb to the summit. Loren stuck out his head to look up. The mountainside cut off not far away, and he assumed that was the end.

“How is it, Mr. Loren?”

“Nothing to see. We’re right by the summit.”

Loren couldn’t detect any movements. He checked a few more times before slowly stepping out.

“Whoa, this is harsh on the peepers,” Gula lamented. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, and she found herself covering them with her hands, groaning at the pain.

“It’s at times like these that I am just a little bit thankful for my prosthetics,” said Lapis. Apparently, her magically produced organs perceived light and dark about the same. She didn’t temporarily lose her visual acuity, nor did she feel any pain as she calmly scanned the area.

“Hey, are you sure your real eyes will perform better?”

“My eyes? Yes, of course. They are incomparable.”

Lapis’s artificial eyes seemed exceptional. Loren couldn’t quite believe that they fell short of the real deal. However, he had to accept the testimony of the one who knew best. He could also understand why she would prefer her real body over a false one, even if she might lose some perks.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. Our destination’s right over there. Let’s hurry.”

But as Loren urged them forward, Lapis said something rather curious. “No, I think it’ll take a while longer.”

What does she mean by that? Loren wondered, but he quickly figured it out.

“It’s still a ways to the lava...”

At the very top of the mountain was a bowl-shaped caldera. The mountain was large, as was the caldera. It looked like it would be a trial to descend the

steep slope from the rim to the lava. If they slipped, they would have to pray that something caught them along the way. Otherwise, they would be sent tumbling straight into the fiery hole at the center.

“You think it’ll reach if we throw it from here?”

If so, there was no reason to go all the way down. The job was to deliver the black helmet to the lava-filled hole at the end of their long journey. Surely a good toss should do the trick.

But after focusing and inspecting the area around the caldera, Lapis shook her head. “We can’t throw that far, and the slope eases around the lake. The chances of rolling it in are slim.”

“It’s like the topography itself has it out for us.”

“Even if we wanted to climb down until we were in throwing range, the slope’s rather steep at that point, so we won’t have good footing for a proper throw... On top of that, once we approach, that ifrit Ms. Emily mentioned will most likely attack.”

“Oh, right, almost forgot about that.”

Loren hadn’t actually forgotten; he simply hadn’t wanted to think about it, so he had driven it from his head. He was thoroughly fed up. It was nerve-racking to know an enraged spirit of flame was going to assault them while they struggled with poor footing. And there didn’t seem to be a way around it.

“I feel sorry for the thing, but we’ve got to settle this somehow.”

“This is the consequence of my mother’s failings. I will do my best.”

Lapis clenched both her fists in front of her chest. It was a gesture that made her look kind of cute, maybe even admirable, but the implications blew that air of innocence right out of the water.

“Looks like we don’t got a choice. I’ll take the lead. Support me.”

As Loren saw it, they wouldn’t have the time to slowly climb down the steeper outer rim. They’d just be sitting ducks for the ifrit’s attacks. Even if it was dangerous, he had to take the lead and race down the slope until he reached a point where he could actually fight.

“Then first, a few defensive spells. Ms. Gula, if you will.”

“On it. I’ll give you a strong one. If the ifrit appears, just leave it to us.”

When it came to magic, it seemed Gula was somewhat more competent than Lapis. The proof of that lay in that Lapis turned to Gula for Loren’s defenses.

Loren wasn’t knowledgeable about the arcane, but he studied Gula as she invoked her spells, and he slowly drew the sword from his back.

With Gula’s slick incantations ringing in his ears, Loren threw himself from the steep edge of the caldera. Once he started running, he burst along the sloping ground, accelerating faster and faster. He held his sword up, shifting his feet so as not to fall, and gouts of flames rose before his eyes.

“There’s more than one of them?!”

The only opponent he had been aware of was the ifrit. But if that was all he had to worry about, there should have only been one flame—yet those blazes coalesced into the form of quadrupedal lizards.

“They’re salamanders, Mr. Loren!”

“What are those?!” Loren cried back as one of the lizard-shaped flames opened its mouth and spat out a beam of fire.

Without a thought to defense or evasion, Loren swung the white greatsword. The moment the blade’s trajectory met the fiery burst, the flame withered away—no contest. Loren lost no speed as he raced through the scattering sparks, approaching the salamanders before they could hork up another beam. An upward swing split the nearest one in two, reverting it to pure fire.

“So they’re sendin’ out the lower-grade spirits first. That’s a classic,” said Gula as she raced after Loren.

Lapis, who was running beside her, nodded in turn. “They’re a pain. We’re near fire, so the ifrit will be able to summon as many salamanders as it wants.”

“Isn’t this a little unfair?” Gula grumbled.

As they complained, the other salamanders opened their mouths wide to hurl

fire at Loren, Lapis, and Gula. But Loren had already thrown himself into their midst and sliced away.

An ordinary weapon would have been either completely or mostly ineffective. Although these beings took on lizard-like forms, their essence lay in pure fire. But Loren's worked wonders. The salamanders were unable to withstand a single strike.

"Looks like you can't make a living fighting spirits," Loren muttered as he watched the body of yet another one dissipate into nothingness. He didn't know how many he had dispensed with by then.

Had they been monsters, they would have left bodies behind, and the materials that could be harvested from them. The salamanders vanished when struck, leaving nothing of value. In other words, no matter how many he killed, he would make no money whatsoever.

I want at least some compensation for my efforts, Loren thought. But even as he went unrewarded, he had to keep swinging. Left with little choice, he let the greatsword extinguish salamander after salamander.

"Low-grade spirits are supposed to be quite formidable, aren't they?" Lapis said.

"That they are. They do govern fire and all. They shouldn't be snuffed out left and right like candles, at least."

But even as Gula said that, the salamanders around them were whiffing it one by one. The one who had summoned them—the ifrit—had yet to show itself, but the spirits kept coming, only to gutter before Gula's authority.

Before Emily's might, Gula's authority had burned up and temporarily lost its potency. However, it seemed she had already recovered her full strength. Compared to a dragon's breath, a salamander's fire was feeble. She could devour to her heart's content.

Meanwhile, Lapis hadn't raised a hand herself. She only dodged the blasts of fire coming at her. But there was a reason for her hesitation.

"I might be of more use if I cast ice magic..."

They were up against fire-attribute spirits, meaning fire-attribute magic was ineffective. Lapis could have used the opposite attribute to deal effective damage, and she was able to cast a spell so potent that it could extinguish the ifrit and the salamanders altogether. But that would lower the temperature of the crater. Even if they did defeat the ifrit way, they would risk being unable to dispose of the black helmet after.

“And since they’re fire, I can’t defeat them with my usual blunt force.”

Seeing an opportunity, Lapis scooped up a stone and tossed it. Although the stone opened up a hole in a salamander, that hole quickly closed, and it was completely unharmed. It was difficult to face spirits with physical attacks.

“How ’bout you try *unusual* blunt force, then?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Even if Lapis wanted to do so, she had no idea what that entailed. She dismissively shook her head.

Gula’s mouth was emitting smoke again. Had she eaten too much salamander fire? Loren began to grow concerned, only for his attention to be stolen by a pillar of flame far greater than any that had come before it.

“Finally showing your face, huh?!”

As far as the party was concerned, it didn’t matter how many salamanders they defeated. They wouldn’t get anywhere if they didn’t beat the ifrit. On the other hand, the ifrit seemingly realized that he couldn’t beat back these intruders with mere salamanders. Sending any more was pointless.

“I’m taking the first strike!” Loren called.

The pillar was still forming, and the ifrit had yet to take form. Even so, Loren had a sense that the demon lord’s white greatsword could still inflict damage, even when the spirit was in that state. He instantly sliced at the flames.

Yet before the tip could brush the pillar, the fire scattered as though it had burst from within. Loren was still mid-slash as he was assailed by a horizontal sweep of crimson flame.

He halted his motion and lunged to evade, but the fire-clad fist hounded him, rending the air as it shot forth again and again.

“So this is an ifrit!”

As a mercenary hired to fight human wars, Loren had naturally never seen an ifrit before (or even a salamander, for that matter). It was even larger than Loren—a naked giant composed of bright red fire. Blazing locks of red billowed behind its head, and its two hands balled into fists as it took swing after swing at Loren. All around it, new salamanders came into being, each with their mouth ready to emit a fiery blast.

