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Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu

Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My **DUNGEON**

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Prologue: Arriving at the Royal Capital

Arsil, the capital of the Kingdom of Alisia. Nell and I had finally arrived in the city I'd visited once before, this time led by Releaux, the mayor of the border town of Alfiro. We were currently cooling our heels while the old man's subordinate handled the entry paperwork. Even though my original goal in coming here had been to inform the powers that be of our situation and a bunch of other stuff...well, that obviously took a backseat when I found out Nell's reputation as a hero was under serious threat. Not to mention the existence of an enemy in the shadows responsible for all this, who was probably moving around behind the scenes even now.

Jesus H. Christ, the human world is just as much of a pain in the ass as it's always been. Not that it matters. I'll still destroy any of Nell's enemies. That's a promise.

Those thoughts ran through my head while I stared at the royal capital. The old-guy mayor got out of his carriage and walked to the one behind it, glancing inside to check on us.

"Lord Yuki, Ser Nell. I intend to head for the royal castle once the paperwork is complete. What do you plan to do?"

"Hmm... What do you think, Nell? I'll tag along wherever you want."

Nell contemplated our questions in silence for a bit before responding.

"I think I'll visit the castle first as well. The Church will have to wait because, above all else, I need to apologize to the king for all the trouble I've caused. So please allow us to accompany you, sir."

"I do not think His Majesty will be at all perturbed... In any case, I understand. I realize it is somewhat cramped, but I ask that you content yourselves with the stagecoach for just a while longer."

With a nod, the old man strode back to his own coach.

"I gotta say, it's real nice having friends in high places. Especially at times like

this.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Lord Releaux is truly without equal, and I’ll be forever indebted to him.”

Honestly, I’d never thought my relationship with him would last this long. Next to Nell, he had to be the human I had the strongest bond with.

Not long after our chat, the formalities at the royal capital’s main gate finished up. Our carriage started moving again, and once we entered the city proper, I could hear the hustle and bustle of people going about their day outside. As expected of the capital of a country, it overflowed with people, just like the demon world’s capital. I found the energy of the place detestably loud now. It was worlds apart from the last time I’d been here. Back then, it’d pretty much been a ghost town crawling with Undead everywhere you looked.

I peeked at Nell and found no trace of anxiety in her anymore. *Looks like she steeled her nerves.* I figured that a part of her was still scared, but if I hadn’t been convinced of her hero status before, the determination radiating from her now sure fixed that. Her courage in this moment definitely marked her as a hero.

A small smile came to my lips. I didn’t have anything in particular to say to Nell, so I stayed quiet like a good little boy and relaxed in my seat inside the carriage.

Chapter 1: A Bridal Scandal in the Royal Capital

Our carriages proceeded along the royal capital's wide, well-maintained main boulevard. After about ten or twenty minutes, we finally arrived at the massive, white-walled castle towering over the heart of the city. Once we had taken care of the entry procedure at the castle gate, the carriages came to a complete stop inside the castle grounds, and we got off.

I'd shown up here as an intruder last time, but this time around, I was gonna storm the castle from the front—even though there was no actual storming involved. Though I appreciated the king's trust in us, our enemy was still lurking somewhere in this city. *Best to psych myself up now and stay that way.*

"Oh, hey, Mayor Old Guy. Watching your people handle all the paperwork got me wondering: what exactly is your rank? You clearly have clout since you've used it all over the place, so there's no way you don't have a special rank or title, right?"

"To be frank, I'm surprised it took you this long to ask me."

He smiled wryly at me before answering my question.

"His Majesty bestowed the title of margrave upon me. It technically makes me a high-ranking noble, but because I am considered an upstart, I do not possess the powers of a normal margrave. In essence, I'm still very much of minor standing."

Margrave... If I remember my history from back on Earth correctly, isn't being a margrave a big freaking deal? A margrave was a high-ranking noble in charge of governing an entire region of borderlands. It wasn't a title assigned to someone just because they were the mayor of some border town.

"What? Lord Mayor, I thought you were a count."

"Indeed I was when Lord Yuki first called upon me. But the king generously awarded me the domains of the nobles who ruined their own lives by siding with the prince during the insurrection. Ergo, my elevation in rank."

“Oh my! Congratulations are clearly in order, then! Though I’m sorry they’re belated.”

“Pishposh, never you mind. I won’t deny that it was an auspicious event, but now, I have to deal with twice as many headaches. So, to speak candidly, I can’t say I’ve been all that happy about it. With that being said, as the king has entrusted it to me, I will, of course, do my utmost in this role.”

That’s our Lord Mayor for ya. Truly the manliest of men. Thinking back on it, this old man had been the one to take the lead when all the adventurers around him were cowering in fear of me and Lefi during our attack on Alfiro. So, yeah, he’d always had guts.

“Damn, old man. You really are a super cool dude.”

“Bah, it makes me embarrassed to hear you say so. Ah, one thing, Lord Yuki.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s *my* turn to ask *you* a question. You...truly insist on wearing that mask?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, this ole thing. The king knows me, but I’ve never revealed my face to him. If anything, he might not recognize me without the mask.”

“Can you truly say that the two of you are acquainted, then?”

Weeell... Guess that line’s kinda blurry, ain’t it? His expression was indescribable as he stared at my mask.

“I think...you might want to consider leaving the mask *off* for as long as possible.”

“You do? Why?”

Confused by his suggestion, I questioned the old man. Just as I did, I heard a voice.

“A-Are you perhaps the Lord Mask?”

“Who, now?”

When I turned around to see who it belonged to, I found a lone soldier with an astonished look on his face. *He’s young. Maybe even younger than me.* Well, technically, only around a year and two months had passed since my “birth,” so

I seriously doubted he was younger in that sense. By that metric, most folks here were older than me.

“Th-That jester’s mask... You really *are* Lord Mask, the man who saved our capital, right?!”

“Uh, y-yeah, that’s probably me...”

“Lord Mask”? Really? They couldn’t have thought of anything better to call me?

“A-Amazing! This is like a dream come true! I never imagined I’d be able to meet our country’s savior! M-Might I ask you for an autograph?!”

“Oh, uh, sure.”

Overwhelmed by the soldier’s endless prattle, I went on autopilot and took the pen-like writing utensil and parchment-like paper he offered me. After racking my brain for a bit, I decided to write “You really thought I’d sign an autograph for you? Think again, doofus. Too bad, so sad.” in Japanese.

“Thank you very much! Wow, such bold, heroic writing! I’ll keep it as a family heirloom!”

“No, I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

My reply was immediate and dead serious, but the soldier didn’t pay me any mind. He just went back to his post, still obviously deeply impressed by meeting me.

“H-Hey, is that...?”

“N-No way. Is it really Lord Mask?”

“Lord Mask?! The mysterious champion?!”

I looked in the direction those voices came from and saw other members of the castle guard whispering to each other. The fervor in their gazes was damn near making me sweat.

“Yo, you two. A word? Could one of you explain why in the seven hells I’m the center of attention? I feel like everyone and their mother is staring at me.”

“Oh, right. Mr. Yuki is quite the celebrity in the capital, isn’t he, Lord Mayor?”

“Indeed. The man wearing a jester’s mask who, in his only appearance here, saved not only His Majesty and Princess Ilyr but our country as well. After your departure, rumors about this man spread extensively in the city. The garrison, in particular, has a particularly strong emotional attachment to the mysterious masked stranger because its soldiers fought alongside you. You see, there is pride in proclaiming themselves to have ‘fought side by side with the champion.’”

“Tee hee. As far as the people of the capital are concerned, Mr. Yuki, you’re the star of the show, hm? Though, of course, they have no idea you’re actually a demon lord.”

“I realize it’s rude to say this in your presence, but every time I hear something or other about said show, I don’t know whether I should laugh or not. The mere mention of your exploits rouses complicated emotions in me.”

Nell wouldn’t stop giggling, and the old mayor chuckled ruefully.

Hol’ up. Why am I the last to know about this?

“Just saying, it woulda been real freakin’ nice if someone had told me about this in advance.”

“My apologies. Truth be told, it completely slipped my mind since you only just donned the mask. When I saw it again in Senguria, I thought about warning you, but in the midst of everything...”

“Sorry about that. I haven’t been in the capital in so long that I forgot as well.”

“R-Right. Can we just get a move on for now? I’ve got a feeling I’m gonna end up dealing with more fans if we stick around here.”

“Agreed. Follow me. I believe His Majesty is still working, but I’m fairly certain he’ll want to meet us once he knows we’ve arrived.”

Ooh, for real? I legitimately thought we were gonna have to wait a while.
Then, as if he’d read my mind, the mayor continued speaking.

“Once he hears that Ser Nell and...well, *you*, are accompanying me, he will prioritize meeting us over his other duties. So come, we must hurry. We cannot keep His Majesty waiting.”

The mayor quickly led us into the castle. A few minutes later, we found ourselves in front of the same room where me and the king had had our little one-on-one conversation. The old man knocked on the door, and upon hearing a voice from within granting permission to enter, he opened it. When we stepped inside, I saw the king, as well as his daughter—the princess, Ilyr.

“Lady Nell!”

Ilyr greeted Nell first. Her expression brightened immediately upon seeing her, and she raced over on her tiny legs to give the hero a big hug.

“It’s lovely to see you again after so long, Princess Ilyr. I hope I didn’t worry you too much.”

“You did, so listen up! Never *ever* disappear without saying goodbye again, okay?!”

“Tee hee, my apologies. I’ll try my best. Anyway, look who I’ve brought with me.”

“Huh? Who?”

Grinning, Nell turned around, gesturing to me. The princess fell for it, hook, line and sinker. She peeked behind Nell, and her eyes met mine.

“Sup? Been a while.”

“Eek!”

When the little girl finally noticed my presence, her eyes widened in surprise, and she froze. Then, a few seconds later, she suddenly looked down, making sure she looked presentable or something. After dithering around in a panic for a bit, she finally calmed down and bowed her head energetically at me. *Yup, super easy to figure out what’s going through her head.*

“M-M-Mr. Demon Lord! It has been kite—”

Whoops. She goofed.

“...*quite* a while! I have been waiting ever so long to see you again!”

“Ditto. I’m happy to see you again too, Ilyr.”

She closed her eyes in bliss as I cheerfully rubbed her head. *Adorable, just like*

a puppy. With my hand on her head, I spoke to the man sitting on the sofa situated in the center of the room: the king. He watched us with a smile on his face, charmed by the spectacle.

“Hello, King. Been a while since I saw you too. You look...not great, huh?”

The king looked just as haggard as the mayor. Anyone could tell from a single glance that the guy had a growing mountain of hardships he was dealing with.

“Yes, it has indeed been some time, demon lord. And...the job of a king is not as straightforward as some would believe.”

His strained smile—emphasis on “strained”—made his exhaustion crystal clear. *This king’s too softhearted, huh?* Based on what I’d heard so far, most of the nobles in the human world were malicious assholes. It made me wonder how much more work they were making for him by acting selfishly and not taking him seriously.

While I was busy thinking those sorts of things, next to me, Nell kneeled in deference to the king.

“Your Majesty, I would like to offer my deepest apologies for the trouble I have caused you thus far. I... I heard about the problems that resulted from my absence here. I feel nothing but shame for inconveniencing you so severely because of my selfish behavior.”

“Do not concern yourself with such nonsense. The ones who are currently kicking up a fuss over it all are the same ones who raise a stink over the most trivial matters. If anything, I must apologize to you for being a useless old man unable to stamp out this unnecessary fiasco.”

“N-No, that’s absolutely not true, Your Majesty! I was informed that you have been defending me strenuously throughout this ordeal!”

Nell shook her head vehemently in response, but the king continued speaking self-deprecatingly.

“The fact that my defense of you has not quelled the voices of those who denounce you only means my words lack authority... Forgive me. Let us leave the politics for another time. What matters here is that you have returned safely, and I am so glad for it. Releaux, thank you as well for guiding them.”

“Think nothing of it, sire!”

The old-guy mayor bowed his head respectfully in response to the king’s words. Then, the king turned toward me.

“Now, then. Lord Yuki, what brings you to the capital on this occasion? Not another invasion of the Demonic Forest by fools who don’t know better, I should hope.”

“Oh, uh, no, not that. I’m here now because of Nell.”

“Because of Ser Nell? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Yeah. I’ve decided to marry her, so thanks in advance for your blessing.”

“I... What?”

In response to how super casually I dropped that bomb, the king just stared at me, frozen and open-mouthed. Gave me déjà vu since his reaction matched the mayor’s almost exactly.

“Awww, I’m so envious... Mr. Demon Lord, won’t you make me your bride too?”

“Huh? Um... M-Maybe when you’re older, okay? Like, a lot older.”

“Ah! It’s a promise, Mr. Demon Lord! You’ll marry me when I’m much older!”

“Y-Yeah, promise.”

I pray to all the gods everywhere that she forgets this promise by the time she grows up.

“W-Wait just a moment. You wish— You wish to *marry* her? A demon lord wishes to marry a hero?”

While I patted Ilyr’s head after making my noncommittal promise, I faced the confused king and continued talking.



“Well, it’d take forever if I told you the whole story, so let’s just leave it at ‘a lot happened.’ But I know things will get complicated because Nell’s the humans’ hero, which is why I decided to tag along with her on this trip. Figured it’d be a good chance to talk things out with you.”

The king remained silent for a while, digesting my words. Then, he finally spoke again.

“Ser Nell, does this mean you will forfeit your post as a hero?”

“Nah, she doesn’t plan to. Right, Nell?”

She nodded in response.

“I would like to continue being this country’s hero for as long as you’ll allow me to. But, um...I also decided I would live by his side in tandem.”

“See that, King? A hero who’s crazy in love. You, too, can seduce a hero if you become a demon lord.”

“Idiot.”

Nell dug her elbow into my side, looking a little embarrassed. Ilyr complained in envy when she saw us acting like that.

“Wooow... I wish I could be like you two too. You’re so close.”

“I think you’ll get just that when you grow up, Princess Ilyr. After all, Mr. Yuki *did* promise to marry you once you did, hm?”

“Oh, really? Hmm... Mr. Demon Lord, do you swear to treat me like Lady Nell when we marry?”

“Uhhh, yeah, sure. You can count on me, I guess... Dammit, Nell. Stop egging her on.”

“I’m doing no such thing. *You’re* the one who made the promise in the first place.”

Nell shrugged with a cute smirk. *Gaaah. She’s grown a helluva lot more resilient after being knocked around by my dungeon’s residents.*

“I see... Though I am a bit surprised by all this, if you two are so determined, then allow me to wish you both well. Congratulations, Lord Yuki, Ser Nell. There

will be those intent on interfering with your happiness, but I'm certain you will overcome them easily."

The king congratulated us sincerely.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty!"

"Hell yeah. Sure does make things a whoooole lot easier to have the country's top man on our side. That said, there's something I wanna talk to you about."

So saying, I glanced pointedly at Ilyr without making it obvious to her. The king's slight nod told me he understood what I meant. He turned his face toward his daughter.

"Ilyr. I believe your study hour should be starting soon."

"B-B-But! Lady Nell and Mr. Demon Lord are finally here after so long! I want to talk with them some more..."

"They have only just arrived in the capital. I very much doubt they'll be departing right away. Would I be correct?"

"Yeah, we'll be here for a while."

"See? Lord Yuki said so himself. You may play with them another time."

Ilyr hesitated for a bit after hearing the king's response. When she finally looked up at me, she had a worried expression on her face.

"Swear it. Swear you won't leave in secret without telling me, Lady Nell, Mr. Demon Lord."

"I swear. We can't stay here forever, of course, but we'll be sure to say goodbye before we go."

"I swear too, Princess Ilyr. Why don't we talk lots and lots tomorrow, hm?"

"Yes! That sounds great, Lady Nell! Will you tell me how your romance with Mr. Demon Lord started when we do?!"

"Huh?! Oh, um, yes, understood. I don't think it's all that interesting, though."

"Tee hee hee! I can't wait!"

Beaming like the sun, the little girl bowed to us and left the room. The second

she was gone, the king's expression changed from a doting father's to one befitting a country's leader.

"Now. Tell me what it is you wish to discuss."



"Fascinating. I had received a report regarding the monster attack on Senguria and the hero successfully driving them back, but I had no idea what lurked in the shadows of it all."

"You got a clue about whoever's backing this noble named Argos?"

The king hummed in thought at my question.

"My apologies, but I cannot think of anyone in particular. That man is well-known for switching factions the moment he realizes he's on the losing side, so until now, he has never worked under a specific individual for long. Hmm... Releaux, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

"Unfortunately, I happen to agree with you, Your Majesty. No suspect comes to mind."