«Just a little energy drain.»

For a moment, Loren thought he heard Scena’s voice. Then all the beams fired toward him were instantly extinguished. He took a moment to steady his breathing, which had grown a tad erratic in the exchange of blows. Concentrating only on the ifrit before him, Loren swung his greatsword.

He used the flat of the blade to deflect a swung fist of flame and swiftly moved to cut down his foe. But the ifrit’s body was entirely composed of fire, and a deflected fist didn’t throw off its stance. Its arm was merely extinguished—and a new arm rapidly grew to replace it, this one ready to block the blade. It defended itself by means Loren could never have expected.

“Honestly, the real crazy thing here is how a human’s managing to match an ifrit blow for blow,” Gula said as she watched both sides fail to land anything decisive.

Ever since the all-out brawl between man and spirit had begun, the swarm of summoned salamanders had stalled. The ifrit couldn’t spare the focus to call them up, and Gula was slowly running out of things to do.

“Isn’t it a bit late to come to that conclusion?” Lapis asked her.

“Should we really be givin’ up on the question, though?”

As their workload decreased, Lapis and Gula didn’t forget to cast support for Loren, who had taken on more of the burden.

“It’s a demon lord’s weapon, so *Enchant* is pretty pointless. He does that strengthening on his own, right? No choice then. I guess I’ll give him an *Overspeed* and *Accelerator*.”

“In that case, I shall cast *Protection from Fire* and *Fire Resist*.”

“Huh? Did you learn some new blessings, Lapis?”

“Tee hee. I’m growing stronger every day. Don’t think I’m still that novice priest who could only use two blessings a day.”

Lapis put a hand to her hip, her face somewhat triumphant, and Gula awarded her with some light applause. They were acting a bit too laid-back for Loren’s liking, but they didn’t hold back on their support magic and blessings. Now sharper and sturdier, Loren managed to catch the ifrit’s body with a powerful strike.

“I feel bad for you, but we’ve got our reasons. If you’re in our way, we gotta cut you down.”

Loren had no idea how to suppress an enraged spirit. He hadn’t even met a spirit in his mercenary days, and knew nothing about the ins and outs of their existence. His only means of stopping one was wielding his sword.

Not that he couldn’t sympathize with the spirit for coming at him. They were both victims of Demon Lord Judie. Perhaps the matter would be settled if he could get that message through. He didn’t know if his words would be understood, but still, Loren called out to the spirit, which grew weaker each time his blade ran it through.

“Hey, I don’t really wanna hack at you ’til you’re burnt out. We’ll leave as soon as we’re done. Could you look the other way until then?”

Putting aside whether the spirit understood him, the ifrit was merely protecting the crater to prevent any more wrongdoing. Killing it would leave a bad taste in Loren’s mouth.

Unfortunately, his goal was more or less exactly what Demon Lord Judie had been doing here before. Maybe it would be difficult for the ifrit to overlook it.

However, the ifrit paused at these words...and backed off.

Loren kept his stance, ready to strike if it tried anything else. But the ifrit gave him a frustrated look, then suddenly scattered into countless sparks.

“I didn’t kill it, did I?” Loren had to make sure. The ifrit seemed like it had

been raring to go only moments before.

“It looks like it retreated upon determining it couldn’t stop us,” Lapis concluded, staring intently at the spot where it had vanished.

Once they were sure no other salamanders were popping up, Loren returned his sword to his back and took a deep breath.

“You have it rough, Mr. Loren.”

“My thoughts exactly. I have a few choice words I’d like to give that demon lord.”

“The demon lord...” Gula muttered. “Are you sure?”

Was he speaking out of recklessness, while not understanding the implication? Or did he speak knowing full well how powerful a demon lord could be? Gula couldn’t be sure. She folded her arms and cocked her head.

Chapter 7:

Caldera to Reunion

ONCE THE IFRIT DISAPPEARED, its summoned salamanders vanished as well. The shore of the caldera regained its peaceful stillness.

A high-grade spirit would probably know this is the perfect time for a surprise attack, Loren thought. He stayed on his toes a while longer. Soon, he realized his foe had truly retreated, and he beckoned to Lapis and Gula, who were still a short distance away.

Lapis jogged down the sloped ground. Before Loren could say anything, she looped around him, closely studying his body. Once her lap came full circle, she nodded. No issues to report. “You fought off an ifrit without suffering major injury. That’s incredible, Mr. Loren.”

“More like I convinced it to stand down.”

Loren had the feeling that the ifrit hadn’t intended to fight to the death. It had stood its ground, hoping to prevent a repeat of Judie’s prior escapades, but it hadn’t done so with the intention of putting its life on the line. A considerable number of salamanders—low-grade spirits—had been extinguished, but as a human, Loren didn’t really know how meaningful that was.

“We’re just melting a single helmet. It can avert its eyes for a few minutes.”

“Right you are. Then let’s go.”

With nothing to stop them, it was no particular feat to reach the mouth of the volcano. The lava lake did emit an unpleasant heat, but it wasn’t unbearable at a distance.

“I doubt we’ll be able to get right up to the shore. We’ll have to edge just close enough to toss it in.”

“At throwing range, the hole is too big to miss.”

“Ah, I want to leave already...”

Gula tugged at the neck of her tube top, fanning her face with her hand. Naturally, this exposed plenty of her sweat-drenched skin. Loren wasn't going out of his way to look, but Lapis still stuck her hands on his cheeks and turned his face away from Gula's general direction.

The closer they got, the more heated air blew against them. Soon, they were roasting in their skin. Worse was the smell that came from the fumes that shot up here and there.

"The smell's pretty bad, but it's not as hot as I thought it'd be."

"That, Mr. Loren, is because my blessings are still in effect. Ms. Gula and I aren't enjoying that benefit, so it's rather rough going for us."

Since Loren had been the one to fight the ifrits and salamanders—beasts of fire—at close range, Lapis had invoked blessings that would shield him from flame. Their effects still lingered, allowing him to brush off the heat, especially compared to his companions.



On the other hand, Lapis and Gula were a demon and dark god respectively, and both were naturally far more resistant to the elements than a human. Had it not been for the blessings, Loren would have been forced to tap out ages ago.

“Whatever it is, let’s just finish up and get out of here. This is no place to muck around.”

“I’ll agree with you there.”

Lapis extracted the black helmet from her sack. Demon though she was, she couldn’t venture near lava without proper preparations. She held it aloft, ready to chuck it in—

And then, in the next instant, she leapt in the opposite direction.

Loren moved at the same time. He reached for the sword on his back as he swiftly distanced himself from the center of the caldera.

Gula was the only one left behind. She had a drowsy expression, and her hand was clutching an arrow that had been fired from who knew where. On closer inspection, there were two other arrows, each embedded in the ground where Loren and Lapis had been standing. They’d both dodged out of the way upon noticing the arrows being fired.

“Why don’t you hand that over?”

The voice presumably originated from the same place as the arrows. Lapis tried ignoring it and throwing the helmet, but more arrows were fired to obstruct her movement. She had little choice but to retreat, hiding behind Loren.

“That helmet is wasted on those who fail to understand its value. Be a good girl and hand it to me.”

A figure was approaching—black hair and black armor. A young man who was equipped with a longsword and a shield, the latter of which he hadn’t had the last time they met.

If Judie’s information was to be believed, the man was named Magna, and he was claiming rightful ownership of the black artifacts that had, until recently, been in the possession of numerous demon lords. Not only had he staked this

claim, he had gone as far as to take them by force.

“What sort of idiot humors the demands of a thief?” Loren asked, positioning himself to face off with Magna.

The moment an opportunity presented itself, he intended to give Lapis the signal to run and hurl the helmet into the fire. Not that he expected to get one over on this man. It didn’t take much scanning to spot the dark elf woman; she was stationed a considerable distance behind Magna and had her bow drawn, vigilantly watching their every move.

I already had a feeling, but I guess she really is working with him, Loren thought as he drew his sword.

Magna didn’t even take a stance as he called out, “You simply have to report that you discarded it, correct?”

“Sorry to say, but the demon lord cast a spell on the thing. She’ll know.”

Judie could discern the location of the helmet from her castle. If Loren let Magna’s words sway him, there was no telling what would happen next. Even without arcane surveillance, the woman behind Loren was the daughter of the demon lord in question. He couldn’t possibly cast aside Judie’s request with Lapis watching.