The mayor shook his head apologetically.

"All right, then who's he working for now?"

"Several factions at present, but the primary one is led by a noble named Emelda Flowright, who is technically of royal blood. The relationship is quite distant, however."

"So, what, does that disqualify him from being the possible brains of the operation?"

"Well, Emelda is a woman."

Ahhh, gotcha. Despite the existence of exceptionally strong women like Nell and her boss, Carlotta the lady knight, this country was a male-dominated one where only men had the right to vote. That inevitably put women out of the running for leader of the current political strife. From next to me, the mayor addressed the king once he saw that I understood the implication of this info.

"Your Majesty, I intend to conduct an investigation into the mastermind. The

fact that they have gone to such lengths to scheme against Ser Nell means they bear a grudge against this country itself. I wish to help these two in any way I can.”

“Thank you so much, Lord Releaux. From the bottom of my heart. You always, *always* come to my defense, and I...”

“Nonsense. You’re fighting for the sake of our nation. It is only natural that we would lend you our aid since you are doing your part to protect us.”

The old man chuckled heartily. *He really is a man’s man.*

“That is my sentiment as well. It is but a matter of course that we assist you as you continue to endanger your life on the front lines for us. I, too, shall put my mind to the task. For now, though, I leave the investigation in your hands, Releaux.”

“As you wish, sire.”

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver. Oh, yeah, King. Just to be clear, I’m gonna do what I need to do. I won’t mess with anyone who isn’t involved, but sorry in advance for any trouble I cause.”

“Hmm... In short, I should extend my condolences to anyone foolish enough to anger you, eh? Do as you will, then. Show them a world of pain on my behalf as well.”

A cheerful grin accompanied the king’s words.

“Whoa. You’re not gonna stop me?”

“There would be no point in even trying. Besides, I don’t think anyone in this country *can* stop you. Perhaps only the hero is capable of such a feat.”

Excellent. Glad we understand each other.

“I certainly am, Your Majesty! Never fear. Should Mr. Yuki be on the verge of running amok, I will most definitely tighten the reins!”

“Ha ha! How very reassuring. You’re responsible for leading him, then, Lady Hero.”

“What am I, a horse?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, an apt metaphor. A runaway horse, to be exact. One who listens to women, and especially little girls.”

“...”

Nell giggled because I couldn't think of a good clapback.

After that, they told us a few more details about this country, and then Nell and I left the room. The old mayor stayed behind since he still apparently had business with the king.

“Whaddya wanna do now, Nell? The king said he'd arrange a guest room for us in the castle during our stay, so you still wanna visit the Church today?”

“Yes. I realize it's gotten somewhat late in the day, but I think it would be best for me to show myself there as soon as possible, especially in light of all the trouble I caused everyone. Why don't you go take a rest without me, Mr. Yuki?”

“Dummy. Like I'd let you go off alone.”

“Then, um, thank you, Mr. Yuki.”

Nell smiled faintly at me. Right as we returned to the corridor we'd taken to enter the castle, something happened.

“Oh? Well, well, who do we have here?”

When we turned the corner, we found a pair of folks up ahead of us. One of them was a young man clad in super flashy, gaudy armor. The other was a girl—most definitely the Royal Conjuror who'd been with Nell in the demon world.

“I honestly thought you would be dead by now, so to see you turn up—”

“Nell!!!”

Little Miss Royal Conjuror completely cut off the flashy-armor dude when she saw Nell, running over to her so fast she practically flew.

“Ronia!”

“Your magical energy is flowing normally, and there's no sign of obvious external trauma... Are you hurt anywhere? Suffering from any aftereffects? As I am now, I can heal almost anything. Tell me if something's bothering you.”

“N-No, no, I’m fine. I’m so sorry for worrying you.”

Little Miss Royal Conjuror patted Nell down all over while she chattered on. Despite her confusion, Nell responded to her. The last time I’d met this girl, she’d been taciturn like En, so it was kind of a shock to hear her saying so many words at once.

I guess that’s just proof of how much she worried about Nell. Now I felt kinda bad. I really should’ve brought her to the capital sooner.

“Yes...you do seem all right...”

After doing a thorough visual inspection of Nell from head to toe, her friend finally decided she really was fine and let out a sigh of relief. Then, she turned toward me and carefully lowered her head.

“I heard you saved her. I... I can’t thank you enough for that. She’s my dear friend, so I’m nothing but grateful to you.”

“Ronia...”

Nell looked a little teary-eyed, touched by her friend’s behavior. One side of my mouth curled up in a smile. Shrugging, I replied to Little Miss Royal Conjuror.

“Don’t even worry about it. ‘Cause, y’know...Nell’s important to me too. Anyway, did the rest of you make it out okay afterward? Even with Nell stalling those assholes, it must’ve been really tough to get around with all those injured folks and whatnot.”

I remembered that she and another of Nell’s party members had been looking after a bunch of the winged tribe’s injured. There’d been quite a few of them too. Words wouldn’t be able to express how difficult it had to have been to get to a safe zone while helping those folks along.

“Nothing, absolutely nothing, was as hard as leaving Nell behind. Thanks to her buying us time, we were able to summon you and outrun the enemy.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad my obstinacy paid off, then.”

“Nell, you went beyond obstinate and straight into reckless territory. Which is something considering you’re such a scaredy-cat. I want you to really reflect on your actions.”

“I-I said I was sorry, okay? B-But any way you look at it, *somebody* had to stop the enemy in that situation. I thought I would be the best option.”

“Regardless, you still need to reflect on your actions.”

“O-Okay, I will...”

Nell smiled awkwardly and scratched her cheek. I couldn’t help grinning at the two girls’ exchange since it revealed how close they were. Then, I spoke.

“Ha ha! All right, you two, take it easy. I know you must have a lot of catching up you wanna do, but for now—”

“Don’t ignore me!”

The three of us simultaneously turned in the direction that angry shout came from. There, we found the young man in the flashy armor. His body shook with rage, and the expression on his very red face was tight. I could see veins throbbing in his temples as well. *Oh, yeaah. I completely forgot he was here.*

“Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Dude had some nerve, just showing up outta nowhere for no discernible reason.

“What?! Y-You don’t know who I am?! I might ask you the same thing, you useless country bumpkin! And who would be caught dead in such a suspicious mask?!”

Huh? Ah, right, I still have my mask on.

“Dang, who am I indeed? Gosh, that’s a tough question to answer. Hey, ladies? How do you think I should introduce myself?”

The last time I was in the capital, I’d played the part of Wye, Nell’s mysterious servant. But now, folks here knew my face. I couldn’t just keep using an alias after declaring my intention to marry Nell either. I definitely did not like the idea of marrying her under a false identity.

“Hmm... Well, since you planned on revealing your face anyway, why not just use your real name instead?”

“No, that’s not a good idea. If you’re going to be here for some time, use an

alias.”

“Wait, you really think so, Ronia?”

“Nell, the object of your affection is known by a false name here in the royal capital. Whatever plans you have moving forward, I’d think the last thing he’d want to do is go by his real name. When your opponent doesn’t know the truth about you, that means you have the upper hand. There’s no need to disclose anything on purpose.”

“Th-The object of my affection?! Y-You knew?!”

“You’re easy to read, Nell. And besides, I’m your best friend. All I have to do is look at your face and I can tell basically what you’re thinking.”

“R-Right... Got it. Ronia, you make a very good argument. I’m convinced. From now on, anytime anyone in the capital asks me who I am, I’ll keep using my alias. Hey! Hey, you! You asked me who I am, right? Fine, I’ll tell you. I’m the mysterious masked manservant, Wye!”

“Do you think I’m deaf?! Didn’t you *just* decide to use an alias?!”

The young man in the flashy armor retorted aggressively without missing a single beat. But he wasn’t done yet.

“Ngh... What an absolute farce this lot is! I find it astounding to think that any of you are thought of as heroes!”

Name: Manuel Croza

Race: Human

Class: Intermediate Knight

Level: 25

Mr. Flashy Armor’s stats were generally around 300 to 350, equivalent to three average people’s. And maybe because his class was Intermediate Knight, he had a bunch of knightly abilities like Swordsmanship and Shield Art. *Pretty strong for a human, huh?* He definitely counted as someone to watch out for.

“Hmm... Right, then, Manuel. You got business with us? Make it quick if you do; we have things to do ourselves.”

“So you *do* know my name! I’ve had it up to here with your jokes, you ridiculous man!”

He shouted angrily, his expression outraged. Then, Mr. Flashy Armor cleared his throat like a pompous asshole and put on an expression like he was about to make a fool out of me.

“Hmph. If your servant is of this level, then you must not amount to much yourself, hero! In the first place, it’s absurd for a commoner like you—a commoner *girl*, no less—who reeks of the countryside to even be a hero! Don’t you understand that the whole country is in an uproar because of the likes of you?”

From next to me, Little Miss Royal Conjurer twitched. I saw a vein throbbing in her temple. She was gearing up to step forward and confront Mr. Flashy Armor.

“Your lack of strength is the cause of all this! You’re pathetically weak compared to your predecessor, whose charismatic strength garnered the people’s faith. You’re a girl, so you should act like one. Which means you need to hurry up and stop playing at being a he—”

“Wow. You’ve got some serious balls to diss Nell like that in front of me, dontcha?”

Before she could, though, I grabbed Mr. Flashy Armor’s face tight in one of my hands and lifted him into the air. Obviously, I was holding back, but I *was* using enough force to dig my fingers into his skull.

“Aaaaah?! Y-You have the n-nerve to behave violently w-with me?! Th-Then you must b-be aware of the w-wrath that will befall you now!”

“Nope. Don’t know, don’t care, dipshit.”

“I-I’m the second son of a duke, you know! The minute you laid your hands on an aristocrat, you put your own head on the chopping blo—”

“Like. I. Said. Don’t know. Don’t *care*.”

Then, I very casually flung Mr. Flashy Armor against the wall of the corridor.

“Nghhh!”

He slammed into it before tumbling to the ground. I crouched in front of him and got right up in his face.

“I give *literally* zero fucks about you being some big shot or whatever among the humans. See, my code of conduct is pretty simple: I protect my allies, and I destroy my enemies. So tell me. Seeing as you humiliated my wife, does that mean *you’re* an enemy?”

Mr. Flashy Armor went pale, but then he started yelling.

“Y-You bastard! I won’t forget what you’ve done here! I’ll make you regret treating me like this! I swear it!”

He ran off down the corridor after leaving us with that clichéd parting threat. I stood up and stared in the direction he’d gone.

“Jeez, what even *was* that? He came outta nowhere looking for a fight, and I was all ready to give it to him too.”

“Ah ha ha. I think I feel a bit sorry for him now that he’s experienced your wrath, Mr. Yuki... Honestly, you excel at frightening people. Your methods are very effective indeed.”

“Rude. Don’t talk about me like I’m some lowrent thug. And besides, if all I gotta do to avoid trouble is threaten folks, that’s a small price to pay, dontcha think?”

I had to agree with her, though. I felt like I’d gotten pretty damn good at scaring the bejesus out of others too. But it was only natural. After all, once I became a demon lord, way more opportunities to scare people had started popping up. *But man, what a shitty experience.* Definitely not a skill I would’ve willingly learned.

“Tee hee, you’re right. I’m sorry, so please forgive me. Thank you, Mr. Yuki, for getting angry on my behalf.”

“No biggie.”

“Your...*wife*?”

Little Miss Royal Conjuror was the one who murmured that. She looked confused as she stared at us.

“Oh, um, th-that’s right. Nothing’s official yet, though, which is why Mr. Yuki and I are here. You know, to inform everyone and complete the necessary procedures and whatnot.”

“I see. Then you’re not going to be a hero anymore, huh? I’ll miss you, but the most important thing is that you’re happy.”

“Oh, no, I plan on continuing to work in my role as a hero. It would be beyond irresponsible of me to quit now, so I’ll remain in this country for as long as they’ll have me.”

“Nell, are you serious right now?”

“I-I am...”

At that, Little Miss Royal Conjuror sighed and stared at me sympathetically.

“I feel sorry for you. You should know she gets weirdly stubborn about the most random things even though she’s usually so easygoing. I feel like I should apologize in advance for anything she puts you through.”

“Ah, right. Well, I’ve always known Nell’s a hero and that there’s not much I can do about it. I get it, so don’t worry.”

“O-Ohmigosh, you two! Stop!”

“You know, Nell, I’ve thought as much since forever ago, but you really are an odd one, huh?”

“Isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black, Ronia?!”

I grinned at their little back-and-forth before suddenly thinking of something I wanted to ask Little Miss Royal Conjuror.

“Oh, yeah, Ronia, why were you even with that doofus? He doesn’t seem like the kind of person you’d hang out with.”

She hadn’t been able to do anything about Mr. Flashy Armor on account of me making my move first, but I’d definitely noticed the way she was glaring at him while he insulted Nell. Her eyes had been ridiculously narrow and full of a

desire to kill him. *No way they're friends.*

"It's for work. He's a duke's son, and I'm a Royal Conjuror. I was given orders to instruct him on magic."

"Ahhh. For work, eh?"

"Out of all the Royal Conjurors serving the country, Ronia is one of the most powerful. If you listed them all by rank, you'd get to her faster by counting from the top down. That's how talented she is. Naturally, that means she's in high demand, as many come to her for instruction."

"Dang, sounds like you've got it rough. You get a lot of conceited dickheads like him?"

"Yes. Too many. They make my head ache. I always wonder why I need to waste my time on the likes of them. Although I gave up on having the question answered ages ago."

There wasn't much difference between her expressions since she was so stoic, but it was easy to tell how dejected she was by the whole thing. *They're working her to the bone too, huh?* Must've sucked really hard to put up with all that, especially at such a young age.

Situations like hers made me all the more grateful I'd been reborn as a demon lord. Stuff like social obligations didn't exist for us. In exchange, we were responsible for everything on our own, but we were also free to do whatever we wanted. *Real talk, everyone should just become demon lords.*

"Anyway, didn't you two have to do something? A lot of time's passed, you know."

"Oh, you're right! Ronia, if you're free tomorrow or the day after, let's talk then, okay?! Mr. Yuki and I will be staying in the castle while we're here."

"Ooh, good idea. I wanna hear eeeverything about Nell's past."

"No, you don't, Mr. Yuki. Ronia, you definitely don't have to say anything either."

"Got it. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Ronia?!"

Little Miss Royal Conjuror and the two of us then went our separate ways. I was glad we'd had this chat because now I knew how game she was to go along with my clowning.

Afterward, Nell had led the way through the streets of the royal capital until we'd finally arrived at the Church's headquarters. The sun had already set a while before we'd gotten there. As one would've expected, the building was massive and magnificently constructed. Back on Earth, it definitely would've been registered as a World Heritage Site.

We had really wanted to inform the Church of both the fact that Nell was alive and our impending marriage, but Carlotta, the lady knight who was Nell's boss, had been away on work, so we'd decided to keep quiet about that second thing for the time being. Considering how precarious Nell's position as hero currently was, we'd wanted to discuss the situation with Carlotta before announcing the news.

Owing to all this, then, they hadn't let me go with Nell since I was a complete outsider. They'd put me in a waiting room of sorts, and there I'd been chilling while she'd made her report. She was back with me now, her expression apologetic for having made me wait. Carlotta's superiors had been pretty harsh with their reprimanding, asking her questions like, "What were you doing until now?" and "Why didn't you come sooner to inform us?" In hindsight, if I'd been in there with her, I probably would've blown a gasket, so making me wait out here had actually been the right choice.

By the way, it was probably a little late, but I'd finally learned how marriage worked in this world. It was something the two people in question agreed upon with each other that apparently didn't require any special procedure or anything. I had just assumed the existence of the Church meant that people pledged their vows in front of God like Christians, but as it turned out, only royalty and nobility actually held formal weddings. All commoners did was tell their parents and everyone else they knew about the person they planned to marry.

What that meant was that I was gonna have to meet Nell's parents—well, her mother, since she was the only one who'd raised her—while I was here. But to

be honest, I knew it would be the biggest hurdle for me. I got nervous just thinking about it. *In that case, I'll rehearse what to say to her right up until we actually meet.*



The next morning. Nell opened her eyes, awakened by the sunlight shining through the gap in the curtains. She blinked sleepily a few times, then slowly sat up as she let out a soft yawn. Turning her head, she saw a young man sleeping in the bed next to hers. Under his mop of unusual black hair, his sleeping face looked innocent, just like a little boy's. He didn't exactly have a baby face, but as she stared intently at him, she thought to herself that, surprisingly, he didn't seem all that far apart from her in terms of age. He certainly didn't look like a demon lord so powerful that humans were no match for him, much less demi-humans, therianthropes, and even demonkind as a whole.