“Why are you so obsessed with it, anyway?” Loren asked. “You come off all high and mighty, but your taste in equipment’s pretty damn plain.”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“If you don’t wanna talk, I won’t force you. I’m just saying I might cooperate if I knew the situation.”

Loren’s suggestion of compromise made Lapis tug at the back of his shirt. She understood that Loren wasn’t the sort of man who would abandon a job halfway. However, there weren’t many humans who’d willingly keep a promise to a demon, and it seemed she was beginning to feel anxious.

But now wasn’t the time to react. Loren continued to look Magna in the eye.

After thinking it over for a bit, Magna’s lips curled into a slight smile. A cynical one, as if he had been mocked. He looked down his nose at Loren and said,

“You are suggesting I seek cooperation from some insignificant adventurer from god knows where? The only thing you’re fit for doing in my presence is lowering your head and obediently handing that helmet to me.”

“I hate dealing with stuck-up pricks.”

“You don’t wish to die doing the dirty work of a mere demon lord, do you?”

“Even your threats are boring,” Loren replied with a sneer. But his eyes restlessly flicked between Magna and the dark elf behind him.

Neither was a foe he could afford to let catch him off guard. The slightest slipup truly would spell the end of his life.

“Hold your tongue, mongrel. Under any other circumstance, you would not even be permitted the opportunity to mince words with me.”

“Don’t make me laugh. I can’t even talk? What sort of noble are you?”

Loren was fully intending to mock him, but Magna’s response was not what he expected.

“/ should be the one laughing. Me? A noble?”

It was a tad surprising to hear him reject the title. What exactly did he think he was, then?

Magna didn’t seem keen on answering any questions. He raised the tip of his longsword and pointed it at Loren’s face.

“For now, I could not care less about your irreverence. If you wish to restore your worth in my eyes, then get on your knees and offer up the helmet.”

“Do you seriously expect me to oblige?” Loren said over a sigh.

However, it seemed Magna was serious. He sent Loren an irritated look before turning his eyes to Lapis.

“Woman. I don’t mind if you hand it over, in place of this foolhardy man.”

“Definitely not. Who knows what she might do to me if I did?”

As Judie’s daughter, Lapis would undoubtedly suffer terrible consequences if she let Magna have the helmet. Lapis wasn’t carefree enough to obey, with that hanging over her.

“Lord Magna! I believe negotiation is pointless,” the dark elf called, locking her aim on Loren.

Seeing as Loren continued to glare without offering a response, Magna next sent a disinterested look to Gula. “What about you, woman? Why not snatch the helmet from them and offer it to me? Adventuring is not a lifelong trade. If you assist me, I promise you wealth and prosperity. I will even disregard your prior insolence.”

The insolence he was referring to had occurred the last time they fled from Magna. Gula had chewed up a horde of enhanced goblins and spat the blood and flesh right onto Magna to create an opening to flee.

“Not even worth discussin’.” Gula stifled a yawn. “You look like you taste terrible, at least compared to Loren.”

What taste would that be? Loren wondered.

Despite his displeasure at Gula’s response, Magna turned to Loren again. “You should understand by now how foolish it is to face me.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s not like we have to fight you fair and square. If we can get your beloved helmet into that there lava, we’re done.”

“Do you think I will permit that?”

Magna spoke as though he was a mighty individual, but Loren had no idea where he’d come from. He hadn’t even heard the man name himself. “Magna” was just what the demon lord had called him.

“You do try my patience, mongrel.”

“Mongrel this, mongrel that—always the same thing with you. Most humans are some kind of mongrel, you know.”

“Indeed. In this world, there are mongrels like you and purebloods such as myself. Who knows what unsavory blood has mixed with yours across the eons? I have inherited only the blood of the finest pedigree, and you speak as though we’re of a kind. Fool.”

Seriously, who is he? Loren wondered as he took Magna’s condescending look head-on.

The man placed importance on blood and declared he had an ancient pedigree, so he had to be nobility, or royalty, or at least from some well-established family. For all that, it was hard to think someone so privileged would personally trek all the way to a mountain in the middle of demon territory—a dragon’s den, no less.

Even so, there seemed to be true confidence in Magna’s tone. He wasn’t just talking out of his ass.

“I will ask once more: hand the helmet to me. Even if you or the demons kept it, it would be as pearls before swine. It will only fulfill its potential once it is held by its proper owner.”

“Please. The arrogance is funny enough, but the begging is pushing it. Even if this thing used to be yours, by the time it ended up in a demon lord’s storehouse, it belonged to that demon lord. If you want it so badly, go negotiate with her.”

“Is that your final response?”

He’s not going to sincerely negotiate with Judie, is he? Loren thought, raising his greatsword. If Magna did claim he would do so, Loren intended to play dumb and dump the helmet in the lava when he turned his back. But he couldn’t make any careless moves while the dark elf’s bow was trained on Lapis.

“Very well, then. Noel, keep your eyes on the woman with the helmet. If she steps out of line, stop her—even if you must kill her. Do whatever you must to ensure the helmet is not thrown.”

“As you wish,” the dark elf replied with a nod, eyes never wavering.

Magna held up the shield and the sword and began slowly walking at Loren. “If one fight couldn’t make you realize that your strength and swordsmanship will never equal mine, then I will have to repeat the lesson.”

“Those don’t sound like the words of a guy who let us scuttle away while covered in puke. Did you manage to scrub the stench off, kid?” Loren asked, going for the throat. “That goblin blood must have reeked.”

For all Magna loved to insult others, he had remarkably thin skin. His face grew instantly grim. “You talk too much. I’ll remove your head from your body if

that's what it takes to shut you up."

"Try it. I'll show you my sword arm's just as persistent as my tongue."

Magna's step was so light that it was hard to believe he was wearing such heavy-looking armor. He lunged. In response, Loren bellowed a war cry and mustered all his strength to swing the greatsword.

Blade clashed upon blade with a shrill metallic clang.

Loren struck with both hands, and as before, Magna used only one. The difference, however, was that Magna's longsword came out the clear and immediate victor.

"Where does that strength come from?!"

The last time they fought, it hadn't been so one-sided. Loren had still used two hands against Magna's one, yes, but his strength had been able to contest Magna's, to a degree.

Yet this time, Loren was utterly overwhelmed. His greatsword was repelled, and his body along with it.

Still, he kept a hold of the hilt and regained his stance. In that span, Magna closed the distance again with a horizontal swipe of his longsword.

Loren held his blade vertically to block what looked like a light strike, only to be pushed even further back. It took all Loren had to maintain his stance and not topple over.

If one were only going by their arm muscles, Loren was clearly the better trained. If one compared the mass of their weapons, Loren's greatsword was the clear victor. Yet once these forces collided, it was as if something besides physical strength and weight came into play, and Loren was always on the receiving end.

"You've *got* to be cheating!"

He was losing in a contest of strength, even after activating his self-strengthening sequence.

If Loren's base might was greater, then he knew he shouldn't be shoved around like this, even if his foe was capable of using similar strengthening techniques. But the outcome defied his assumptions. And yet he couldn't conceive of Magna knowing techniques that could outmatch the teachings of the demons.

"Silence, knave. Do you wish to further besmirch your honor?"

"Mongrel, knave, is that all you can say? I have a name, and it's *Loren*!"

Maybe, just maybe, if Magna knew his name, he might actually use it. But Loren's foe demonstrated absolutely no interest in this new information. "A mere mongrel tried to offer his name? What cheek."

"You sure you shouldn't do the same?!"

"What I'm sure of is that you've heard my name from the demon lord. I see no need to speak it to you."

"Just how pigheaded can you be?" Loren drove in his sword. His swing was impossibly fast for the massive size of the blade he wielded, but he was parried by a single swing of the longsword. As Loren heaved the greatsword back to position, Magna remained in his post-swing posture, holding the shield in his left hand in front of his body.

Since Magna had just deflected an attack, Loren expected him to go on the offensive. He didn't understand why Magna had put up a shield—but quickly found out.

With his shield up, Magna charged straight at Loren, who was still trying to recover his stance. The shield smacked straight into Loren. The impact pierced straight through his body, forcing the air out of his lungs and his body into the air. Loren tasted a momentary feeling of floating before he smacked into the ground, back-first.