Well, for better or for worse, he was a simpleminded, childish person when he was awake. One wouldn't know that he was a demon lord if he didn't tell them. Nell had thought of him as the friendly, older boy next door since she first met him, and that impression hadn't changed in the slightest in all the time she'd known him. If she'd actually had a childhood friend of the opposite sex, she imagined that this was what he would have been like.

I've known him for barely a year, yet his existence looms large within me, growing every day.

"Tee hee..."

She giggled softly before slipping out of her bed and sitting down on his. Then, she ran her fingers through his hair, taking care not to wake him. His hair was disheveled, sticking out all over the place, but it was surprisingly pleasant to her touch and silkier than she'd expected. His warmth seeped through her palm, putting her at ease.

Ba-dump. Deep inside, her heart beat feverishly. Normally, she would never do something like this because it would be too embarrassing, especially with others around. However... *It's fine right now, isn't it?* Heat welled up within her as her chest tightened painfully with emotion. She smiled faintly, continuing to stroke his hair.

“Nh...”

That small, adorable sound rang suddenly in her ears. It didn't come from Yuki but elsewhere. Nell's gaze sought out the owner of the voice, landing upon a little girl sleepily rubbing her eyes as she sat up on the sofa in the room. Her black hair was the same color as Yuki's, and she wore what seemed to be some sort of traditional dress.

“Good morning, En.”

“Nh... Morning.”

The little girl—En—yawned cutely while she continued rubbing her eyes. She was Yuki's primary weapon and valued partner, so naturally, she had accompanied the pair on their visit to the royal capital. En had remained obediently within Yuki's magical storage area for the whole journey. She didn't mind, though, as long as she could always be with her master.

But Yuki hadn't wanted her cooped up in there to sleep, so before bed, he had taken her out of storage and leaned her against the sofa. She had just now woken up and transformed into her human form. Nell knew how gentle and thoughtful the child was.

“Hmm...? What are you doing?”

Head tilted curiously, En questioned Nell, who sat on Yuki's bed.

“Well, I realized that I haven't had many opportunities to see Mr. Yuki's sleeping face, so I thought that this was a good chance to take my time and watch him. Would you like to watch him too, En?”

“Yes...”

The black-haired little girl nodded. She got down from the sofa and tottered over to his bed. Then, doing her best not to wake him, she carefully climbed on next to Nell.

“Master...is sleeping.”

“Yup, he is.”

“Master's...sleeping face. I've never seen it.”

“That makes sense. He *is* an early riser.”

Yuki woke up early every morning without fail. Whenever he was in the dungeon, he evidently didn't require much sleep because of the power the dungeon poured into him. Among the residents of his demon lord castle, the only one who was an earlier riser was Lew.

Since he was often up before everyone else, by the time Nell herself awakened and went to help him, he had already made breakfast for the group. This was the case even on days that followed late nights of playing board games with Lefi, like the one not too long ago.

Conversely, whenever he was outside the dungeon for longer periods of time, he required an immense amount of food and sleep to maintain the tremendous power hidden in his demon lord body. Right now, for example, he was sleeping much more deeply than Nell did. And in truth, she had never thought of him as a great eater until they left the Demonic Forest, after which it had surprised her a bit to see how much food he actually consumed. She found it strange to even think about this, but his meal portions gave her a glimpse into a fragment of a demon lord's power.

“I...think he's cute.”

“I completely understand what you mean.”

Nell giggled softly. There was an enormous gap between Yuki's innocent sleeping face and his normal, boldly chaotic personality. He always claimed that his behavior was nowhere near as bad as Lefi's, but from an outsider's perspective, he was more than outrageous in everything he did. Sometimes, he would say, “Kick logic out and do the impossible!” and though he said it jokingly, it described him perfectly. *Hmm. He really is an odd one.*

“He...looks a little like Rir.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes...he does.”

En nodded emphatically. At that moment, Yuki stirred a bit, possibly because their voices had drifted into his consciousness. He slowly opened his eyes, and after blinking a few times, he sluggishly turned his head to look at the two girls

sitting on his bed.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Yuki. I’m sorry, did we wake you?”

“Master... Good morning.”

“Morning... What are...you two doing?”

“Tee hee. Nothing special.”

Yuki didn’t seem fully awake; his eyes remained half closed. His narrow, slitted gaze certainly reminded Nell of Rir, and the realization made her chuckle inadvertently. Though En remained expressionless, she spoke her next words with pride.

“See...I told you.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re absolutely right.”

Yuki stared at the two of them curiously as they giggled hysterically.



I was currently at the training grounds, one of the facilities set up in the royal castle. The place was built like a circular arena, and I had to wonder if the government actually used it as one, what with the spectator seating built around the ring.

“...”

“Ha ha! What do you think of this?! I reserved it just for you today! Be grateful for my consideration as we face off against each other in combat!”

Standing in front of me with his arms folded arrogantly, Mr. Flashy Armor spat those words.

“Combat?”

“That’s right! And naturally, it will be a clash of swords! We decide here and now which one of us is the superior swordsman!”

“Oh, woow... Sounds interesting. You have fun with that, then.”

“Huh? H-Hey, wait. Why are you leaving?!”

Mr. Flashy Armor tried to get me to stop after I turned on my heel and started

walking away.

“What do you mean, ‘why’? Tell me, what makes you think I have to do anything *you* say?”

Why the hell am I even here? I couldn’t honestly answer that question for myself. After En and Nell’s chatter woke me up this morning, we all ate the breakfast prepared by the castle’s maids. Then, while I was trying to decide what we should do next, a random messenger suddenly arrived with a summons. It wasn’t for Nell, though; it was for me.

I was confused as to why a noble would ask for me, but I didn’t put too much thought into it and just ended up following the messenger. And what awaited me was homeboy here. *This mofo... He really didn’t learn his lesson yesterday, huh?* I hadn’t decided yet if he was daring or just dumb, but based on our interactions so far, I was leaning real hard toward the latter.

“Is that...Lord Mask?”

“What? Oh, I think you’re right. He’s wearing the rumored jester’s mask. I heard gossip claiming that he’s in residence at the castle, and it seems it was actually true. Huh. So that’s Lord Mask...”

“But who’s that next to him? Ah, it’s Lord Manuel.”

“What? Why is Lord Mask with Lord Manuel? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, you know what he’s like...”

“Mm, yeah. So, he picked a quarrel with Lord Mask, did he?”

Soldiers were in the vicinity conducting training drills. They kept glancing over at us, trying to figure out what was going on. My superenhanced demon lord hearing picked up one of their conversations. Turned out that they didn’t think all that highly of this dude either. *I mean, given his personality, I totally get it.*

Just then, Mr. Flashy Armor replied to me ever so confidently.

“Because you must obey the demands of the one who is both a duke’s second son *and* slated to be the next hero!”

“Wait, what? Who’s the next hero, now?”

“Me! I am! Yesterday, uh... That’s right! I suddenly remembered some business I had to take care of, which is why I had to leave! But I certainly couldn’t let you go on thinking you could make a fool of the next hero, so I’ll show you my true abilities today!”

What in the world? Was this guy really supposed to become the hero after Nell? Even though his stats were so low? Yeah, sure, he was considered strong by human standards, but even using the day she and I had first met as a reference, Nell blew him out of the water.

“Ohhh, I get it now. I bet you’re the only one calling yourself the next hero, aren’t you? Man, talk about amazing. I, for one, am *shocked* to be in the presence of the self-proclaimed next hero. I was just confused about who you really are for a second there. Now that I know, I’m counting on you to protect the country with your true abilities!”

“Y-You discourteous boor! It isn’t as if I ever said I *wanted* to be a hero!”

Mr. Flashy Armor’s indignant reply meant he’d taken the bait.

“Reeeally. Ya don’t say. Does that mean there’re people out there who think you’re cut out to be a hero?”

“That’s right! And if my power can benefit this country, then I willingly choose to step forward and become the next hero!”

Inch. Resting. Looks like Lady Luck is smiling down on me today. There was only one conclusion I could draw from the fact that he had backers trying to get him in as the next hero, and that was that those backers were Nell’s enemies. After all, as the son of a duke who possessed a decent amount of talent, Mr. Flashy Armor was their best choice to pass the hero’s torch on to. Even him being a complete idiot worked to their advantage because he would never be suspicious of their true motives.

Then again, maybe him being so dumb was proof that he *wasn’t* their pawn. Morons like him were quick to give the game away without even realizing they’d done it. Not that it mattered, though. I was just glad to have stumbled across such an excellent source of information.

All that aside, Mr. Fancy Armor was surprisingly ambitious. If he fixed his

arrogant attitude, people probably would've stopped hating him as much as they did. But whether he toned it down or not, too bad for him, he'd never measure up to Nell, the current hero. Didn't matter what he tried. Objectively speaking, it was unreasonable for him to have been made Nell's rival. *Or they might have some reason for using him specifically.*

"Hmm... I changed my mind, Manuel. I'll give you the fight you want. But I have a condition. If I win, will you tell me who said you could be the next hero?"

"Oh? That's all you seek? Then, supposing you happen to possess the strength to beat me, I'll gladly take you on as one of my allies. As a future hero, I'll certainly be in need of them, eh? But I'm strong, so I very much doubt that future will come to pass!"

While talking, Mr. Flashy Armor picked up one of the wooden swords near him and tossed it to me.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm good. I *really* don't wanna be on your side. Anyway, you sure you wanna do this with wooden swords?"

"Of course. This is simply another training regimen. Neither of us should grievously wound the other over such a matter, as I'm sure you understand."

Well, well. Look who's thinking like a responsible adult. I was a little surprised by his earnestness. In the next instant, a cheerful voice came from behind me.

"Miiister Deeemon Looord!"

"'Demon lord'?"

"Oh, um, there's a reason for that. You see, the last time they met, Mr. Yuki and Princess Ilyr played a game of Heroes and Demon Lords. He took on the role of a demon lord, so I imagine that's what she's referring to."

"Right..."

"Huh? But I never played such a fun game with Mr. De—"

"P-Princess Ilyr! Why don't we cheer on Mr. Yuki together?!"

"Ah! You're right! Good luck, Mr. Demon Looord!"

I turned around and saw Nell, Little Miss Royal Conjuror, and the princess in

the stands. The little girl waved her hands energetically at me. I didn't know when the heck they'd gotten here, but I was sure Nell'd invited them. *Thanks for keeping the wool pulled over your friend's eyes too, babe. You're doing a great job.*

And so, our sham—sorry, our *practice match* began. But...

“Hyah! Hngh! Rah!”

Using just the tip of my wooden sword, I deflected all of Mr. Flashy Armor's strikes half-assed. *Hmm. He's weak.*

“Gah! Damn you! Why won't you attack?! Aha! You must be afraid of my skill —”

“Not even close, dumbass.”

“Ow!”

When I parried his slash at my torso, it left him wide open, so I went ahead and thwacked him on the top of his head with my wooden sword.

“Incredible. He's easily sidestepping Lord Manuel's blows.”

“Which is all the more amazing considering Lord Manuel's talent. I've seen his abilities with my own eyes in practice matches. And the fact that Lord Mask is so nonchalant while overwhelming Lord Manuel can only mean that he possesses some unique sword skill of his own. He truly lives up to his title as the champion who was our country's salvation.”

“Squee! Mr. Demon Looord!”

The soldiers in the arena were in full-on spectator mode at this point. I could hear the little princess shrieking for me too. Except all I could think was that the soldiers were way off the mark. This guy sucked; his attacks were crazy slow. His thrusts, parries, and feints were all much more refined than mine, but every move he made was super easy to read, so they weren't hard to dodge.

Basically, instead of talent or whatever, it came down to physical prowess. And the gap between us was huge. *Probably because he's human, and humans are weak.* If I were to actually hit him with all my might, even using this wooden

sword, there was a good chance I'd end up killing him.

"Haah, haah... Ngh!"

Mr. Flashy Armor, on the other hand, continued to go at me with everything he had, which was just tiring him out. His shoulders moved up and down as he panted violently.

"Uh-oh. Better tighten your grip, man."

"Grr...!"

I smacked his forearm, which caused his sword to fall out of his hand.

"All right, I win."

"Argh... I haven't lost yet! As the next hero, losing is not something I know how to do!"

With that, he grabbed his wooden sword again and took up a fighting stance.

"..."

His desperation suddenly made me think that there had to be more to his behavior than just wanting to beat the stuffing out of someone who'd made a fool out of him. So, I lowered my wooden sword and asked him about it.

"Tell me something. Why did you insult Nell like that?"

"Hmph! No particular reason except the truth! A hero is the symbol of this country's power! They must never lose or put themselves in difficult situations! But now, everyone is aware that the current hero couldn't get herself out of a predicament! A defeat is not a defeat if others don't learn of it, but unfortunately for her, the people already know!"

Y'know, I kinda get where he's coming from.

"What's more, the current hero is a woman! There is no reason for a woman to stand on the killing fields! Women should stay at home sewing and whatnot, leading peaceful lives!"

Aaand there it is. Why am I not surprised? This freaking guy... He's just a straight-up shit-talker. Guess I had the wrong idea about him.

All of his bad-mouthing had made me assume he was part of the anti-Nell

faction or whatever here in the royal capital—which he technically was, in his own way. He obviously bought into all that garbage, which was why he could say things he'd said. It was just that I hadn't felt any real malice coming from him like I had from all the other scumbags I'd met so far. Plus, I sometimes got glimpses here and there of him being a decent person waaay deep down, so it only made sense that his very existence confused the crap out of me. *Jeez, what a hard guy to figure out. No wonder there's no demand for male tsunderes.*

"Hmm... Okay, have it your way."

"Come, Mask! We're nowhere near finish—"

In a single step, I closed the distance between us and kicked hard at his wooden sword, breaking it in half. Then, I crouched down and swept his legs out from under him.

"Bwah?!"

Once he was flat on his back on the floor of the training arena, I stabbed my wooden sword into the ground right next to his head.

"Now can we call this my win? This is just a practice match, so you don't gotta worry about anyone giving you shit for losing. Regardless of whatever burden you're being forced to carry."

"Hmph..."

He had no choice but to accept his defeat since, short of killing him, there was no clearer demonstration of the power disparity between us. Mr. Flashy Armor looked frustrated as he stared helplessly up at me. I spoke again.

"Right, time for you to apologize to Nell."

"What?! Wh-Why should I?!"

"It's only natural. The fact that you're weaker than me, the hero's servant, means that you're *definitely* weaker than the hero herself. I couldn't care less if you wanna keep calling yourself the next hero, but you sure as hell don't have the right to insult the current one since you're weaker than her."

While it was true that I was actually stronger than Nell, bringing that up would only make things unnecessarily complicated, so I kept my mouth shut.

“N-Ngh... You’re...not wrong...”

“I’ll call her over, then. I want a *real* apology from you, okay? Yo, Nell!”

She’d been watching us from her seat in the stands. When I called out to her, she pointed at herself and put on a puzzled expression, to which I nodded and waved her over. She told the other two sitting next to her that she’d be right back, then made her way down to the ring and walked toward me.

“What is it, Mr. Yuki?”

“He has something to say to you. Dontcha, Manuel?”

Doing as I prompted him to, Mr. Flashy Armor, who was still lying on the floor, began to mumble something. It almost sounded like the words were being dragged out of him.

“I... I’m sorry, Lady Hero. I spoke impertinently for someone who can’t even beat your servant. P-Please forgive me.”

Nell seemed bewildered by his attitude. But she recovered quickly and smiled ruefully at him before replying.

“Oh... W-Well, I honestly don’t think you ever had a chance of winning against Mr. Yuki. You’re right about my weakness as a hero too. I still have a long way to go, don’t I? So, um, why don’t we work hard together to protect this country?”

Beaming cheerfully, she extended her hand down to Mr. Flashy Armor. He looked absolutely lost, his mouth agape, and just stared at her in silence. After a while, though, he slowly took her hand.

“W-Will you marry m—”

“I’ll kill you, you shit for brains.”

“F-Forget I said anything! A-And I agree! Let’s work together!”

Cold sweat streamed down his panicked, twitchy face. But he took Nell’s hand and stood up.

After that, Manuel told me some *very* interesting things. There were

apparently a few select people who had convinced him that he was destined to be the next hero and were pushing him to want the role. Specifically, they were nobles who held the position of count and some of their hangers-on, who themselves were lesser aristocrats.