He choked from the impact, but didn't have the time to grapple with the pain. Loren rolled to avoid a thrust coming straight for him and desperately tried to gain ground, but a follow-up attack came just as he rose, and once again, the shield sent him helplessly back down.

"Mr. Loren!"

Lapis tried to rush over, though Noel threatened her with the bow. But Lapis ran regardless, and Gula dodged in front to shield her.

“Move!” Noel snarled.

“Yeah, no. *I*’ll deal with you.”

An arrow snapped forth, only to be crushed in the teeth of Gula’s authority.

Noel’s eyes widened slightly as she saw the arrow crushed in empty air, but even if she didn’t know its nature, she could tell Gula had used some sort of power. She shifted her aim to the dark god.

Lapis only glanced at the arrow as it was gobbled up. She threw herself between Loren, who was still on the ground, and Magna, who was trying to skewer him with his sword.

“You’re in the way, woman!”

“There’s no need to point out every obvious detail.”

Magna redirected his shield at the interloper. Lapis smacked her clenched right fist against it with all her might.

There was a dull sound. The immense blow made the shield’s surface quiver, but the one who was pushed back wasn’t Magna. Though she had attacked, it was Lapis who faltered.

A look of disbelief crossed her face, and Magna slashed forward to keep her in check. Lapis dodged the attack, and in the time she’d bought him, Loren unsteadily rose to his feat.

“What’s with him?!” Lapis lamented. “This is egregious! Absurd!”

“That’s what I want to know. He’s gotten tougher since the last time we saw him.”

“Between then and now...”

Just as Lapis narrowed her eyes to inspect him, Magna slashed at her. She nimbly avoided, though as Loren approached to prevent a follow-up strike, he was received by Magna’s shield. Magna swatted him off as though driving away a bug, but the motion sent Loren flying through the air.

“Is it the shield? Did adding the shield power up the enchantments?”

Lapis still didn't know where Magna's artifacts had originated. However, if they were some sort of set, it made sense that a missing piece had amplified his power. This wasn't so surprising.

And, if this train of thought was correct... Lapis looked down at the black helmet in her hands.

She had kept it out, ready to toss it as soon as she saw the chance, but that chance had yet to present itself. Maybe now that Gula was blocking Noel's sniping? But though Lapis no longer had to deal with Noel, she was now burdened with Magna, who was a far more terrifying opponent.

“If you abandon the mongrel, you might get your chance to rid yourself of it,” Magna sneered, tilting his head toward Loren.

Lapis didn't answer. She continued studying each of Magna's motions.

Certainly, if she were to abandon her concern for Loren, she could act freely. Perhaps that would give her the leeway she needed. But Lapis immediately discarded the idea. She refused to even think about it.

“It's true, we really must take care of this,” she said as she twirled the helmet on her finger by its rim.

This offhanded treatment earned a scowl from Magna. To Lapis, this helmet was a thing destined for the rubbish heap. It was little more than garbage.

“But if I place this trash and Mr. Loren's life on the scales, it's obvious that Mr. Loren is more important.”

She said this so unabashedly. Magna gave a magnanimous smile.

“You heard her, lover boy,” he said to Loren. “How does it feel to be protected by a woman?”

Had Lapis not intervened, Loren might have died while he was stunned by the shield blow. Loren did not respond to Magna's taunt, indifferently readying his blade.

Lapis had saved his life; this was a simple fact. He didn't feel insulted when facts were pointed out to him. Rather, Loren had no idea why Magna had taken

on such a mocking tone.

“What about you? Aren’t you only able to fight us thanks to that dark elf?” he asked.

Without Noel, Loren’s party would have been able to gang up on Magna, and in that case, it was unclear whether he would have so thoroughly dominated them. One thing was for sure—Magna was free of Gula’s power only because Noel had taken the heat. In that equation, it could be said that Noel was protecting him.

“That is a grave misunderstanding. She has no bearing on my ability to fight. She follows me only for the sake of her own desires. I will not be troubled to lose her.”

“Sounds like you’re wasting her time.”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself? You understand it is sheer recklessness to defy me, do you not?”

Even while self-strengthening, Loren was still the abject loser in this fight. If he wanted to augment his strength further, he could always invoke that sensation of something unlocking in his head, but for some reason, he doubted that would give him the edge he needed. “Yeah, but it’s too early to give up.”

“You persist? Your inability to understand your place is so unsightly.”

Loren’s jacket was a top-class piece of armor that had been granted to him by the highest rank of vampire. It boasted unimaginable defenses, given its humble appearance. But despite the jacket, Loren had taken serious damage from Magna’s shield.

That shield strike was so powerful that Loren feared that it would have obliterated him, had it not been for the jacket, and he had taken several of these blows. His body was crying out.

“Do you have a plan?” Lapis asked, approaching Loren and touching his hand.

Perhaps this contact activated some healing blessing. He felt a warmth flow into his body at her touch. The pain from where the shield had struck him receded, as did the ache from where he had been driven into the ground.

“No, nothing yet.”

Magna surely knew it was dangerous to allow a priest to approach a swordsman. Even so, he didn’t try to stop her. Allowing a priest to heal this foe wouldn’t change the situation in the slightest.

Loren frowned as he picked up on these implications. “I’m up against a human. If I admitted defeat after losing a test of swordsmanship and getting smacked around by a shield, it’d stain my good name as a mercenary.”

If he were facing monsters, or other such beings far beyond him, perhaps retreat would have been the call. But his foe was a human, and struggling to overcome other humans was just the job of a mercenary who made his living from war.

Naturally, once Loren was all out of tricks, it would be critical to flee without looking back. That said, he had yet to use everything at his disposal.

“I have to at least wipe that holier-than-thou look off his face.”

“Come, knave. What do you think you can do?”

“That’s for you to find out!”

Magna stood poised with his sword and his shield, and a composed smile on his face—an intimidating image.

With his grip on his sword renewed, Loren let out a shout to fire himself up. He brandished his greatsword forward and lunged to slice.

“How did you make it all the way here in the first place?” Loren asked.

The blade he drove forward was lightly caught by Magna’s one-handed longsword. As long as Magna beat him in the strength department, there was no point in being strategic. Loren met power with power—and for a moment, a look of doubt crossed Magna’s face.

“I walked. Obviously.”

“You didn’t run into anything along the way?”

“Apart from that woman, nothing. What are you trying to say?” Magna flicked

the tip of his sword toward Noel, who was locked in combat with Gula. Though even as he said it, Magna seemed doubtful.

Loren understood that the mountain housed a dragon, and that its presence kept both animals and other monsters from setting up shop anywhere near it. As for what that dragon had been doing? It had been looking after Loren and his party while they stayed in her den. In short, Magna had used this gap in her surveillance to climb the mountain and thus faced no significant obstacles.

“There was lightning too, right?! You’re not going to tell me you dodged the lightning all the way here?!”

“What are you talking about? The sky was clear when we arrived.”

Weather changed quickly on mountains. It wasn’t like the volcano was always spouting the same amount of smoke either. The density and direction changed from moment to moment. By pure coincidence, by the time Magna made his journey, the lightning that had plagued Loren’s party had entirely vanished.

“Goddammit, so we got landed with all the trouble.”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

Loren couldn’t argue with Magna’s statement in this instance, but he still cursed at it. The difference in their timing and route had been slight, and yet, it had resulted in their experiences being worlds apart. His party had faced incredible difficulties while Magna had taken a leisurely stroll to the summit.

I really was born under the wrong star, Loren thought as he continued swinging his sword. He could feel the strength building in his arms, but this still didn’t let his blade reach Magna’s body.

“Sever, Caliburns.”

A white flash of light grazed Loren as it whizzed past. Loren only barely avoided it by throwing his body to the side. He was struck by a wave of heat that burned the fuzz from his skin, but even as he grimaced, he swung his blade again.

If he let Magna escape from the range of his blade, he would be annihilated by those flashes without ever getting a chance to fight back. But the closer he

got, the more difficult those flashes were to avoid.

Loren determined that the enigmatic flash attacks were so fast that they were impossible to dodge once fired. The only thing saving him was the line Magna uttered before each shot, which tipped him off in advance.

⟨I'll assist!⟩

Scena's voice was followed by a flow of power that centered on Magna.