Later, I would learn more about these counts from the king himself. According to him, they were often found in the company of that asswipe noble—the one who'd tried to set Nell up in the town we stopped at on our way to the royal capital—at various social events. So, basically, I'd been right about Mr. Flashy Armor's backers and the culprits of the stampede being connected as members of the same faction.

The king would also tell me that he planned to investigate the trio's social network and determine the true mastermind behind the nefarious plot against Nell. I'd privately thought it was kinda cool to suss out the lone villain from a list of candidates like something out of a detective drama, but I was smart and didn't say it out loud since we were having a serious discussion. Then, though, from next to me, Nell went and blurted out, "Mr. Yuki, this sounds like a tale from a storybook. Honestly, I'm a bit thrilled to be a part of it." She stared at me in amazement, and without thinking, I responded to her, "Did you read my mind?!" The king chuckled in rueful amusement at our one-act play.

Out of all the things Mr. Flashy Armor had told us, the most vital tidbit was that a massive party was scheduled to be held here at the royal castle soon. Most of the nobility would be attending, including those evil dickheads, so if shit was gonna go down, it would be then.

I'd actually heard about the party from the king beforehand, though I hadn't known about the guest list until Mr. Flashy Armor'd told me. It had originally been planned to let everyone know that the hero was alive and well, meaning Nell would've been there one way or another. Fortunately for me, the king had been nice enough to make arrangements so I could attend too.

In the meantime, we planned on gathering as much information as we could in order to attack the anti-Nell faction head-on during the party. Anyone who threatened the country was an enemy. Even if our plan to catch them with their pants down at the party didn't go well, at the very least, Nell and I would attract everyone's attention. That'd be another way for me to keep the enemy in check

and prevent them from doing anything unnecessary.

Anyway, we were clearly making progress. All of this also meant that we'd be busy making moves for a while, with the party as our goal line. I wasn't a fan of the roundabout way we were doing this, though. My whole shtick was cackling like the demon lord I am and charging in recklessly while saying stuff like, "You think I give a rat's ass about the human world?" The only reason I'd agreed was because the situation had to do with Nell.

I was still technically passing myself off as Nell's servant, which meant everything I did would reflect on her. If I acted without consideration for humans while I was on their turf, my behavior would only worsen her reputation. For example, that jackwad noble Argos Radlio was almost guaranteed to piss me off even more. It would probably get to the point that I'd seriously consider kidnapping and torturing information out of him before killing him. But the minute people found out about that, they'd go feral and bombard Nell with all kinds of criticisms. Even if they never found his body, the sudden disappearance of a man who was staunchly anti-Nell would be sure to put her right at the top of the suspect list. No matter how it went down, it was easy to predict that Nell would come out the loser, and that was a huge no-no.

I wanted Nell to come live with me in my dungeon, of course, but I wasn't dumb enough to destroy her place here in the human world to achieve that. Instead, my thinking was that I'd do my damndest to handle this situation the human way in order to help her recover her authority as a hero. Once everything had calmed down, *then* I'd murder the crap out of the bastards who thought they could pull a fast one on her. As for the aftermath, I'd ask the king to handle it. I had a good feeling he'd help me out.

Now that I think about it, both the king and the mayor are doing a ton for us. I'll have to think of a way to repay them.

"Okay. I guess that about does it. So, Manuel."

"Wh-What is it?"

Mr. Flashy Armor's attitude had done a one-eighty after the end of our fight. He spoke to me while continuing to sneak glances at Nell. Despite him spouting off nonsense about women not being fit to be heroes, he'd been acting like this

the whole time ever since she'd smiled at him. Her angelic smile had clearly ensnared him. Now I couldn't decide if he was easy to read or just dumb.

"Just so we're clear, you're done being Nell's enemy, right?"

"Huh? Oh, um, y-yes. Yes, that's right. I now understand that being a hero isn't all about might. It is almost as if... Aha! As if it is vital for a hero to be kind and loving, just like the Holy Mother. In short, I was too superficial in my thinking. Ser Nell possesses all the attributes of a hero and then some! Yes, she does indeed, so I shall never again malign her!"

What in the hell is this ding-dong going on about? I scowled at Mr. Flashy Armor because he was clearly getting too big for his britches just from Nell being nice to him. But I sighed in exasperation when I saw that my glare had zero effect on him. Then, I spoke.

"Okay. Heard, I guess. Anyway, you still got your eye on being the next hero?"

"Of course! Especially because I just now swore an oath to protect this country alongside Ser Nell!"

"Oh, w-well... Mm, that *is* true. Right, then let's do our best."

Nell accompanied her reply with an awkward smile. *Simmer down, bitch boy. Don't make things awkward for my wife. I'll launch your sorry ass right into outer space.*

"Fine, whatever... Here, I'll give this to you."

I pulled something out of Inventory and tossed it to Manuel.

"Wow, it's so heavy! What is this? A wooden sword to train with?"

In his hands, he held a bokuto—a wooden katana.

"It looks like a wooden kata—a wooden sword, but conceptually, it's designed to work as a staff for melee combat. It's harder and more durable than iron, plus it contains magic that its user can activate, making it an all-around versatile weapon. At the very least, it's much higher quality than those wooden swords."

The Demon Lord's Bokuto Staff: A staff styled after a wooden katana created by Demon Lord Yuki. Constructed of

magical hardwood and infused with a copious amount of Demon Lord Yuki's magic, this weapon boasts strength beyond that of steel. Highly efficient at magical conduction. Quality: B+.

This bokuto-style staff was made from magical hardwood trees that grew in the Demonic Forest. Despite being made of wood and falling into the staff category, it was stronger than an iron sword. Strong enough to *break* any iron swords it clashed against.

By the way, I didn't use staffs at all, but they supposedly made it easier to activate magic. "Supposedly" was the operative word here, because I'd actually tried to use it one time but had no idea what I was doing, so I hadn't really been able to tell if it was easier to activate magic or not.

It was whatever, though. I found it loads easier to pump magic into En. She made activating it a breeze too. Not to mention that she could unleash magic at her own discretion. *I barely have to do anything 'cause of her.* But that was no surprise considering that she was the crown jewel of my arsenal. And while this staff was also of my design, there was no way in hell it could defeat my little sword girl!

"Wow... I can most certainly feel...power emanating from this wooden sword! But are you sure you wish to gift this to me? It must be extremely valuable, no?"

"You gave me the info I wanted, so consider it my way of saying thanks. Besides, you're gonna be the next hero, aren't you? Means you're gonna have to work just a little bit harder, yeah?"

What I didn't tell him was that I'd made the thing half as a joke. Except it'd turned out to be a lot higher quality than I'd anticipated, so it would've been a waste to just let it sit unused in Inventory. *I expect to see some serious improvement with the help of this weapon, Mr. Flashy Armor.* The stronger he got, the better Nell's chances of living with me in the dungeon permanently.

"Mask... You really *do* want to become my ally, the—"

"I said fat chance!"

“Haah, glad that’s over... Dealing with idiots is freakin’ exhausting. Why the heck did I even agree to take him on first thing in the morning? I gotta stop being such a good guy.”

I gave a big stretch after we’d said goodbye to Manuel and walked out of the training grounds.

“Tee hee. But, Mr. Yuki, you gave him something you made, which means you’ve taken a liking to him, doesn’t it? He wasn’t such a bad person in the end, hm?”

“Well, he definitely didn’t turn out to be a scumbag like I first thought. If he’s not my enemy, then I need him to work his ass off for the sake of the country. The safer it becomes, the faster you can move in with me and everyone else in the dungeon.”

“Oh, um, y-you were already thinking that far ahead?”

“All I think about lately is you. I get why you wanna keep being a hero here, but it doesn’t change the fact that I want you to come live with me ASAP. Gotta do whatever I can to make that happen.”

Grinning, I shrugged at her. Nell looked kinda happy to hear what I’d said.

“Ronia, Ilyr, I get why Nell showed up, but why did you two? Did she invite you both?”

“When I went to play with Lady Nell, she told me you were at the training grounds, Mr. Demon Lord. So I asked her to bring me with her! We met Lady Ronia on the way here.”

“It’s as she says. Ronia was on her way to see me as well because she had some time, and that’s how the three of us ended up together.”

Ahhh, okay. Makes sense.

Ronia, who was walking next to Nell, suddenly turned toward me and spoke.

“I remember that you weren’t wearing any armor when we were in the demon world, and I see you didn’t put any on this time either. Do you not use it?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I don’t. I have a bunch of reasons, but long story short, no armor for me.”

“Huh. She’s right. I’ve never seen you wear any, Mr. Yuki.”

I don’t use defensive items. Just my usual clothes for me, thanks. It’d become a habit for me because there was no advantage whatsoever to using that sort of thing in the Demonic Forest.

First of all, the mid-grade armor from the DP Catalog didn’t do a damn thing against the monsters that lived in the southern region, and those were the weakest you’d find in the place. Then, there was the so-called top-tier, stupidly expensive armor. The strongest monsters, which lived in the western region, destroyed it in one hit. How did I know this? Firsthand experience.

On top of that, anytime I realized I had no shot at winning and ran away with my proverbial tail tucked between my legs, the armor just got in the way because it made it really hard to move around. I sure didn’t need useless junk like that. Above all else, though, this demon lord body of mine was hella tough. It’d withstood attacks from a dragon, and dragons were, y’know, the strongest race in the world.

Even if I was about to be attacked by a monster way, *way* stronger than me, I’d gotten damn good at protecting myself instantly. Especially my torso, since that was where lots of the human body’s vital points were. As long as I could survive a blow, I could use a potion afterward to recover. Rir and my other pets would defend me while I waited for it to do its thing.

Now that I knew what real combat felt like, it made me wonder how soldiers could move, well equipped as they were. They had those helms obscuring their vision *and* the armor they wore, which had to be insanely heavy. And that didn’t even take into account the constant battles between all of the various human and humanoid species. The latter were definitely stronger than humans back on Earth, which called into question whether the humans’ steel armor could even withstand the humanoids’ attacks.

I summarized my reasoning to Nell, who nodded in understanding.

“Wow, so you actually *did* think it through. I just thought of the clothes you wear every day as your work uniform—that you enjoyed doing everything in

them or something.”

“Don’t call my clothes a work uniform, jeez.”

Although I can’t deny that my basic fit is always a T-shirt and jeans. They were easy to wear and move in, dammit. And since I usually just holed up in the dungeon, it wasn’t like I had a reason to care about fashion.

“Hmm. Interesting. By the way, are you a demon lord?”

“Yup—no! No, I’m not! Uhhh, y-you see...ummm... Dang, I guess you weren’t fooled, huh?”

I’d automatically said yes because of how casually Ronia had slipped it into the conversation. *Damn. It’d be impossible to try to talk my way out of it now.* She had to have figured it out from the way the little princess addressed me.

“Nell can’t lie. I know right away when she tries. Then you must be the demon lord living in the Demonic Forest, yes? The same one she’d been sent to eliminate. And that is how you met.”

Holy shit, this girl knows everything. Well played... It made sense when I considered her class, though. After all, she had to be super smart to be a Royal Conjurer in the first place.

Meanwhile, Nell was in a state of panic next to me as she tried to explain things to Little Miss Royal Conjurer.

“Um, R-Ronia? I-I have a very good reason for not tell—”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Nell. Regardless of who or what he is, he saved you, and that won’t change.”

“Right... Thank you, Ronia.”

“That’s because Mr. Demon Lord is a heroic demon lord, Lady Ronia! Oh, oh! He also has really wonderful wings!”

The little princess spoke with a happy smile.

“Ah, yes, I do remember seeing them once. Very attractive wings. I want to study them.”

“Th-Thanks, I guess?”

That's a compliment, right? She's complimenting me, isn't she?

"Mr. Demon Lord! I want to see your wonderful wings again! And, and I want to see where you live!"

"Uhhh, how 'bout later? Since we're in public right now, and all. Also, my house is a liiittle far from here. The trip there is dangerous too, so you can't come hang out. Sorry, kiddo."

"R-Really...? B-But I heard you live in a biiig, handsome castle, and I wanted to see it... I never get to leave here..."

The little princess sounded so sad mumbling that.

Shit. Shit, balls, hell, and damn.

"Oh, all right. You wanna come with me when I leave? I'll talk to your dad later."

"Ah! Really?!"

"Yeah. But if he says no, it's a no. Got it?"

"Got it! Thank you very much, Mr. Demon Lord!!!"

I patted Ilyr's head now that she was grinning from ear to ear.

"Hmm. He's gentle with children, isn't he? I think he'll make you a good husband."

"I... I think so too."

Nell giggled softly. She sounded both embarrassed and pleased by Ronia's words. I purposely didn't look at her.



"H-Hey, Mr. Yuki? Do you think this looks strange on me...?"

Nell fidgeted restlessly, tugging at her outfit as she surveyed our surroundings. She sounded anxious.

"Nell."

"Wh-What? Why do you look so seri—"

"Let's get married. Right now."

“Huh?! Th-That came out of nowhere...”

Her cheeks flushed from embarrassment, she peeked shyly up at me. As for me, I kept on talking, my serious expression not changing even a little bit.

“You’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen. I just wanna pick you up, take you home, and hang you somewhere as decoration. Seriously, you look amazing. Stay with me forever.”

“Um, I-I’m incredibly happy to hear you say such things, Mr. Yuki, but maybe you can say them when there *aren’t* others around?”

Nell was red all the way to her ears now. She looked over at the person standing next to her, who just so happened to be a shop employee watching warmly over us.

Oops, my bad. I’d lost control of what I was saying because she just looked so dang pretty. I should’ve known better, considering what a shy girl she was.

“Okay, Nell, how about this? Let’s flirt when we get back. It’ll be just the two of us, so wear that for me. We’ll have our very own private show.”

“A private show?! Omigosh, Mr. Yuki, you need to calm down. I’ll do what you want, so please, take a deep breath... Oh, what about *your* formal attire, Mr. Yuki?”

She’d thought of a way to change the topic and rolled with it.

That party taking place soon at the royal castle? Well, it was actually a ball. We’d both be attending, but neither of us had anything we could wear to it. To solve that problem, we’d decided to hit up a tailor in the castle town, and hot diggity damn did Nell look fantastic in her dress. It transformed her from a shy girl next door to a bombshell, exponentially increasing her destructive power. If normal Nell was “Level 1 Cute Nell,” then Nell right now could only be described as “Pierce the heavens! Go beyond your limits! Level 9000 Cute Nell!” Yeah, she had my head so messed up that I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about either.

“Eh, I just bought whatever fit. Doesn’t really matter what I wear anyway since women are the stars in events like this.”

Who even cares about men dressing up?

"I don't think that's true... But darn, I really wanted to see you all fancied up, Mr. Yuki. Are you sure you don't need to try it on again today?"

"Yup. The tailor sized it for me already. Besides, I'm not a fan of clothes like this. Formal wear makes me feel trapped, both physically and emotionally."

"Okay... Once we return to our room, then, you're going to wear your formal attire too, Mr. Yuki. I would *love* to see you dressed up. And I'll wear this dress for you."

"Mm... Yeah, that'll work. Miss, how long will it take to finish our outfits?"

The shop employee, who had continued gazing fondly at us, responded without hesitation.

"About three hours. If you would be so kind as to write down where you're staying, we can have them delivered to you."

"Oh, no, don't worry about it. We'll drop by later to pick 'em up, if that's all right with you. So, what do you wanna do now, Nell? We've got time to kill."

"Hmm... How about we take a stroll around the capital? You said you wanted to go sightseeing here, didn't you?"

"Ooh, great idea. Let's do it."

As soon as we were sure the employee was good to make whatever adjustments our clothes needed, we left the shop. The moment we stepped outside, the hustle and bustle of the city enveloped us. Amid the throngs of people crowding the main boulevard, Nell stood next to me, her head tilted up at me as she spoke.

"Right, then, Mr. Yuki. Is there any place in particular you want to see?"

"Weeell, I don't exactly know what all they have in the capital, so I'm not totally sure how to answer that. You know any shops that sell handicrafts? That would be cool."

"Handicrafts? Do you like that sort of thing?"

"No, not really. It's just that I make a bunch of stuff all the time, so I figured

it'd be nice to see what kinds of designs are out there. You know, increase the number of things I can take inspiration from."

There was one other thing too. I'd already given Lefi a ring, but I'd missed my chance to do the same for Lew and Nell.

That said, Lew and I were still in our one-year trial period, so we wouldn't be official until then. Plus, Nell had initially asked us to treat her as a guest in the dungeon, so we weren't technically official either. When the time came for that to change, I wanted to have rings ready for both of them. I still hadn't decided whether to buy the rings or make them myself, though, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to stock up on ideas in the meantime.

"Ahhh, that's right. You're always making strange objects in your castle."

"Th-They're not strange, dammit! Listen up, Nell. Historic inventions of any era are born from the things others call junk. In other words, even I have the potential to strike gold with my collection of items."

"Heh heh. Okay, okay, I understand. I've never seen anything like your creations before anyway, so I suppose they're amazing in their own ways. You're right, there just might be an invention in there to surprise the world."

"Damn straight."

Nell talked like she was soothing a child throwing a tantrum. I wasn't satisfied with her response because I was pretty sure she was just humoring me, but I couldn't think of anything else to say. Especially not when she smiled so cheerfully.

"Let's be on our way, then, Mr. Yuki. There's a flea market up ahead. You should be able to find plenty of handicrafts."

"Cool, lead on. And, um...h-here."

Though I was kinda embarrassed, I reached my hand out toward her. She understood the meaning right away and timidly slipped her fingers into mine, her cheeks reddening slightly.

Hand in hand, the two of us moved through the crowds in the royal capital. I felt the heat of her body through her palm, and our shoulders occasionally

brushed up against each other while we walked. All we were doing was holding hands, but...it felt like home. Warmth welled up in my chest.

“Tee hee.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

I questioned her when I heard her soft giggle. She replied happily.

“I was just remembering the last time I walked through a town. It was with you and Lefi. The two of you were so intent on doing whatever you wanted that it was all I could do to keep up with you.”

“Oh, yeah, when we were playing tourists in Alfiro. Man, that was fun. Especially watching you run around like a chicken with its head cut off!”

“Was it, now?”

I stared at Nell in surprise.

“Hell yeah it was! Just being with you rouses the sadist in me, so I can’t help teasing you! I never get bored when we’re together. It’s freaking great.”

“Mr. Yuki, hearing that doesn’t actually make me happy, you know.”

She smiled wryly before continuing.

“Honestly, it was the first time since I became a hero that I felt like I’d lost control of a situation. You two went anywhere and everywhere you pleased, racing down whatever path you saw fit without ever considering the consequences. That was your and Lefi’s solution to everything. You can’t imagine how shocked I was.”

I shrugged unrepentantly.

“You say all that, but you know you’re not exactly normal yourself, right?”

“Huh? R-Really? I’ve always considered myself normal...”

“Nope, not even close. I mean, c’mon, you decided to marry a demon lord despite being a hero. Any normal person would think you’re pretty out there too.”

“Tee hee, you do have a point. Maybe I *am* a weirdo.”

Nell nodded, her cheeks pink and her expression pleased.

“Oh, wait, Mr. Yuki. This way.”

“Roger.”

Nell tugged on my hand and we turned at an intersection—before I stopped abruptly.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Mr. Yuki?”

She stared up at me, curious about my sudden halt.

“Nah, it’s nothing. Anyway, a flea market is one of those outdoor markets, right? The ones with tons of stalls?”

“Yup! Lots of people set up little booths or spaces with quilts and sell unique, interesting things. You have the Analysis ability, right, Mr. Yuki? If I remember correctly, it’s quite strong as well. I’m sure you’ll be able to tell the difference between the wheat and the chaff.”

“Oho! You want me to use these all-seeing demon lord eyes to find real treasure for you, do ya? Consider it done. I’ll use my power to find you the best stuff!”

“Thank you.”

Nell nodded with a smile.

She and I moved deeper into the city, with me acting unfazed the whole time as I did my damndest not to look at whoever was surveilling us.

“You there! The young couple! How about some capital-renowned grilled boar?! It’s right tasty!”

“Young couple...”

“Oh, yeah? Then we’ll take two—no, three skewers. Can you wrap one of them up for us?”

“Thanks, lad! And I sure can!”

I shoved the wrapped skewer into Inventory, then held one of the remaining two up near Nell’s mouth. She had a slightly goofy grin on her face.

“Here, Nell.”

“Huh? Oh, right, thanks.”

She chomped down on the piece of meat at the end and took the skewer from me before asking me a question.

“Is the one you put away in your magical storage for En?”

“Yup. I know for sure she’d want to try it because she loves to eat. Got a feeling she’ll sulk if she finds out we ate some good stuff without her.”

En wasn’t in Inventory right now. I’d figured I should keep her out in the real world in the safety of our room, but the little princess had discovered her when she’d stopped by to hang out, and I’d ended up introducing them. They’d hit it off like a house on fire, so the two were currently playing together in the castle.

Upon seeing En for the first time, the little princess had said, “She looks just like a doll!” Which was actually a pretty spot-on description of En’s appearance. Ilyr had been super excited, gushing and squealing like she’d just met a celebrity or something. Based on what I’d heard, she had almost no friends her own age, which probably explained why she’d been so happy to meet En.

En’s reaction, meanwhile, had been the opposite. Usually stoic, she had been clearly bewildered by the princess. I’d thought it was kinda funny.

There was no real need for her to be with me anyway. I didn’t have a reason to swing my sword around in the city. Not yet, at least. Plus, it was a good thing for En to make new friends, so I was happy to see the two of them get along.

“Hmm...you’re right. Her expression doesn’t change much most of the time, but for some reason, I can tell that she’s incredibly overjoyed whenever she’s eating.”

“Yup. Super cute, right?”

“Yes, indeed. Very cute.”

We chatted and walked, but then, Nell suddenly froze. She tried really hard not to look in a particular direction before turning to me like nothing had happened.

“Mr. Yuki...you noticed it too, didn’t you?”

“Damn, Nell, you too?”

Well, considering how much closer they’ve gotten to us, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. In the direction that troubled her was the someone who’d started tailing us not long after we’d left the royal castle. They’d been keeping a pretty consistent distance for the most part, but once we’d stepped into the crowds here, they must’ve decided to get closer so they wouldn’t lose sight of us. That was why Nell had noticed them too just now.

“Darn it, you should have told me once you knew.”

“I didn’t want them to know I was onto them. You’re really careless in some ways, and I felt like you’d stare straight at them once you found out we were being followed.”

Whoever the creep shadowing us was, I figured they were either trying to figure out my real identity or monitor Nell. Whatever the case, I’d come up with a plan the moment I’d realized they were there. I’d leave them alone and act normal with Nell, show them how well the two of us got along, and leave an impression strong enough to make them wonder who the hell this man next to the hero was.

“Wow, that’s awfully mean of you to say. Maybe you’ve forgotten, but I’m a hero. I *do*, in fact, have training on such situations, meaning I would never make such an idiotic blunder. And I certainly don’t appreciate *you* calling *me* careless, Mr. Yuki. Casting stones from glass houses and all.”

“Yeah, you’re right, my bad. That aside, I don’t think their goal is to watch and wait for a chance to attack. They’re probably just investigating us, so how about we keep flirting like we have been? Give ’em a toothache with our sugary-sweet, lovey-dovey relationship.”

“Hmm... Agreed.”

Nell nodded with a bashful smile.

“Daaang. This is incredible.”

My voice was tinged with amazement as I looked around the flea market Nell had led me to. It was a hell of a lot more massive than I’d imagined. Countless

stalls lined the straight road and created a chaotic but lively atmosphere. Just being here made excitement bubble up inside me. According to Nell, this flea market operated all year round, so it was no wonder it was a famous tourist attraction in the royal capital.

“You can sometimes find very valuable items for sale here. If you buy something at one of the stalls and decide to sell it at a normal shop, you might find your pockets quite a bit fuller. Tales like that abound here, apparently. Of course, that means there are also plenty of stories about people unknowingly buying junk, much to their detriment.”

“Woow... Like that vase, for example?”

“What? You mean that one? Well, it looks like a normal vase to me. But I guess you see something else?”

“Yup. It has an effect where its owner will definitely have a nightmare every night. Doesn’t look like an actual curse, though.”

It wasn’t cursed like En’s previous axe form had been. This just seemed like a normal effect of a magical item. *But what kind of demographic is this even supposed to appeal to?*

“Hmm... I know I was the one who said as much, but there really are incredible things here, huh? I mean, you found something like that right from the get-go, Mr. Yuki.”

“What can I say? It just happened to catch my eye. In hindsight, it wouldn’t be all that strange to find weird, quirky stuff everywhere in a flea market this big. Ya know, there might even be ghosts lurking in one of the many things buried here.”

“S-Stop it. You know very well that I hate scary stories.”

“My apologies, madam. In the event you find something ominous, I shall maintain my silence so as not to frighten you with the item’s truth.”

“Mrr... You’re such a cretin.”

Nell scowled at me, her lips pinched together tightly. I smirked and shrugged at her in response. Then, we both burst out laughing. After that, having

completely forgotten about our tail, we wandered around the stalls.

Just like she'd said, there was a lot of junk here. But scattered within the piles of junk was the occasional valuable item, both the good kind and the bad kind. I'd seen one person buy something that fell solidly into the latter category, and only one thought had come to my mind when they had: *My condolences for your loss*. I was pretty sure that, in a few days, he would open up his own stall and sell something just like it.

As for the good pieces, anybody who got lucky and bought one would get some major return on investment by selling it off somewhere else. They didn't matter to me, though. Since I currently lived my life away from society and the economy at large, I had zero need for money and thus basically ignored everything except things I found interesting. And even if I ended up wanting money at some point, I could just sell parts from the monsters I hunted in the Demonic Forest. I was sure I'd make a killing that way too.

I saw a few magical items and pieces of gear that increased the wearer's stats, but I didn't buy any of them because the effects sounded kinda iffy to me. Also, honestly, I didn't really need that sort of thing. Besides the fact that I could just *make* better versions of them if I ever did.

"Ooh, these earrings would look great on you."

"Huh? R-Really?"

I suddenly picked up a handmade earring. A tiny, golden-colored heart dangled off the end. It was a cute design that even an adult could wear.



“Did you make these?”

“Y-Yes, I did! I-I think they’ll look beautiful on your missus! Would you like to buy them?!” the girl who seemed to be the owner of the stall chattered. She was either nervous or just not used to pitching her goods.

“Ha ha! Yes, please. I’ll take ’em.”

“Thank you very much!”

I paid, took the earrings from her, and turned to Nell.

“Nell, turn your head.”

“O-Okay.”

One side at a time, I brushed her hair aside and slipped the earrings onto her ears.

“Done. Yup, they definitely look great on you. Guess I was right, huh?!”

No need for her to know that I picked up the earring because I noticed her peeking at it! At times like these, I was especially grateful for my sharp demon-lord senses. Never mind that I felt like I could be putting them to better use instead.

“Tee hee... Thank you, Mr. Yuki.”

“You’re welcome. I gotta do at least this much for my adorable wife, y’know?”

With a beaming Nell by my side, I waded deeper into the flea market.

Out of nowhere, we heard the sound of shattering glass, followed by an echoing roar. They had come from nearby and caused the folks around us to flinch in shock. As soon as she heard them Nell, who was still next to me, crouched down a bit, ready to unsheathe the holy sword strapped to her waist at a moment’s notice. Her reflexive movement spoke to her training. Miss Nell had been laid-back more often than not lately, so seeing her like this now was a forceful reminder of her role as a hero.

When I looked in the direction of the racket, I found it coming from what seemed to be a restaurant. The angry voices arguing inside reached us all the way out here.

“Looks like something’s happened. Sorry, Mr. Yuki, but I should go and put a stop to the quarrel. As a holy knight, it’s my duty to resolve situations like this should I come across them. Wait here, okay?”

“Wow. You’ve been so relaxed lately that you were letting out the airhead in you nonstop. But looking at you now. You really are a hero, huh? Damn, though, I love that gap! Makes you even cooler!”

“Mr. Yuki, this is a serious situation, so please don’t say things that will make me feel discouraged.”

I’m sorry. Please forgive me.

“I had no idea holy knights did stuff like that too. Must be tough being one, what with how many different types of responsibilities you’ve got.”

“Well, we only perform mediation like that if we happen to be at the scene. The garrison would usually respond to reports of such events, so you could say it’s unusual for us too. I myself have dealt with incidents like that only a few times since becoming a holy knight.”

The roar we’d heard? It’d turned out to be a whole lotta nothing. Just some drunk acting like a drunk and the restaurant owner getting pissed off about it. Nell’d calmed them both down before convincing the drunk to compensate the restaurant for damages. Case closed. Then, we’d gone back to strolling around the flea market.

“Still, you were pretty good at it.”

“Because Carlotta taught me how to handle different situations.”

Ahhh, makes sense. That lady knight would definitely be able to manage that sort of thing.

“More importantly, Mr. Yuki, I was shocked to find out how short-tempered you actually are. They both went white as ghosts when you loosed your anger on them. You complimented my handling of the situation, but I think anybody could have done the same with how docile they became after your tongue-lashing.”

“Ha ha... Yeah, well, you know...”

I laughed awkwardly, trying to gloss over what’d happened as Nell stared intently up at me. “I don’ need no wet-behind-the-ears chit buttin’ in!” the restaurant owner had growled at her when she’d tried to talk to them. What’d really set me off, though, was the drunk, with his, “Heh heh heh. Yer a cute little thing, aintcha, missy? You wanna earn some pocket money?” I sure hadn’t been able to keep my mouth shut when, at the same time, he’d tried to grab her by the hips.

But, like, come on. How else was I supposed to have reacted to having that happen right in front of me? Anybody else would’ve done the same.

“I *am* happy you were angry on my behalf, but frankly speaking, I’m used to being underestimated all the time because of my appearance. So please, try your best not to escalate problems unnecessarily.”

“I’m sorry, okay? Just because you’re used to it, though, doesn’t mean I am. And I don’t plan on *getting* used to it either. So accept the inevitable whenever you’re with me.”

“That’s not fair, Mr. Yuki.”

“I know. I just figured that if I put it like that, you wouldn’t get any madder at me.”

“Darn you...”

Nell sighed in resignation, then smiled ruefully. I grinned back at her and grabbed her hand.

“Now that that’s settled, let’s go. I wanna wander around a bit more.”

“Yeah, yeah. As you wish.”



Darkness fell as evening turned to night.

“All righty, then...”

Time to do what I need to do for my cute wife.

“I’ll be back in just a little bit, Nell.”

“See you soon. Be careful, okay? En, make sure you protect Mr. Yuki.”

“Yes... You can count on me.”

“Pretty sure you meant that the other way around, right, Miss Nell? Right?!”

“Of course not. It’s a given that you’ll protect En, but she’s your weapon on top of being her own person. *You* are the one I worry about, considering your recklessness, and since she’ll be the closest to you, she’s the only one who can do the job of protecting you.”

“Don’t worry... I’ll protect Master.”

“I know you will, En. Thank you.”

Nell smiled and gently rubbed En’s head. I huffed a laugh at their conversation before putting on my mask.

“Sorry about this, En. I know you get sleepy around now, but hang in there for just a bit.”

“Okay...”

Once she’d returned to her sword form, I picked her up with one hand. I glanced at Nell one more time as my way of saying goodbye, then jumped out of the castle window. I slipped past the castle’s night guard and its outer wall to land in a back alley of the capital, where I disappeared into the darkness.

With Stealth active the whole time, no one would notice my presence even if I walked right by them. I could do an amazing, over-the-top comedy routine right in their face and they wouldn’t have a clue. I wasn’t going to, of course, but I could.

The faint twinkle of the night sky and the light spilling from surrounding houses combined to provide just enough illumination in the dark. I walked along the road, talking to En, whom I’d hefted onto my shoulder.

“So, En, tell me about your day with the little princess. Did you have fun?”

“Yes...I had fun. The castle is amazing. Ilyr reminds me a little of Iluna.”

“Hmm, yeah, they’re both super energetic, huh? Definitely might be birds of a feather.”

“Their...names are almost the same too.”

“Whoa. You’re right.”

Both of their names started with the same “l” sound, and they had similar mannerisms in the way they talked too.

“Master...did you have fun with Nell?”

“Oh, yeah, tons of fun. Thanks, En. You deliberately let us have our alone time, didn’t you?”

“l...can always be with you, Master. But Nell can’t.”

“That’s true.”

“So, Master...you should spend lots of time with her, okay?”

“Yup. I’ll do my best.”

I gently stroked the hilt of my sword as she remained sheathed on my shoulder.

En and I were currently stalking the stalker who’d tailed me and Nell today. You could say we were turning the tables on them. A combination of images from the Evil Eye I’d released in the afternoon and the dungeon’s Maps function told me that the shadowy individual had continued to follow us even after we’d returned to the castle. The creep had hung around for a while before deciding that we wouldn’t be doing anything else, and they’d left not too long ago. I was guessing they went to report to their master.