It was the power that caused stones to erode to dust. The ground under Magna crumbled. Loren and Lapis had seen a similar phenomenon before, and they could tell she was using her unrestrained energy drain.

The wave was so strong that even inorganic stone couldn't maintain itself. Scena's power consumed the space around Magna's body. However, unlike the rocks beneath him, neither Magna nor his equipment crumbled.



By the time Loren realized Magna had resisted Scena, Magna's longsword shot out, and Loren quickly raised his greatsword to defend himself. Once again, he lost to Magna's force and rolled along the ground.

"Sever, Caliburns."

A flash shot at Loren while he was down. Loren knew he wouldn't be able to evade if he clambered to his feet, so he used the momentum of his roll to send himself even farther back. He barely made it.

"You have a gift for running away."

"It's a necessary skill!"

From Magna's perspective, Loren was just flailing about. He seemed to consider it some sort of joke. For Loren's part, he considered evasion one of the most important life skills for a fighter. Even a powerful attack became meaningless if it couldn't hit its target.

That annoy you? Loren's attitude seemed to say. *Come and get me, then.*

Magna's gaze sharpened. Loren didn't have the leeway to provoke him further. After all, his own attacks didn't work, and even Scena's full throttle energy drain had been resisted. There wasn't much he could do. Loren felt like screaming and gnashing his teeth about just how many times over that shield had reinforced his foe, but he managed to contain his frustration and racked his brain over how to break through.

"If I can just distract him for a second..."

If he stood no chance in an aboveboard battle, then he needed to catch Magna off guard. However, Magna was hardly paying attention to him to begin with. He was so much stronger that nothing Loren did was worthy of a second glance.

Then what does he care about? Loren glanced at the black helmet in Lapis's nearby hands. It was no exaggeration to say that Magna's focus had been on it for nearly the entire battle. Snatching the helmet away was his top priority, and every action he took was in service of that goal.

Then perhaps Loren could use the black helmet to draw his attention.

Loren considered wearing the helmet himself to gain a portion of the same grace Magna was receiving, but he gave up on the idea as he recalled Magna's insistence on his right to the equipment.

Enchanted items occasionally came with certain use conditions. The most famous example was a certain holy sword, which could only be used by the individual who pulled it from its pedestal. The sword recognized its wielder and allowed its strength to be utilized by that wielder and no other. If anyone else tried to touch it, they couldn't even swing the blade, let alone lift it. Even if they managed to overcome these issues, the blade would be too dull to sever a single twig.

If a similar effect had been cast on the equipment Magna was wearing, then Loren plopping the helmet on his head might well be suicidal. Then how else could he use it?

Loren's left hand reached toward Lapis. "Lapis! Pass!"

His order was rather ambiguous, but Lapis instantly understood what he was after. She tossed the black helmet toward him.

Loren saw Magna's eyes following it through the air. *Looks like this just might work, after all*, he thought as he caught it.

"You, what are you..."

Magna cut himself off with Loren's next action.

Not a moment after he had caught the helmet, Loren chucked it high into the sky above Magna. Lapis's eyes widened in shock—Loren was throwing something they couldn't risk having stolen right at the thief.

This came as a surprise for Magna as well. His expression was similarly shocked and he mulled over his next action.

After all, Magna's hands were occupied by a sword and a shield. He would need to drop one to catch it—both, if he wanted to be sure. However, he was in the middle of active combat, and he hesitated to relinquish either armament.

Since he can use such a powerful shield bash, he could just knock me down before collecting it at his own pace...

They were fighting atop a volcano, but there was still a sizable distance to the lava. Even if Magna failed to catch the helmet, it wouldn't be instantly reduced to slag. Which meant he should technically be fine if he got rid of the nuisances in his way first. But Magna's sole focus was on obtaining the helmet, and this alternative didn't seem to occur to him.

Strength and technique aside, he seems inexperienced, Loren thought as he got both hands back on his greatsword, raised the blade in a high stance, and kicked off the ground.

His aim was not Magna.

Even if Magna was focused on the helmet, he would still react to an attack launched directly at him. So Loren set his sights elsewhere. He locked onto the very helmet that was falling toward his foe.

Loren leaped up, and he struck his blade down on the helmet while it was still high in the sky.

The force rapidly accelerated the helmet toward its target: the face of Magna, who hadn't yet grasped the situation.

The item he most dearly coveted was flying straight at him. He could neither repel it with his shield nor swat it down with his sword. And with all that force behind it, the helmet struck his brow.

"Gah?!"

There was a loud sound as metal clashed with bone. Magna bent back, crying out, and inadvertently dropped his longsword to hold his head.

The helmet, meanwhile, bounced upon impact, sending it straight back to Loren.

"There!"

Magna was unable to move from the pain. His comrade Noel couldn't assist, as she was occupied with Gula. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity had been bestowed on Loren. He didn't even think of dropping his sword to grab the helmet. Instead, he took another great swing.

"Lord Magna! The helmet!"

“Hrngh?!”

Noel’s warning forced Magna to lift his aching face, but by then it was too late.

The greatsword’s blade had connected with the airborne helmet. Loren felt a pleasant sensation in his hands as he mercilessly followed through with his swing.

The blow generated a horizontal vector of force and sent the helmet spiraling straight toward the center of the caldera—the lake of lava. At the speed and distance it had achieved, Loren was sure there was no way for anyone to prevent it from its fiery doom.

Without sparing a glance for Magna or Noel, he shouted, “Job’s done! Let’s get out of here!”

They were running before he had even finished. Loren’s party to the caldera rim, and Magna and Noel toward the center. Finally, the helmet collided with a splash. It touched down in the seething pit...but only at the very edge.

“Oh, for crying out loud! I screwed up!”

The first to curse was Loren.

Loren thought he had swung with all his might, but the black helmet hadn’t flown as far as he thought it would. The greatsword wasn’t built for smacking, not to mention that he’d been in a hurry. Perhaps he hadn’t put his back into it. In any case, the black helmet was in the lava, but it had fallen close to the edge.

Not that he could give it another smack to get it further in, at this point. His opportunity had passed.

Magna completely abandoned his fight with Loren and ran to collect it. All Loren could do was order Lapis and Gula to run with him. He prayed that the lava would destroy the helmet before Magna reached it.

“Damn you! A mere mongrel!”

The next curse came from Magna. He considered chasing after Loren to finish him off, but between securing the helmet and punishing the one who’d sought

to destroy it, the helmet was more important.

For a moment, he pierced Loren's back with a look of rage. But he quickly looked away toward the helmet, which had fallen atop the lava. Perhaps it was reflecting the molten light, or perhaps it had begun to absorb a dangerous amount of heat. Regardless, it glowed red as it slowly sank, and Magna dashed toward it.

"I see! Since the helmet's part of the set, it hasn't yet been affected by the defensive enchantments on the other pieces!"

It was a little late, but Lapis hit her hands together in enlightened delight as she ran beside Loren. Loren hadn't thought it through that far, but that probably explained why he had managed to land such a clean blow.

In that case, he had been right to avoid attacking Magna directly, despite the opportunity the helmet had given him. Not that this mattered now, when his main priority was simply to vacate the areas as soon as possible.

"Yeah, yeah, just keep running! I can't handle him when he's in a rage!"

"You have a point!"

It was unclear if the set would be impacted by the loss of one of its pieces. However, Magna had fought without the helmet thus far, and it was sensible to assume he would maintain his current strength.

At least this was what Loren was thinking as he looked over his shoulder. Of all things, he saw Magna step directly into the lava, albeit with a look of great agony on his face.

If an ordinary human tried that, their leg would be instantly burnt to a crisp. Yet Magna's full plate armor guarded his legs as well. Perhaps that served to block some of the impact. He proceeded as though he were wading through water and seized the sinking helmet in his hands.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Even if the equipment is largely responsible, he hardly looks human anymore."

"Not even a dark god would do that."

Loren's party exclaimed in awe, fear, and surprise as Magna clutched the helmet and brought it to his face. It had only been submerged for a brief moment, but the helmet had still suffered from the heat. Its shape had warped, and it was pocked with holes. Forget about its effects as an enchanted artifact—it would be hard to use it as a regular helmet from here on out. As he stared, Magna seemed to reach the same conclusion. His hands shook, and his furious gaze turned toward them.