Right now, I had no plans to make any moves on the rat bastards who wanted to get rid of Nell. Why? Because I would take my sweet time murdering the fuck out of them later. But I was definitely interested in finding out the identity of our tail’s boss. I also wanted to know why they’d set the stalker on us in the first place, as well as whether or not these scumbags actually knew who I was beneath my mask. In short, I was gathering intel to prepare for what was to come.

“Gotcha, you little shit. Let’s see what you have to show us.”

I flung the Evil Ear I’d taken out of Inventory at the man who was walking briskly ahead of me. Fully charged, the Evil Ear soundlessly flapped its ear-

shaped wings the moment it left my grip. It began following the man I'd designated as its target, the lowlife stalker, at a reasonable distance. Not too close, but not too far either. Now I could hear what I wanted without trailing him myself.

Okay, so, if I'd released my Evil Ear alongside my Evil Eye this afternoon, I wouldn't've had to be here right now, doing this whole "stalk the stalker" thing. I hadn't even thought about how handy the Evil Ear would've been until waaay later. Whoopsie.

I-I just wanted to see the enemy's lair with my own two eyes. And besides, the Evil Eye was about to run out of juice since it'd been running all day. I needed to stay within range to retrieve it, so ultimately, I would've had to track the stalker myself anyway. *Yeah, let's leave it at that.*

While those thoughts ran through my head, the guy who'd been monitoring us finally arrived at his destination. He went inside a building...

"Hwuh?"

...and I unthinkingly let that confused sound slip.

What the hell? The man had gone into the Church's headquarters in the royal capital, a place Nell and I had just visited a day ago. I had honestly thought the guy would lead me to the estate of that asshole noble Argos or maybe to his underlings, but this? This was *definitely* not what I'd expected.

What reason did the Church have to put us under surveillance? Whatever it was, the idea of an organization quietly monitoring its employees didn't inspire pleasant thoughts by any stretch of the imagination.

Now I was extra glad I'd decided to come out here myself. If I'd stayed at the castle and watched from there, I would've been forced to tell Nell things I *really* didn't want her to hear. Before I'd left, she'd tried to tag along, saying she didn't feel right about leaving the job to me and En, but I'd told her that it wasn't that serious and that it wouldn't take long. In hindsight, leaving her behind had been the right choice.

What's done is done. It was time to find out what exactly the Church was thinking in having us followed.

“So? What of the hero?”

A man wearing a priest’s robe questioned his subordinate.

“She seemed quite happy with the man calling himself her servant. I would describe them as lovers.”

“The servant... He must be that Mask person who appeared when the capital was in danger. What did you learn of his true identity?”

“We still have the results from his use of the evaluation crystal when he visited the Church’s secret safe house. There isn’t much, but I believe only the Church is in possession of this data.”

“Oho! Excellent. *Most* excellent. Now we have an advantageous card in our hand. Tell me who he really is, then.”

“His name is Wye. Race is human, class is Thief. If we follow this information to its source, we should be able to discern his true identity soon.”

“He should be well-known as a powerful individual, but I’ve never heard the name. In any case, continue collecting information by any means necessary. Do you think we can win him over?”

“It will be extremely difficult. Based on Carlotta’s report during their time together, this Mask lives in a location far from normal society. Evidently, he has no interest in political power or money either. Despite allying himself with the Church on the prior occasion, he only did so because of the hero’s affiliation with it. If we fumble our approach, the likelihood that he will turn his fangs on us is high.”

“Well, isn’t *that* aggravating? It seems our only option, then, is to take preventive measures. Fortunately for us, there are others who share our misgivings about the current hero’s abilities.”

“In my personal opinion, she more than exemplifies the measure of a true hero.”

“I won’t deny that she’s talented, but her predecessor was monstrously powerful. After forty years of being a hero, the word ‘defeat’ doesn’t exist in his

vocabulary. His strength sets him apart even in his old age. Ever since he became the basis of what it means to be a hero in our society, an inferior stock like her cannot be allowed to continue as his successor.”

“But...if memory serves, Master Lemiro himself suffered a number of defeats in battle as well.”

“The masses don’t know of his losses, however. In contrast, Nell’s failures are known far and wide, regardless of the fact that they stem from the country’s discord. Therein lies the difference between them. Why are you so insistent on defending her anyway? Are you unsatisfied with our current path?”

The man in the priest’s robe raised an eyebrow inquisitively at his subordinate.

“N-No, nothing of the sort. It’s merely that we all know the current hero—we all know Nell has dedicated an extraordinary amount of effort to her role. Everyone in the holy knight order thinks of her as a younger sister. I just want her to be as happy as possible, so I have reservations about arranging a political marriage for her to His Excellency...”

“You’re too naive. This is for the future of both our country and the Church. With so much at stake, even she would gladly offer herself.”

“...”

“Hmph. I’ve said enough. You are to continue monitoring those two, and you’ll report to me the moment you learn anything important.”

I unconsciously smashed my fist through the brick wall I’d been leaning on.

“Master...calm down.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Sorry. I’m fine.”

Letting out a quiet sigh, I forced myself to cool it. *So that’s what those bastards were thinking.* This “His Excellency” tool had to be my current enemy’s leader. Clearly, the Church had deepened its involvement with those at the heart of the country after the crisis that’d faced the royal capital a while back. Arranging a political marriage for Nell to His Goddamn Excellency meant joining

forces with him, and through him, the Church would increase its authority. Already powerful in its own right, the Church would then gain even *more* power. His Assholency would also be able to strengthen his own position with his new ties to the Church. That was their grand scheme.

I didn't know if everyone within the Church was going along with the plan, but if I considered how precarious Nell's standing currently was, I could easily imagine the situation unfolding exactly how that guy in the priest's robe wanted. In other words, there was a good chance the organization Nell belonged to would end up as my enemy.

I really, *really* wanted to destroy everything in front of me. But this was the place where Nell's comrades, the ones she'd spent her life with, lived, so I restrained myself. I had to believe she still had friends in the Church, which was why I wasn't gonna assign enemy status to everyone just yet.

"I know what you look like now, cocksucker. I won't be forgetting your face anytime soon."

Count your days, because I'll be taking you out myself later. He deserved it for treating Nell as nothing but a tool.

And then there was the subordinate, Mr. Snoop. *I'll leave you alone.* He'd earned it by trying to stand up for Nell despite being in the enemy's service.

"What's...a political marriage?" En asked me curiously. I just remembered that she'd been listening to their conversation too.

"Well... Okay, for example, you know how I decided to marry Lefi, Lew, and Nell because I like them? Well, a political marriage isn't that. You don't have to like the other person in a political marriage. They happen when someone wants to use the other side's influence and form stronger ties through them, 'cause stronger ties means more power."

"They...are trying to force Nell to do that?"

"Yeah."

"Then that man...is a bad man."

I nodded before I replied to her, making sure not to let the anger in me slip

out.

“He’s my enemy, no question about it. Especially for trying to trap Nell in a shitty situation.”

“Yes... Your enemy is my enemy, Master. We get rid of anybody who tries to hurt Nell.”

“Thanks, En. I’m counting on you.”

“When this is all over...I’ll marry you too, Master.”

“Hrk.”

I choked.

“Uh, how ’bout we leave that for when you’re older? Like, a lot older. You’re too little now, okay? I said the same thing to Iluna and the others, right? So let’s table that for another time.”

Considering her nature, though, it was still a mystery whether or not En would actually grow up.

“Okay... Another time.”

I breathed a soft sigh of relief when she obediently agreed. *Jeez... I wonder how much longer I can keep stalling the girls with “when you’re older.”*



“Haah...”

The king, Reyd, rolled his shoulders broadly, loosening the stiff muscles there. He then slumped deep into the chair in his office and lightly massaged his brow. His joints ached from the long hours sitting at his desk.

“I’m showing my age too, eh?”

He was at the age where he should have abdicated the throne already in favor of his heir. He had no heir, however, so the only thing he could do was continue fulfilling his role, no matter how much it pained him. He smiled derisively to himself at his dark thoughts.

Part of the blame for the country’s current troubles could be placed at his feet. First, he hadn’t noticed the changes in his son. No, more accurately,

despite noticing them, Reyd had chosen not to consider the matter too deeply. Instead, he had regarded Lute's abnormal behavior as simply a rebellious phase and left it at that. Because of his oversight, the king had put the country in jeopardy, allowing other nations the opportunity to take advantage of their weakness and inviting internal strife as well.

Following the death of his son, the senate had been relentlessly pestering him to beget a new heir. But that would mean marrying another woman since his wife, the queen, had passed on years prior. Reyd understood very well that one part of his duty as king was to ensure the continuation of his lineage, but the truth was that he had no intention of having more children at his age. He certainly had no desire to so much as entertain the idea on the heels of losing his son.

However, his decision not to further his bloodline had directly led to his ducal relatives aiming for the throne, as they were technically of royal blood as well. There was no denying the intense political strife currently raging around this matter. And despite them having simply gotten caught up in this issue, the two currently residing in the castle were doing their best to resist and fight those who would harm them. So, as someone who could arguably be considered one of the causes of the present situation, he certainly couldn't relax.

"Perhaps it's time I tried one of these."

So saying, the king took the stopper off one of the small bottles he had on hand. That unconventional demon lord had nonchalantly given him the supply after remarking that he seemed tired. The liquid was some sort of nutritional tonic.

My goodness. He's much too softhearted. The young man was infinitely more human than the insufferable blackguards who dominated his country's political sphere. He understood his daughter's fondness for the demon lord as well.

The king huffed out a laugh, then swallowed the small bottle's contents in a single gulp.

"What the devil...?!"

Instantly, a powerfully rejuvenating sensation rushed through his whole body, like his very flesh and blood were being remade. Energy surged up from deep

inside him as the dull pain in his bones receded. In a matter of seconds, so much vitality was flowing through him that he was reminded of his body in its prime. His exhaustion had vanished completely, as if it had never even existed.

“...”

The king sat in his chair, absolutely flabbergasted by the tonic’s fearsome efficacy. Then, a knock sounded on the door to his office.

“Your Majesty, you have a visitor.”

“R-Right. Let them in.”

The door opened immediately at his bidding, and a man appeared on the threshold.

“Sup, King?”

“It’s you, eh?”

It was Demon Lord Yuki. At present, his true face was on display since he wasn’t wearing his usual mask. Not too long ago, the young man had revealed it to him with a very casual, “Oh, yeah, this is what I look like. Nice to officially meet you.” Nevertheless, the king had found himself surprised by the reveal. He had known from the demon lord’s voice that he would be young, but he hadn’t anticipated *how* young until he saw his true face.

“Yuki, what exactly *is* this unbelievably effective nutritional tonic of yours?”

“Hmm? Oh, that. Super Potion. Good shit, right?”

The demon lord answered him nonchalantly.

“Wha— An elixir, you say?! H-Have you no comprehension of how valuable this is?!”

It wasn’t a simple nutritional tonic, but an item on the level of a national treasure. Reyd was aware that the young man had used some sort of medicine to heal his daughter’s wounds when he’d saved her, but now that he knew precisely what that medicine was, he was appalled at how easily Yuki had given him the vials. If a small country acquired even a single bottle, it would very soon find its coffers overflowing.

“Valuable according to *your* standards. Personally, I couldn’t care less. I made the decision a long time ago not to be concerned about stuff like that.”

“B-But...it must have cost an exorbitant sum just to produce one bottle, no? Are you certain I can have this many?”

“It definitely wasn’t cheap, but I have like a hundred on me, so don’t even worry about it, my guy. I mass-produced a shit ton a while back.”

“Whew.”

The king inadvertently sucked in a breath at the demon lord’s words.

“Look, I’m the sort of gamer who gets twitchy if I have anything less than a hundred vital recovery items. Oh, if you’re thinking of just holding on to those, I don’t recommend it. They won’t go bad in Inventory, my magical storage, but they definitely will in the outside world.”

Reyd couldn’t make heads or tails of the first part of Yuki’s statement, but he certainly understood that a demon lord’s sensibilities were a bit different from normal people’s.

“Well, if you say it’s fine, I’ll take you at your word... Right, then. Thank you. I’ll use them properly. Now, tell me what brings you here.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry for dropping in when you’re busy, but I’ve got a new development on my end. King, do you know anyone who’s referred to as ‘His Excellency’?”

“Hmm... ‘His Excellency,’ you say? For the most part, those addressed by that title are government ministers. Don’t tell me one of them is the mastermind.”

“Damn, you’re quick on the uptake, huh? The truth is, when Nell and I went out today, we had a tail monitoring us. We let him follow us around all day while pretending we didn’t know, but when he left us alone not too long ago, I decided to follow him. Imagine my surprise to see him wind up at the Church.”

“What? The Church?”

The Church was currently deeply entrenched in national politics. Privately, the king felt a sense of impending danger about this, but he couldn’t turn a blind eye to the aid they’d provided during the crisis in the capital, which left him

unable to take a strong stance against their political involvement. He'd been apprehensive that the Church would eventually make its move as it sought greater influence. It seemed his misgivings hadn't been unfounded after all.

"Yeah. Some big shot or whatever wants to force Nell into a political marriage with this 'His Excellency' character. They're apparently scheming to strengthen their connections. Makes me think that the Church's partner in all this must be powerful in their own right to be able to manipulate the hero, who's the Church's biggest trump card. Hence, I was wondering if you might know who His Excellency is."

"I see... Hmm, I believe I may indeed have an idea. In my own investigation into the matter, there is one individual I found to be particularly suspicious. You are well aware I have no heir, yes?"

"Yeah, I am."

For just a moment, Demon Lord Yuki looked sympathetic, but his expression quickly reverted to a calm one. *This man... His humanity truly knows no bounds.*

"Ha ha..."

"Huh? You wanna let me in on the joke?"

"Forgive me. It's nothing of importance. Right, so, without an heir, I have only two choices: either find myself a new wife and produce another son or adopt a boy from one of the families with royal blood. As I have no intention of having more children at this age, I must inevitably choose the latter."

"Got it. Then, if you adopt a son from one of those families, it means the real power to run the country switches from you to them, huh? Behind the scenes, the adopted son's birth father would have all the authority."

"Precisely. I can avoid that possibility by affiancing one of the sons to Ilyr instead, but I have absolutely no intention of involving her in the messy world of politics. So you may take her with my blessing."

The king grinned, and the demon lord panicked in response.

"Uh, wh-why don't you let me think about it once she's an adult? Anyway, I understand what you're getting at. His Excellency is from one of the families

aiming to become the next king and take power. The timing is too perfect for this to be a coincidence too. Whoever he is, he's trying to gain the upper hand over the other upstarts by strengthening his ties to the Church."

"Indeed. And there are currently three men offering up their sons for adoption. The minister of finance, the president of the senate, and the minister of military affairs. All of them would be addressed as 'His Excellency.' The one I have my eye on, however, is the minister of military affairs—a man named Jayma Ledrios."

"Yeah? What's he like?"

"Highly patriotic, to the point that his patriotism distorts his worldview. He abhors the current state of our country. For a long time now, he has been insistent that we strengthen the country in order to avoid interference by our neighbors. He would place the country under military leadership if he had his way."

"Mm, gotcha. A stereotypical war hawk, eh? Those clowns are always going on about 'for the sake of the country,' but then they'll turn around and do the most heinous shit. You gotta watch out for 'em."

"Oho, I see you're familiar with the type. In point of fact, he has a tendency to aggressively push his agendas forward, so I'm very much of the opinion that he shouldn't be in power. Unfortunately, however, he is quite an outstanding, capable individual. Many adore him, and among the three I mentioned, he is the most talented and has the most recorded accomplishments."

"So, basically, the probability is high that he's the 'His Excellency' behind all this?"

"I believe so, based on the three's recent movements. After hearing what you had to say, my suspicions about him are even stronger. He stands at the top of the military. If he and the Church, which continues to deepen its involvement in our domestic affairs, join forces, it wouldn't be overly difficult for them to take control of the nation. Their interests are aligned."

"Huh. Fascinating. By the way, just out of curiosity, who do *you* want to lead the country?"

“Mm, a good question... I’m still debating, but personally, I think the president of the senate would make a fine head of state. He’s incredibly trustworthy, and I can’t find any faults in his abilities. But the senate lacks substantial authority, so it’s a difficult situation.”

“Wait, what about you just staying the king from here on out? Is that not an option?”

“I am beyond fed up with this aggravating job. I keenly felt my shortcomings as a leader in the last tumult, which is why I would dearly love to just forfeit my post as king and leave the country in someone else’s capable hands. But I can’t destroy my country over my selfish whims, so I’ll persist until the next king has been chosen.”

“Wanna come hang out with me once you’re done, then? You can rest and relax for however long you want.”

“Heh. That sounds wonderful. Yes, please allow me and Ilyr to impose on your hospitality when the time comes.”

The king replied with a smile to the demon lord’s suggestion.



I wasn’t totally sure because I hadn’t really listened to it much even in my old life on Earth, but what sounded like classical music was playing in the ballroom, piping out of a magical item that looked like a gramophone. It wasn’t a *real* ballroom, though; that was just the best way I could describe the space Nell and I were currently in, with the wall bordering the castle’s courtyard having been removed. She was acting as my dance partner-slash-teacher as we practiced how to dance.

“Mr. Yuki, stop rushing. Take it slow.”

She giggled while instructing me.

“Gah! D-Dammit!”

“No, no. You’re stiffening up again.”

Nell was grinning like an idiot, clearly enjoying herself as she pulled me by the hand and spun us around leisurely. I tried my best to follow her lead and match

her movements, but it was very possible that I lacked a talent for dancing. For one thing, I definitely wasn't used to it. For another, ever since we'd started, I'd somehow kept stepping on my own feet. There'd even been a few times where I'd damn near tripped over myself and fallen. Despite the slow dance movements, I was having an unexpectedly hard time syncing my body to the rhythm of the music.

"Another thing to note, Mr. Yuki. We generally only dance during banquets and celebrations. Naturally, the upcoming event falls under this category. So your expression mustn't be so strained. Smile, please. Smile!"

"Nh..."

She's expecting way too much of me. This is nuts. I didn't say that out loud, of course. Instead, I forced my facial muscles to do as she said and fashion a smile. An ever so cool, cover-of-GQ-handsome, refreshing demon lord smile. I was sure it would win the hearts of women and children everywhere. *Heh. Sorry, folks. My heart already belongs to several women, so I can't accept your love.*

"On second thought, maybe it would be best if you *didn't* smile. I feel like someone walked over my grave."

"Cripes, you're not even gonna pull your punches?!"

My shock was completely genuine, and I retorted without even thinking. Nell cackled in response.

"Forgive me. But it's important to act natural instead of being self-conscious and creating a facade. I realize this is your first time at such a social event, though, so I understand. Just try your best to stay relaxed. Keep your expression calm. That should be enough to smooth your way through any interactions."

"O-Okay, got it. I'll try."

Nell was unexpectedly knowledgeable about etiquette and stuff, most likely on account of her role as a hero keeping her in constant contact with the royal family. So I meekly obeyed, deferring to her expertise in this area.

It was probably easy to guess why I was even bothering to practice dancing—something that was very much uncharacteristic of me. Just like the formal attire I'd bought in town, the dance lessons were in preparation for the upcoming

ball. For as much as I obviously didn't give a damn about what this country's aristocracy thought of me, the fact remained that, in human society, a servant's behavior reflected directly on their master.

What I knew about royal society came solely from my imagination, but that didn't mean I was totally ignorant about how things worked. Me attending this ball was to stop those pinky-up jerks from talking shit about Nell because of her "crude, mannerless servant." I didn't want her reputation to be ruined because of me. Since our enemies would be at the function too, I sure wasn't planning on giving them any excuse, no matter how small, to further their campaign against her.

That was the reason behind my current attempts to learn basic etiquette and dance. But I should've known it wouldn't be that easy. Etiquette wasn't the problem so much as dance. I'd never danced before or had any sort of experience with it, making it my Achilles' heel.

To really drive home just how garbage I was at it, there was something that En had said. She was watching us from nearby and had mumbled something to herself. "Is this...a ritual?" was how she'd put it, and yeah, that described it perfectly.

Her words had hit me pretty hard, so here I was, desperate to get better at dancing. I couldn't deny that I was a complete freaking noob at it, but I at least wanted to be able to dance well enough so that I wouldn't embarrass myself, especially when my audience was someone like En, who said whatever came to mind.

"All right, Mr. Yuki, let's do what we did just now again and again until you've mastered it. Repetition matters most in activities like this, after all."

"Oookaaaay. Now, watch closely, Nell. I think I'm starting to get the hang of it."
Yeah. Maybe. Not totally sure.

"Really? Then let's give it another go while the feeling is still fresh in your mind!"

Nell strode over to the magical gramophone, rewound the music track back to its beginning, and moved back in front of me. I wrapped one arm around her

waist and used my free hand to take one of hers. Thinking about everything I'd learned so far, I spun her around the room once more.

Speaking of this ballroom, the king had let us borrow it without question when we'd asked him if there was a place in the castle where we could get in some dance practice. Ilyr and En were playing in the attached courtyard while Nell and I went through the steps. Sometimes, the two little girls would prance over to watch us, with the little princess cracking up at my clumsy dancing. At the moment, En's expression was her usual blank, spaced-out one, but I had a feeling she was wondering what we'd be eating for lunch.

"Mm, I see. You're... Hmm. Well, you're not much better than before, but... Hmmm... I don't know how to describe it. 'Something is different' is all I can say."

"Miss Nell, you're literally not saying anything I can make heads or tails of."

Come on, woman. Am I getting better or not? Just tell me already, jeez. And what the heck did she mean by "something is different"? What was different? Details! I need details, dammit!

"You're right, sorry. I'm not especially well-versed in dance myself, actually. I was only taught the most common types, which is why I can't concretely tell you what feels different."

"Grr..."

My plan had been to become just proficient enough that I didn't stumble my way through a song, but we were running out of time. I had no choice except to use my last resort.

"All right. Nell, hang tight for a sec."

"Huh? Sure, but...why that, Mr. Yuki?"

"Cause necessity drove me to it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Nell's puzzled stare as I pulled up my interface and started flicking through it. Everyone in my family could see it whenever I browsed it now, Nell included. But Lefi and Leila, after she'd hounded me relentlessly like the nosy intellectual she was, were the only two

who even knew what it was, with Lefi still being the only one who had the authority to operate it.

Though Leila had eventually figured out how it worked, Lefi and the others only thought of the display as “a transparent board floating in the air unique to a demon lord’s powers.” That was because even when they peeked at whatever was on the screen, they couldn’t read it since it was all in Japanese. Of course, it used this world’s language for Lefi when she used it, but the menu also simplified itself whenever she used it, so she still didn’t know all the fine details and intricacies of it.

“Okey dokey. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be, Nell. One more time!”

“R-Right.”

Once again, Nell and I danced, spinning around the room to the rhythm of the music. But I was no longer the same man I was before. Now, I followed Nell’s lead with graceful, flowing steps. All the awkwardness in my movements had effectively vanished. Even I felt how polished my dancing had become.

“A-Amazing, Mr. Yuki! You’re leagues better than you were! What in the world did you do?!”

“Heh heh heh. This is what happens when I put in just a little bit of effort.”

I responded smugly to Nell, who looked stunned. I secretly felt the same way as her, but no way was I gonna let her know that. My dramatic transformation was all thanks to an Ability Scroll I’d bought using DP. After pouring my magic into it, I’d acquired a brand-new ability: Dance.

As the ability’s name suggested, any dancing-related movements I made were greatly refined. I’d even gone so far as to immediately bump its level up to 3 instead of keeping it at 1. If I’d done that, I would’ve risked it doing me as much good as Swordsmanship—none whatsoever—and that wouldn’t’ve made much sense.

I suspected that Nell didn’t have any abilities relevant to dancing, which meant Instructor Nell’s skills were so average that they didn’t even count as legit abilities. Not that I was in any position to talk considering that I clearly possessed zero aptitude for the art of dance. I’d needed a way to boost it fast

since I didn't have the time to train myself the proper way, so it'd totally been a necessary expense. I definitely hadn't just blown Ability Points for nothing. No sirree. *I sure am glad I saved them up for a moment like this.*

Until recently, whenever I was outside the dungeon's territory, its power didn't extend to me, meaning functions like DP-related controls had been limited. But that, if the "had been" didn't make it clear, was a thing of the past now. *I think it changed right around the time Lew's family went back home?* Sometime around then, I'd become able to use DP-related functions even away from the dungeon. That included acquiring abilities while outside its domain like I'd just done.

My theory was that it had something to do with me finally being the same level as the dungeon. I was its equal, so to speak. The more I grew as a demon lord, the more access I had to the powers the dungeon had originally come equipped with. Those powers felt more familiar to me than ever, like the dungeon was truly harmonizing with my existence.

Mwa ha ha ha. A demon lord continues to evolve day after day. Something's missing? Just make it unmissing. If I couldn't dance, all I had to do was acquire an ability that would let me dance. Viva la France!

While I chanted out that victory cry in my mind over and over again, Nell beamed up at me and spoke.

"This is wonderful. Now we can move on to the next step."

"Whaaat? You tellin' me we're not done yet?"

"Of course not. We've only just begun. I must admit, I was a tiny bit worried about teaching you everything, but now, I think you'll be ready by the day of the ball."

"Just out of curiosity, how much more do I need to learn?"

"Hmm, I'd say around twenty more styles? So let's do our best, Mr. Yuki! I'll be right here with you until you've learned them all."

"Right..."

Nell excitedly squeezed her hands into fists. A distant part of me found it cute.

But only a distant part, because her answer left me in such a daze that all I could do was agree in shocked resignation.



Somewhere stood two men. One was clad in a soldier's gear, the other in clothes befitting a noble.

"Are you sure about this?"

The soldier's expression was strained as he asked that question. In response, the nobleman inclined his head.

"Yes, of course I am. Why have we been preparing for so long if not to make our move?"

"But... Even if we're treated coldly now, we're still soldiers who have sworn oaths to protect this country. To do something that threatens it would be beyond the pale..."

"If we don't act, nothing will change. Moreover, someone *must* do this. By rights, the Church should be separated from matters of state, but it has entrenched itself deeply into politics—a circumstance His Majesty allows. Someone has to open this country's eyes."

"I suppose so..."

"Please don't worry. Several distinguished individuals have endorsed our plan. Whatever the result, the situation is bound to turn in our favor. For you see, as things stand, only you can avenge yourselves."

"Yes... Yes, you're right. I'm sorry, I found myself wavering for a moment there. Thank you for your hard work, Lord Argos. You can leave the rest to us."

"Of course, of course. May the fortunes of war favor you."

With a determined look, the soldier headed to the hideout concealing his like-minded comrades. He never once noticed the brutal smile on the face of the nobleman behind him.

"Magnificent."

I got down on one knee, hands folded, as I stared reverently at the sublime sight in front of me. Then, I offered up a sincere prayer.

“So goddesses really *do* exist...”

“S-Stop it, Mr. Yuki! You’re embarrassing me! And didn’t I already parade myself around in this outfit for you many times before?!”

“You just don’t get it, Nell. It never gets old seeing something like this.”

Still in a kneeling, prayerlike position, I responded to Nell, who looked flustered by my reaction. She was currently wearing a dress. Like she’d said, she’d given me a private fashion show not long ago, and I’d gone nuts admiring her in it then too. *But beautiful things are still beautiful no matter how many times you look at them, y’know?*

The maid who’d helped her put the dress on stared at us in a way I could only describe as someone who’d drunk some overly sweetened coffee. I just ignored her. I was too focused on making Nell writhe in agony with my fawning.

Then, the curtain covering the dressing room next to hers slid open with a rattle. Ilyr and En appeared, both wearing dresses just like Nell.

“Tee hee hee. What do you think, Mr. Demon Lord?”

“Master...does this look good on me?”

They held the hems of their skirts and twirled around for me, showing off their dresses.



“Woow! You two are the cutest in the whole wide world! You look just like princesses! Though, uh, I guess you *are* a princess, Ilyr.”

Oh, yeah. I totally forgot she's a real live princess. Ilyr was wearing one of her own dresses, while En wore one the little princess had lent to her. Why'd En have to borrow one? Well, though Nell had been able to buy a dress off the shelf because adult clothing was readily available, that wasn't the case for children's wear. Due to low demand, that kind of stuff had to be made from scratch, and the employee at the tailor's shop had regretfully told me they wouldn't be able to make one for En in time for tonight's ball. I'd actually wanted to have a custom dress made for En too, but since we were operating under time constraints, borrowing one from Ilyr had been the next best option.

Who cares, though? It's an undeniable truth that my kiddos look like angels regardless of what they wear!

“Thanks for lending En one of your dresses, Ilyr. I mean it. C'mon, En, you thank her too.”

“Yes...thank you, Ilyr.”

“Tee hee hee! Of course! You're my friend, En!”

Ilyr beamed as she replied. *Yeah, this kid's just as cute as the rest of mine. No more, no less.*

“Maaan, elementary school kids are so awesome!”

“Ele...mentary school kids?”

“What is ‘element-tree school kids,’ Mr. Demon Lord?”

“Oh, nothing. Don't worry about it.”

I brushed off those questions as the two little girls who'd asked them cocked their heads curiously at me. After I patted their heads gently enough that I wouldn't ruin their updos, I turned to Nell and spoke.

“Okay, Nell. You remember the program, right?”

“Yup. I drilled it into my head.”

“I can't be with you at the beginning, so be ready for a bunch of annoying

dickheads to bitch about you.”

“Mr. Yuki, I told you I’ll be fine. Besides, you already know that I can’t call myself a hero if I have you protecting me at all times. I can handle that much on my own. Honestly.”

Nell grinned, her strong will concealed in the depths of her eyes.

As far as I knew, there were three forces currently at play here in the castle.

First, those of us on the king’s side. We safeguarded Nell, whose reputation was on the downswing, and acted to protect her. Said king had set up meetings with several VIPs way before the ball. The old lord of Alfiro, who’d done us several huge solids since I’d first met him, had tagged along with the king to lay the groundwork in rallying support for Nell.

The second force was the Church’s radicals. Although they should’ve been Nell’s allies, they instead plotted to use her as a pawn in a political marriage so they could strengthen their organization’s prestige. Except I already knew the names and faces at the heart of their faction as well as the extent of their hostility toward her, meaning they no longer posed a problem.

And finally, there was the military force who’d tried to set the hero up, otherwise known as the anti-king faction. At the center of this particular group lay the minister of military affairs, Jayma Ledrios, who was in charge of the country’s armed forces. Most of his allies consisted of other military officials. On the surface, they’d taken a moderate stance, but for a long time now, they’d been vocally against the king because of his lenient style of governance.

This faction was also apparently responsible for creating all the commotion designed to destroy Nell’s reputation. We suspected Argos Radlio as the mastermind who’d orchestrated the stampede just outside of Senguria a while back. And whaddya know, we had confirmed reports of the minister of military affairs meeting with Argos in secret pretty frequently.

As for *why* they were so hell-bent on forcing Nell out of her role as the country’s hero, I had a couple of guesses. One, they wanted to install their own pawn as the new hero. Two, by removing Nell from her position, which put her close to the king in a professional capacity, they wanted to weaken the king’s standing. I could think of a handful of other possibilities too, but the long and

short of it was that they were my enemies.

Since these jerkoffs would be attending the ball too, I wanted nothing more than to pay my most humble respects right to their faces. I needed to do some cleanup first, though, which was why I couldn't be with Nell when the ball was officially underway. Not at the start of it, anyway.

"If something happens, I'm counting on you to handle things here. But in case things go *really* sideways and you don't have a way out, I want you to escape to the dungeon, okay? Doesn't matter who's around you, just do it. Though I'm planning to make sure that doesn't happen by taking care of our unwanted watchers in a jiffy."

"Understood, Mr. Yuki. I'll be on my guard. You should be careful too."

"Oh, yeah, you bet I will be. Especially since you're always nagging me about not being reckless."

I shrugged, then turned toward En, bending down so that we were on eye level.

"En, you've got a big job to do too. This time, you have to protect Ilyr, not me."

"Yes...of course. She's my friend."

"Good girl."

I could feel myself smiling a little as she nodded matter-of-factly. Finally, I faced Ilyr.

"Ilyr, something bad might happen at today's ball. I want you to protect yourself by listening to what everyone says and staying watchful of your surroundings. Okay?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Demon Lord!"

Once I heard Ilyr's energetic response, I stood up with an "up I go" and turned toward Nell again.

"All right, we all link up later. I think a bunch of stuff is gonna happen, sooo... I dunno, just be flexible and adapt to the situation as necessary."

“What are you even saying?”

Nell chuckled while she replied. I smiled back at her, then turned away from them.

Time to pull off a few supersecret shenanigans.

“Lady Hero. My name is Elmerea Favolanje Lautnis. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I am Mobday Suyo Porteye, and I, too, am pleased to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet you. My name is Namaewo Kangaeruno Mendou. I’m on good terms with the Church’s leadership.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me, everyone. I’m— My name is Nell, and I currently have the honor of serving as the country’s hero.”