"Crap! He's looking at us!"

"Even if he starts running now, he won't catch—" Loren stopped mid-sentence when something sliced through the wind, barreling past him. It continued flying straight and stabbed into the ground of the upward slope they were scaling.

An arrow.

Looking back, he saw Magna giving orders to Noel, who steadied her bow from a crouching position, holding it level. She was aiming at their backs.

The next arrow grazed the side of Loren's jacket as it flew. The one after that struck his shoulder with a dull thud.

"She hit Neg!"

"I applaud her accuracy at that distance, but it's even more astounding to see it deflected."

Noel's aim was good, and elven bows were notoriously powerful to boot. That likely ran true for dark elves as well. Yet Neg had deflected the shot with astounding toughness.

This had still been quite a surprise to the spider on Loren's shoulder. He didn't fall off, but he expressed his feelings by rustling his legs.

"That tickles! Settle down!"

"Looks fun..." Gula mused as Loren stroked Neg's back to calm him.

Of course, *Neg* wasn't having fun, having been shot, and neither was Loren.

"Less nonsense, more running!" Loren warned—at which point a flash came careening toward them.

The sword named Caliburns was active once more. But perhaps owing to the distance, or because Magna's hand was shaking in wrath, it collided with the ground quite some distance from the party, tearing up a large chunk.

"Don't wanna eat one of those."

"Right. Looks like its power increases when he's angry."



Having raced up the slope in one go, they threw themselves down the drop that followed. This downhill slope couldn't be cleared as easily. They could only take certain paths, and those thick, dark clouds had begun to gather again.

If the lightning broke out again, which of them would be more impacted—Loren's party or Magna? Loren quickly concluded that he specifically was most at risk.

If luck could be expressed in numbers, Magna's was surely of a higher value than his.

"But we still have to run down, right?!"

"If only we could use the same path from before..."

Lapis swiftly scanned the area. The scenery was too uniform for her to determine if they had exited the crater from the same point they had entered it. If they had managed to maintain trajectory, they would reach the tunnel to Emily's den before long. But there was no guarantee they were anywhere close.

"No way to tell from above!"

"Yes, unfortunately, there weren't any landmarks."

Lapis kept her eyes peeled, but all she could see was the craggy mountainside. She had no idea where the cave entrance was hidden among all the bumps and dips.

Gula narrowed her eyes beside Lapis, but she was also unable to find any leads, her gaze wandering fruitlessly.

"So we just gotta give up and run?!" Loren highly doubted a mere human could spot what a demon and dark god could not. His words of resignation were met with one of Noel's arrows, stabbing into the ground by his feet.

To follow up, another flash pierced the rock face, shooting straight from the crater side and not missing by much. Clambering down was their only option.

They had been unable to scale the slope in a day, but perhaps the downhill journey would be quicker. Of course, that would only hold true when they were able to run.

Loren still preferred tackling the slope to round two with Magna. He was about to set forth when a slight sound reached his ears.

“Cheep! Cheep-cheep!”

It was like the chirp of a small bird, and as far as Loren had seen, there were no birds on the mountain. There was nothing for them to eat, nor any trees to rest on. So what exactly had made that sound? He strained his ears, and his eyes caught a slight movement at a point on the mountainside.

Once he focused, he saw its head poke out: the shadow of what could be a lizard, albeit a touch too spiky.

“One of Emily’s kids!”

“Huh? Where?”

Lapis could hear the chirping but hadn’t identified where it came from. Loren grabbed her hand and Gula’s—Gula had given up on looking at all—as he ran toward where the dragon nymph’s head poked out of the ground.

As expected, the arrows and flashes came flying from behind them, but Loren couldn’t let that stop him. After running some distance, he spotted the passage they had used to reach the caldera and shoved Lapis and Gula inside.

“Hey, no need to be so rough, Mr. Loren!”

“Ah! Where d’ya think you’re touchin’? Feel me up there, and—”

A vein popped on Loren’s head as Gula blushed and fidgeted. “Just get in there already!”

He kept pushing Lapis in—and gave Gula a kick on the behind—before glancing back at the summit. Magna hadn’t yet emerged. Loren dashed in as well, while the dragon nymph who’d shown him the way got in a bit of rest as it hung from his back.

If they were seen entering the cave, Magna and Noel would be after them soon enough. However, their foes had missed the moment they disappeared, and they had no young dragon to guide them. It would take them quite some time to spot their escape route, and even if they did find it, the path would funnel them through an ancient dragon’s den. It was hard to imagine they

would emerge unscathed from a meeting with Emily.

Loren considered collapsing the entrance, but that would only make it more conspicuous. With enough time, they could reach Emily. If they explained the situation, he hoped they could bargain for some knowledge, or even assistance. Thus, Loren left the entrance untouched as he chased the footsteps of his two comrades.

Epilogue:

Descent to Report

“TREMENDOUS WORK out there, Lapis. You really nabbed yourself a good man.”

The one who said this so cheerfully, smiling ear to ear, was Judie, Demon Lord of the western territory. They were in the dining hall situated in a corner of her castle.

It was very nearly nighttime, and atop a large table—so large that one had to wonder just how many people were supposed to use it—the maids set down dish after dish of food, presumably for dinner.

“The surveillance spell was cut off, so I believe the helmet’s original enchantments were dispelled as well. Even if that isn’t the case, as Mr. Loren reported, the item is no longer in a usable state.”

Judie merrily swished wine around her glass. Her eyes were on Lapis, who was collapsed flat over the table, and Loren, who was slouching limply against the backrest of his chair.

They had both been ferried here without being given the chance to lay down their weapons, and their clothes were still

covered in dirt and dust, but Judie didn’t seem to mind in the least.

Back at the volcano, Loren’s party had fled from Magna with the assistance of the dragon nymph and bolted all the way to Emily’s den. Once they arrived, they’d found Emily, who had been fretting over her missing child, and explained the situation.

Needless to say, Emily had been mad at the kid for suddenly disappearing, but had the child not been returned, Loren expected he wouldn’t have made it back alive. He’d calmed everyone down, after which Emily flew off to find Magna and give him a thrashing.

Loren hadn’t seen the battle that unfolded from there.

In any case, he'd determined that resting his body took priority. So, they sat in the den and discussed what to do next.

Before reaching the mountain, Loren and Lapis had discussed what they might do when the job was done. They had considered returning to the demon lord's castle and spending a bit of time with Lapis's parents. But Loren hadn't been thinking about that. Instead, he proposed taking refuge at the demon lord's castle as it would be the safest place in demon territory.

Lapis halfheartedly endorsed this, while Gula stomped her feet to the bitter end—she hadn't forgotten the terror of the demon lord's maids. But she ultimately agreed it would be better to wait for things to hunker down in safety, rather than sitting on their hands and letting Magna attack them on the road.

All that remained was to descend the mountain and return to the castle. Around the time they made that decision, Emily returned looking somewhat frustrated. She reported chasing someone—presumably Magna—around for a while before finally losing sight of them.

It seemed even Magna had qualms about facing an ancient dragon, and he had been on the run the instant she showed her face.

“That man is trouble. He managed to block my breath.”

Upon hearing this, Loren and Lapis couldn't close their gaping mouths.

Emily had likely held back considerably, hoping to avoid any additional collateral damage, but Loren simply couldn't believe that a human had managed to defend against that. Lapis didn't *want* to believe.

Magna's strength probably came from his equipment, but this just went to show how powerful that equipment really was. Lapis was growing even more curious as to where it had come from.

“Just how strong is that set? I'm surprised we managed to melt the helmet.”

If the equipment was so powerful, Loren had to wonder why a volcano could actually destroy it.

Emily replied, “Equipment of that sort often manifests effects only when worn. When no one had equipped it, its true power was concealed.”

They chatted as they spent another night in Emily's den. The next day, they were mobbed by small dragons who were reluctant to part with them, after which they left, once again by hanging from a rope dangling from Emily's leg.

On the way down, they said their farewells to Emily and descended, wary of running into Magna all the while.

At the base of the mountain, they dived straight into the wagon they had used on the way there, and they drove the horse as fast as it could go along the highway.

When Lapis hid the wagon, she had taken her time to ensure that the horse wouldn't starve. She had surrounded it with food and water, and so it was ready for the intense workout they demanded.

It had taken a night of sleeping rough to reach the mountain, but only a day to return to the castle, where they petitioned the demon lord for temporary asylum.

"We definitely got on his bad side," Loren muttered. "I'm losing my touch, earning the resentment of someone I know I can't beat."

"You have it rough," Judie agreed.

"Don't act like this ain't got nothing to do with you, lady."

"What a foul mouth you have, Mr. Loren."

The demon lord clearly didn't want to concern herself with any of this. Loren looked around despondently and, seeing Lapis looking just as haggard in the chair beside him, he poked her shoulder.

"What is it Mr. Loren?"

"Gula's gone. Did she think I'd be mad at her for failing to take out the dark elf?"

In the midst of his battle with Magna, Lapis had run toward him, and Noel, the dark elf, had tried to get in her way. Gula had been the one to hold Noel back.

Sure, dark elves were powerful and rare, but Noel definitely couldn't be strong enough to keep Gula busy. Loren suspected Gula had held back, or perhaps that she had been reluctant to finish off someone who was one of the

last of her kind.

Lapis thought differently. “It would be quite difficult to take out that dark elf.”

“Even for you?”

“What are you expecting from a perfectly ordinary priest, Mr. Loren?” Lapis uttered this blatant lie as brazenly as ever.

Naturally, Loren was not convinced.

However, Lapis went on with complete seriousness. “That dark elf presumably has some sort of contract with the swordsman Magna. Dark elves were always known to be a little stronger than elves, but her very being has been enhanced such that she’s even more powerful.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, there are vassal contracts and subordinate contracts. Specifically, someone makes a contract with someone else through some form or another. Through the execution of the terms, both sides receive various benefits.”

“Do you think perhaps the concept has been lost in human lands? If the technique was known over there, they’d be using it all over the place. You know how humans are,” Judie added.

It stung a little for Loren to hear that, being human and all, but if there really was such a convenient arcane technique, he could definitely see people using it without reservation.

“A black knight who knows a lost art, huh? That *is* a bit interesting,” said Judie.

“I’d rather never see him again.”

“This isn’t the first time Mother has misplaced her priorities.”

Perhaps feeling a lust for battle, Judie spoke brightly of Magna. As for Loren and Lapis, they wanted to stay well away from him if they could. *Is this just the way a demon lord thinks?* Loren wondered as he circled back around to his initial question.

“So, where did Gula go?”

“She’s probably...at the maid station. Or the break room.”

“Oh... I hope she survives.”

It seemed the maids’ curiosity was still alive and well. Loren sent up a prayer for Gula, who had been dragged off to suffer this curiosity.

“You deserve praise for your efforts,” Judie said with a smile. “You did well, overcoming such hardships—especially for a human. You show promise, Mr. Loren.”

“Should I be happy to hear that?”

“’Tis a great honor! Rejoice!”

“Oh, shut it. I’d prefer gold over praise.”

They had already received the greatsword as an advance payment, but words were free, and Loren had more said it for the sake of it. For some reason, Judie’s expression clouded over.

What now? The sudden change made Loren inadvertently lean forward.

With a foreboding tone, Judie explained, “I have some bad news for you, Mr. Loren.”

“Then I don’t want to hear it. But I doubt that’s an option.”

“Your party fought with that ancient dragon, correct? Did you happen to spot an especially flashy stray shot in the middle of it?”

Loren remembered. A blast from Emily’s breath had collided far in the distance, causing great damage in the process. Emily had gone to Judie to smooth things over—and once Loren recalled exactly where it had struck, his face stiffened. “Way we heard it, it collided somewhere around the great demon king’s castle.”

“Yes, that’s the thing. That blast cleanly eradicated a whole corner of the castle. So the great demon king flew into a rage and has demanded compensation from you and the dragon.”

“Why *me*?!” Loren smacked the table. This was absurd!

But despite the troubled look on her face, Judie didn’t pause before spelling

out the reason. “It seems both parties are to blame. Yes, the dragon’s breath was the direct cause, but fault also lies with the one who made it expel that breath.”

“And all of that happened because of your request.”

“Of course. But I never told you to fight a dragon.”

Judie said this so nonchalantly that Loren had no rebuttal.

The request had indeed only entailed throwing the helmet into the volcano. Judie hadn’t given them any directions on how to get there. In that case, anything that happened along the way was their responsibility, and in that sense, the great demon king wasn’t being completely unreasonable.

“As the client, I did think I bore some responsibility, so I paid the compensation out of pocket. Do you intend to request more remuneration from me on top of that?”

“Well, no...”

“Incidentally, about that money I paid the great demon king. I don’t intend to demand it back in full, nor will I hound you for it. But you’re not going to shirk your debt entirely, are you?”

As Judie stared at him, Loren felt a terrible sweat break out on his brow and down his back. He shook his head.

Although this was a somewhat ambiguous situation, Loren’s mercenary instincts prevented him from playing dumb about costs accrued and damages caused during a job. But it was entirely possible that the amount Judie had paid was more than he would ever be able to repay. He couldn’t imagine it.

“I could tell you just how much I paid,” said Judie. “But do you really want to hear?”

“I...do not.”

“I’m grateful that you’re working alongside my little Lapis here. So as I said, I’m not going to ask you to pay everything back all at once. Just send me a bit when you have some change to spare.”

Before Judie’s beaming smile, Loren fell silently back into his chair.

How much would Judie extort out of him? He didn't know. But she wasn't the sort of person he could refuse to pay. *Why does doing work only ever increase my debt?* Loren wondered as he stared up at the ceiling.

"Also, the great demon king seemed somewhat interested in you. You might be summoned one of these days. Incidentally, you could write off this debt by marrying into our family. Think about it, okay?"

"Dun' wanna... Just send me back to Kaffa."

"Yes, I do think you should head back for now. You really must find Lapis's eyes, and she still has so much to experience. I'll prepare your return trip, so please, just take it easy for now."

The thoughts running through Loren's head could be summed up as, *How did it come to this?* For now, he decided not to think. For now, he would just take his ease.

Even if he stopped thinking for the time being, those worries would creep back in eventually. He decided a little escapism would do him good. When he looked to his side, he saw Lapis, who was still flat against the table. For some reason, she was gazing at him with a somewhat pleased smile.

Perhaps she was relieved that this request had ended without incident. Or perhaps she was reacting to Loren's new and even greater debt—one that would take a very, very long time to clear.

Whatever the reason, she smiled. Loren frowned. He turned up to the ceiling again, letting out a long, tired sigh.

Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

WHEN I BROUGHT Mr. Loren home, some of my friends told me I had terrible taste. So I did a little backbiting of my own. A bit more literally.

I'll admit, adventurer and mercenary aren't the most upstanding trades, but we demons are the sort of race that fair and upstanding people run from. Don't you think?

Anyway, this is Lapis.

This time, I ended up working alongside Mr. Loren on a job issued by a demon lord. The demon lord in question being my mother, by the way. It seems she wanted me to toss a helmet into some volcano before a swordsman named Magna could get his hands on it.

I still have to commend Mr. Loren's nerves for demanding an increased reward. Although somewhat problematically, my mother readily accepted. She said something about fighting and winning the reward for himself—what era does she think this is?

Also, I think our maids should have restrained themselves somewhat when they tossed Ms. Gula about like a toy. Any ordinary human would have died from that treatment. Though perhaps they only did it because they know she wouldn't. When I consider the possibility of that happening to Loren, it just doesn't sit right with me. But, well, it was Gula, so I let it be.

With that said, Loren ended up fighting an opponent of Mother's selection to earn that bonus. I cocked my head to the side when I looked at them, able to tell they were trying to conceal their identity. We demons don't wear heavy armor, as a rule. Some might do something intimidating as a vague threat, but armor can generally be dismantled or penetrated with shock waves. It's pointless to us.

Yes, there are exceptions, but I will say definitively that demons hardly ever

fight in full plate armor. It was simply laughable how Loren's foe could hardly move, thanks to the weight of said armor. I never imagined I'd find my father inside.

Then Mr. Loren won, although not in the cleanest way. He pretty much tripped Father up, and once Father fell, he couldn't get up again. That's usually impossible. Just what was Mom thinking when she dressed him up in that?

I'd prefer if she considered her daughter's feelings a bit more—I mean, I had to watch my own father being beaten black and blue. But I suppose that's too much to hope for.

Incidentally, my eyes are certainly both prosthetics, and the real ones remain sealed somewhere. However, I can see perfectly fine. That is something I would like to make clear.

If we stayed too long, I feared Mr. Loren would see all manner of things he was better off not seeing, so I moved to get this sorted and set off. Admittedly, I hadn't seen my parents in a long time, and I *did* want to talk to them more, but my sentiments were... Hm, how should I put it...

Oh, I *was* pleased with Mr. Loren's considerate suggestion that we stop by on the way back, though.

It was smooth sailing from our departure to the volcano. It's not like demon territory is a hive of scum and villainy where foul beasts wander every square inch. Such places do exist, but the unremarkable parts are, well, unremarkable. In fact, I'd say our roads are far better maintained than the ones in human territory.

An ancient dragon had settled on the volcano we were headed to, and that was the reason that demon lords couldn't approach it. As you might expect, we were attacked not long after we arrived.

I presumed our attacker's intent was to cause a stir to rile up the dragon, luring it into attacking us, and I can say they succeeded. Incidentally, said attacker was a dark elf, a famously endangered race. They are persecuted by their closest relatives—the elves—and they're quite beautiful, what with their

human-like proportions. They're even better endowed than humans, I'd say. That's why they're hunted... But is that really it?

Suddenly, I pictured Ms. Nym saying, "Kill them all."

Dark elves are few in number and are valuable specimens. But it's not like Ms. Nym doesn't have her own perks. No, I won't write any more on this subject. I'd rather not become a pincushion for her arrows.

I was thinking these things when we were spotted by the ancient dragon that lived on the mountain. It was terribly angry about all the noise disturbing its home.

I tried insisting the dark elf was to blame, not us, but the ancient dragon was really irked not by the noise, but by Ms. Scena, who worked from within Mr. Loren. To be more precise, it was due to her Lifeless King powers.

There wasn't much we could do about that, so Mr. Loren ended up fighting the beast.

If a common adventurer or mercenary should face a common dragon even once, their life is considered to be one of excitement and adventure—worthy of a dramatic tale. Should they fight an ancient dragon, it wouldn't be strange to see them skip straight past the status of "hero" and straight into "legend."

Just what sort of star was Mr. Loren born under?

Such thoughts put me in a bit of a strange mood, but that was when the ancient dragon fired its breath. It was impossible to block.

If I were in peak condition, I might have stood against it, but it tore through my subpar magic defenses like paper. Ms. Gula's authority was burnt up like so much kindling. Mr. Loren's crisis management skills are fearsome, seeing as he sensed the danger and dodged it beforehand. He grabbed me and Ms. Gula, then fled out of range. By this point, I think his physical abilities have transcended those of mere mortals.

Even if he quits being human, though, Mr. Loren will always be Mr. Loren.

I thought there would be another blast, but the ancient dragon was petrified. That was when it offered a truce. According to the dragon, its breath attack had

landed in the vicinity of the great demon king's domicile. If we could ask my mother to sort things out, it promised to let us go. We gladly took it up on that offer.

After all, we would definitely have died if that battle went on any longer. If one letter to Mother could buy our lives, that was dirt cheap.

Although what happened next was none of my business, I prayed a battle wouldn't unfold between our great overlord and the ancient dragon. I say this without any hint of jest. Their battle would bring demon territory to the brink of destruction, and surely human territory wouldn't fare any better.

Their confrontation would in a very real way risk ending the world, so I really did pray it could be settled civilly.

In this way, we parted ways with the ancient dragon and resumed our ascent. However, Ms. Dragon returned the next day.

It seemed the discussions had concluded, and having had a change of heart, Ms. Emily—that's her name—said she would help us climb the mountain.

The negotiations presumably went well.

When we asked for the safest place to stay, Ms. Emily went as far as to ferry us there herself. The world may be vast, but I doubt anyone out there has been carried by an ancient dragon before. This was already the sort of story I would brag about to my grandkids, but even more incredible was the fact that she invited us into her den.

I'm repeating myself, I know. But though the world may be vast, I doubt anyone has returned alive from an ancient dragon's den. *That* is a story that will last seven generations. Although Mr. Loren doesn't seem too impressed.

Ms. Emily's den was piled high with all sorts of unbelievably valuable treasure, not that we could bring any of it back with us. Mr. Loren seemed entirely uninterested. I think he can be a bit too much of a realist. I wouldn't ask him to be quite as excited as Ms. Gula was when she tried to eat the dragon nymphs, but I still wanted a tad more.

And so we spent a night in Ms. Emily's den. Evidently, dragons are poikilothermic, and her nymphs flocked to Mr. Loren and me for heat. Only one of them succeeded. The others were wrapped in Mr. Neg's threads.

Mr. Neg truly is amazing. They were infants, yes, but he still managed to incapacitate *dragons*.

Of note, I can't shake the feeling that we ought to apologize to Ms. Emily. It seems my mother once caused her a great deal of trouble. On top of that, the enraged ifrit waiting for us at the top of the mountain was all Mother's fault. What was she even trying to do, seriously?

There was no use thinking about it, so we started climbing again. In barely any time at all, we were thrown into a battle with the ifrit.

Mr. Ifrit, who summoned hordes of low-grade salamander spirits to meet us, is a being of such power that his kind are worshipped as gods of fire in certain parts of the world. That said, it was a bit shocking to see Mr. Loren able to fight him, blow for blow.

I understand that his weapon plays a large part in this, but I don't think Ms. Gula and I were crazy for being surprised at such an abnormal sight.

As for Mr. Ifrit, he retreated as soon as he realized he couldn't take down Mr. Loren.

All that remained was to toss the helmet into the lava, and that would be the end of it. But that was the precise moment the black swordsman, Mr. Magna, made his entrance. He appeared alongside the dark elf, Ms. Noel, and demanded we hand over the helmet.

Naturally, we didn't accept his demands and we ended up fighting, but Mr. Magna did say something quite curious. He claimed to be the proper owner of the helmet and said that he carried the blood of an ancient lineage. But what exactly does that mean? I've decided to tuck that information away for later.

As expected, or rather, inevitably, the battle left us at a disadvantage. We had been unable to stand against the man when last we met him, and now he had added a stolen shield to his enchanted set, making him an even stronger foe.

I thought there was nothing for it. That we were doomed to lose. But Mr.

Loren was hatching his own plan. He threw the helmet—the one Mr. Magna *definitely* was not supposed to have—straight at Mr. Magna.

This ended up being a decent move. Mr. Magna had known we would never surrender the helmet to him, so by doing so, Loren managed to take him by surprise. Mr. Magna would also have needed to drop either his sword or shield to catch it.

Thus, a moment of hesitation.

Using that chance, Mr. Loren struck his sword against the helmet, smacking it down toward Mr. Magna. Then, with another strike, he managed to send it flying toward the lava.

You'll understand if you try this, but striking a near-spherical helmet with a sword and getting it to fly *exactly* where you want it to requires extraordinary skill. Doubly so with a sword that massive—it would have been incredibly difficult to control. Mr. Loren really is amazing, to have succeeded on his first try.

And with that, we bolted.

One of Ms. Emily's children helped us along the way, and we somehow managed to make it off the mountain.

My word, I hardly felt alive by the end of all that, but perhaps that's what one ought to expect from a demon lord's request.

Incidentally, when we fled into Ms. Emily's den, Ms. Emily went out to tussle with Mr. Magna. If only she'd killed the man... But unfortunately, he got away. He's the persistent type, I just know it.

And so, we succeeded, and that should have been the end of it.

But it seems that the breath attack Ms. Emily fired actually struck the great demon king's residence itself, and our exalted overlord demanded outrageous reparations to pay for the repairs. And as it happened during our job, apparently, the responsibility fell to Mr. Loren.

This was obviously a plausible-sounding excuse to foist it off on him.

In the first place, it isn't the sort of sum any individual can afford to pay.

Clearly the great demon king doesn't honestly expect him to pay it. In short, it means that the great demon king and my mother have both shown interest in Mr. Loren. How should I put this? My condolences.

However, his debt will be written off if he marries into our house, so if he doesn't protest... I won't be mad, for one.

But I wouldn't have so many issues if I could tell him as much upfront, now would I?

I think I'll leave it at that for today.



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