She had automatically begun speaking casually to them but had caught herself and switched to more polite language. As part of the education she’d received as hero, she was generally competent with the formalities. But interactions like these weren’t the norm for her. She wasn’t used to employing her knowledge of etiquette and such, hence she found herself lapsing into her familiar speech patterns. Nell knew she needed to take extra care tonight, however. It wouldn’t do for her to carelessly give these people anything they could find fault with. That way lay danger.

“You are truly a vision, Lady Hero. I had no notion of your astounding beauty.”

“Indeed. Her beauty and inner light shine akin to a saint’s.”

“Everyone’s eyes are completely riveted on you.”

“Thank you very much for all of your kind words. I am quite honored by them.”

At the moment, she was surrounded by a bevy of admirers, who were, objectively speaking, handsome young men of the nobility. They showered her endlessly with flowery compliments, which she responded to with a polite, practiced smile.

Their words have no effect whatsoever on me. It was a decidedly strange

experience for Nell. She was being treated just like a princess from the fairy tales she'd heard as a child, yet she felt nothing at all despite having a passel of good-looking young men fawning over her. The most likely reason for this was that *his* gaze always conveyed his heartfelt feelings, while the men around her offered nothing but empty words.

Well, she knew how she would react to *his* words. Even if he called her cute or beautiful as a joke, she would blush in embarrassment. He was the only one with the power to affect her; every other man's attempts at flattery rang needless and hollow. Rather than making her happy, they left no impact whatsoever.

As a matter of fact, all this attention only made Nell realize how much she loved him—how his words thrummed through her heart. She found herself feeling a bit pleased by the thought, because every time he had raved over her in her dress, despite the fire in her cheeks, she had known that his compliments were genuine.

She had her own conjecture as to why he was able to gather people who adored him so much. It wasn't his outward appearance, but his gaze. He looked at you like he was staring deep into your eyes. Furthermore, each of his words carried with them his true feelings, so there was never any need to question his sincerity. Everyone was drawn to him because of his nature. *Although that's exactly the reason he has all of us dancing in the palm of his hand.*

While no one was looking, Nell allowed herself to huff out a soft laugh. Then, she schooled her features, putting on her mask of politeness once more since she still had to keep the nobles company.

"Bah, look at that commoner chit."

"Quite brazen of her to show her face here after the fracas she caused."

She heard some malicious murmurs among all the chatter as well, but they left her completely unfazed. They were utterly inconsequential ripples as far as she was concerned. When she thumped her own shoulder with her hand, she definitely felt *it* there.

"Hmm? Lady Hero, is something the matter?"

“Oh, nothing serious. I admittedly have not had much experience wearing formalwear such as this, so my shoulders are feeling somewhat stiff.”

“Ah, yes. Those sorts of inconveniences are indeed common when one is unused to this sort of attire. I am sure that the more opportunities you have to delight us with your ravishing form, the more natural such apparel will become to you. And if I had any say in the matter, I would certainly create many such chances to present your sightliness to all who would behold it. What say you to becoming my bride? I can promise you a life far more opulent than your current one.”

“Y-You scoundrel! How craven of you to behave like this so suddenly! Fine, then I shall throw *my* hat in the ring as well. Lady Hero, if you agree to marry me, I can guarantee your place as my second wife. I’m sure you’ll enjoy your lifestyle with me.”

“Oh my. As lovely as your invitations are, I feel they are wasted on me.”

Her rejection only spurred other arrogant young men to vie for supremacy as they offered their own pledges to her and boasted of their backgrounds. *Who would even want to marry condescending upstarts such as yourselves?* Of course, her politely smiling expression didn’t betray her true thoughts as she continued to supply them with vague, noncommittal responses.

Nell couldn’t see it, but she knew that one of *his* special Eyes rested on her shoulder. He had prepared it in advance along with several Ears he’d released throughout the hall. Right now, he was likely monitoring the situation from a secret location some distance away. The reason she was able to remain so calm that she surprised even herself was that, despite not being physically with her, he was still watching over her.

Actually, she might have been able to attribute part of her composure to something else: the fact that there were fewer condemning voices than she’d expected. Nell could certainly hear the malicious whispers nearby, which were perhaps intentionally loud enough for her to hear. She had come prepared to be publicly excoriated, but most of the backbiting was simply petty jealousies.

According to *him* and His Majesty, she was all but sure to face considerable adversity, so she had expected much more severe censure given the

circumstances. That was why she honestly felt disappointed by the lack of genuine ill will. *It might be better to heighten my wariness, because there may be a reason for this turn of events.*

The only way to describe the current situation was to say that it was the calm before the storm. Because once *he* arrived, Nell knew that chaos would ensue. He wouldn't care that they were among high society since he never concerned himself with such things. Considering that he thought of most of these people as their enemies, she knew he wouldn't settle things peaceably.

Thus, Nell decided not to overexert herself. Until he arrived, she would keep an eye on those they thought of as their enemies and contain them if necessary, like they had previously planned.

While those thoughts ran through her mind, she maintained her relaxed, dignified demeanor. To those around her, her carriage epitomized grace. That, coupled with her natural beauty, attracted people's attention in a positive way, regardless of their politics. It was why not many openly criticized her, though she never realized as much.

"Ser Nell, are you enjoying yourself?"

When she turned around upon hearing that voice, she found the king himself, Reyd Glorio Alisia, standing there. At his appearance, her crowd of young admirers courteously withdrew, leaving her alone with him.

"Your Majesty! Thank you very much for inviting me to this event. I deeply admire the generosity of your heart in allowing one such as myself to attend."

"Please, there's no need to humble yourself so. Not when you fight for the sake of this country. If I were to exclude you, I would be laughed out of court for my narrow-mindedness."

Nell and the king had met countless times in preparation for the evening's ball, but their conduct as they exchanged social pleasantries did nothing to betray their relationship. Their verbal rally had been designed specifically to curb the enemy's criticism of Nell. After all, who would want to be labeled as a heartless cur for criticizing a hero who fought to defend their country? A good man though he might have been, the king was also a politician who knew how to use his authority to his advantage.

“I see you are indeed the belle of the ball tonight, eh? If your lover saw you right now, don’t you think he would be burning with jealousy?”

“Hee hee, I wonder. Mr. Yu— *He* does have quite a childish side to him, so he might indeed sulk.”

The king, the country’s leader, and the hero, the keystone of the country’s defense. Such a charismatic duo drew everyone’s attention, which naturally meant that all ears were turned toward their conversation. And their exchange created a small stir among the crowd.

“The hero has a lover? Then those rumors were true?”

“Hmm... Are you referring to the claim of the masked champion being her betrothed?”

“But has their union been approved? I mean, the hero is paramount to the defense of our country! Didn’t her predecessor remain unwed until the end of his term?”

“So is the talk of her marriage a portent of her resignation from her role as hero? Considering the circumstances, it’s important to think of a replacement to protect the country. Ah, an engagement does make sense in this context, then.”

“Indeed. I’ve heard the masked champion is a formidable individual in his own right. I think it safe to say that expectations will be high for any child born of their union.”

“Where is this rumored masked champion anyhow? I heard from members of the garrison that he’s residing in this castle for the duration of his time here.”

“From all accounts, he is the hero’s servant, so perhaps he’s not attending tonight?”

Now that he and Nell had everyone’s full attention, the king exhaled quietly, then raised his voice. He made sure it projected throughout the hall.

“Heed me!”

Instantly, the commotion receded.

“It seems unfounded rumors have traveled far and wide, so allow me to

reassure you all. Ser Nell will *not* be resigning her post as our hero!”

At the king’s words, the noise level increased once more. In reality, the Church was the only one with the authority to keep or remove her from her role because she still technically belonged to their organization. Regardless of that, however, the king’s announcement essentially made it a royal decree.

Since the insurrection crisis in the royal capital, the Church’s involvement in the country’s domestic affairs had deepened considerably. This had resulted in the king being unable to act unilaterally and force the Church to obey him. But his powerful words demonstrated that, as a king, this was one thing he would not yield on.

“She is the backbone of our country’s protection. Her powers are undeniable, and more importantly, Ser Lemiro himself, the previous hero, has acknowledged her vast, hidden potential. And yet, there are still those who would criticize her as lacking strength. I judge those voices as treasonous, for every attack they lob is intended to chip away at our country’s defenses. But I highly doubt such foolish individuals are currently in attendance tonight. Am I correct?”

Another voice followed behind the king’s.

“I’m in complete agreement, Your Majesty. The hero’s abilities far surpass anyone else’s. To point accusatory fingers at her and unashamedly call into question her strength would be the height of stupidity. Surely there are no such imbeciles here.”

“I concur. If any *are* here, I would certainly presume them to be spies.”

“Oho, you all think so as well? I appreciate it greatly.”

The first one who had echoed the king’s opinion was the man whom Yuki liked to call “the old mayor guy.” His name was Releaux Rulouvia, and in addition to his position as lord of a frontier town, he held the rank of margrave in the peerage. He had helped the king lay the groundwork for Nell’s defense. One of the men they had approached was the president of the senate, George Vivera Abbot, who had voiced his opinion after Releaux.

As president, George had maintained a neutral position due to the nature of

the senate as an advisory body. However, his friendship with Reyd went back a long time. In addition, he'd had doubts about the abrupt and unnatural way criticism of the hero had appeared since the very beginning. As such, he had chosen to align himself with the king in defense of the hero.

After hearing these men champion Nell, the consensus among the rest of the nobles changed. Whether they genuinely believed in her innocence or not, they concealed their true thoughts on the matter with suitably earnest expressions and started voicing their agreement.

When the king realized that their act had achieved the results they desired, he breathed a sigh of relief in his mind. At that moment, however, their enemy acted.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, I have something to say.”

A man suddenly stepped forward and bowed courteously.

“There is no denying that Ser Nell’s abilities are incomparable to ours. But that in itself doesn’t mean we should take no action and merely have her remain in her role as the hero. That would be negligent in terms of protecting the country, would it not?”

Nell and the king exchanged surreptitious glances. Then, as if ready to fight on the front lines, they turned toward the man.



Argos Radlio found himself feeling impatient, but he was careful not to reveal it.

“Thus, I propose that she remain in the country’s employ, but that the title of hero be passed on to another—”

“You say such strange things, Baron Radlio. Heroes are determined by their talents, *not* by popularity. Replacing a hero because of the populace’s anxiety, no matter how deep, would defeat the purpose of the role entirely.”

Releaux Rulouvia was the one who interjected.

“Allow me to ask you a frank question, then. Isn’t the people’s concern an embodiment of her unsuitability as a hero?”

“Hmph. Are you not aware of the stampede and resulting chaos that occurred in Senguria?”

“Excuse me? Of course I am. I don’t see how that’s relevant, however.”

“Then you must also know that Ser Nell, alone, repelled the monsters’ raid without any injury or fatality to the townsfolk and its garrison.”

“Yes, I do...”

For an instant, Argos felt one of his eyebrows twitch in aggravation, but he forced himself to respond calmly, a polite smile on his face.

“Despite her abilities, she vanished for a time *because* she was fighting such powerful enemies. You praise those who have returned from difficult battles, but then in the same breath accuse them of lacking strength. Do you believe heroes are gods or some such?”

The man in front of Argos stared coldly at him while making a fool out of him. He heard soft, derisive laughter coming from the crowd as well. The combination spurred his frustration. In his mind, he scorned Releaux as an upstart, baseborn mongrel who had no right to insult him like this. But none of that showed on his face as he maintained a rational facade.

“I will admit that good sense doesn’t really work on you and Lefi, Mr. Yuki. You two are just too powerful for it,” Nell commented wryly, but incidentally, it went unheard.

“Then allow me to address you directly, Ser Nell. What are your thoughts on the present circumstances? It pains me to say this, but you *do* bear some responsibility for the instability we face. So what do you have to say on the matter?”

“Huh? Oh, um... There’s no denying that my training is still lacking, so I feel awful that my delay in resuming contact led to everyone fearing the worst.”

Argos smiled gleefully inside when he heard Nell taking responsibility for her actions. Just as he readied to go on the offensive, though, Nell spoke again.

“Even so, I am still a hero. It would be wildly irresponsible if I quit now, carried away by others’ sentiments instead of my own. I can’t do that. I became a hero

to protect this country. Therefore, I must do whatever I can to the utmost of my abilities. I have done just that until now and will continue to do so moving forward. I decide my path, not others.”

“Irony, considering the irresponsible words you utter. Do you truly think what others have to say about you doesn’t concern you?”

“Yes, I do.”

She nodded slowly but confidently.

“It is my will, my resolve, to be a hero. I will protect this country simply because that is what I wish to do. Which is why, so long as I am given the chance, I will maintain my dignity and continue to put my life on the line as a hero.”

Because that was how *he* lived his life. He gambled everything he had so he could do what he wanted. Always honest, always direct.

He was the reason she had even decided to continue being a hero. For better or for worse, his influence on her had been strong, as evidenced by her admiration for his way of life. *I will most certainly have him take responsibility for changing the course of my life so dramatically.*

While those thoughts ran through her mind, young nobles watching her smile started murmuring among themselves in astonishment.

“Wow...she’s so courageous.”

“Not only is she beautiful on the outside, but so is her spirit within...”

“She truly is a saint.”

Argos’s carefully crafted smile disappeared when he took note of their attitudes. Despite him having strenuously attempted to throw his opponents off-balance for some time, he had only succeeded in bolstering her reputation further. Neither the king nor his accursed hangers-on, not to mention the hero as well now, showed any hint of discomposure.

As a matter of fact, they were acting like nothing of great import had even occurred. The hero was chatting away with the princess and another young girl who looked like a foreigner. And then there was the king. Though he appeared

to be listening to Argos, he was smiling fondly down at his daughter and her friend, silently leaving the situation to his subordinates to handle.

They acted like they didn't understand how precarious their present position was. Furthermore, very few in the crowd of aristocrats lent their voices in support of Argos. The nobles who had remained neutral from the outset didn't matter, but what of those his faction had approached in advance? His allies had laid the groundwork with them, so they should have been explicitly on his side. Even they remained relatively silent, however, merely standing idly by.

It seems the stampede we orchestrated in Senguria has backfired completely. If the hero had failed to drive back the monsters, there would have been a vast chorus of voices agreeing with him about her lack of power. Instead, her lone charge against them had been successful. Damage to the town and its people had been prevented as well, leading to an increase in praise for her.

That, Argos realized, was the reason those like him, who criticized the hero, were now in the minority. In other words, he had effectively been abandoned by the people who should have supported him. He was well aware of how bad the situation had become, but he certainly hadn't predicted the speed at which the nobles had turned against him.

The scene wasn't supposed to have played out like this. His argument about the current hero's incompetence should have been decisive in turning the tide in their faction's favor, after which they had planned to introduce their candidate for the new hero, the one whom they found deserving. But he had bungled the whole scheme right from the start.

Tch! All that money, gone to waste...!

There was another issue too. The hero's lover, the masked man, was nowhere to be found. They knew how amorous and affectionate the couple were toward each other, so they had expected to find him here, at this function that should have served to deal a setback to the king's faction, by the hero's side as her ally.

In truth, they had received information well in advance stating that he would be at the ball. Nevertheless, he remained absent. What did that mean? Was he up to something in the shadows?

Argos's frustration continued to climb. Nothing was going as planned, and

doubts assailed him from behind one after another. But he exhaled deeply and forced himself to calm down.

He wasn't done. Not yet. He still had one more piece to play.

Argos's plot revolved around the assumption that both the hero and Mask would be in attendance, but it could still be salvaged with only the hero present. He had accounted for Mask catching wind of his plan, which threatened to weaken its efficacy. In that case, though, a strategic amount of instigation was likely to compensate.

He could acknowledge that he hadn't done a great job of getting the aristocrats at this ball on his side. The idiotic masses were another matter entirely, however. By manipulating information and spreading falsities, they had succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt about the current hero in the people's minds.

The work was easy. Their faction still held the advantage. Reassured, Argos began devising a new plan.

"Begging your pardon!"

Just then, a guard suddenly appeared in the ballroom and rushed over to the king. He whispered something into the monarch's ear. The nobles in attendance focused their attention on the two men.

Alone, Argos watched the scene, a small smirk on his lips. *Did they succeed?*

"Hmm... Well done; thank you. Everyone, I have news. It seems my men have discovered a group foolish enough to create a disturbance within the castle grounds. Several dozen armed ruffians evidently attempted to storm the castle."

The king's words caused a stir among the guests.

"What?! Outrageous!"

"Y-Your Majesty, we need to get you to safety!"

A few of the aristocrats who worked for the military in a civilian capacity moved to protect him, but the king continued speaking calmly.

"Wait, please. No need to be alarmed. The would-be invaders have already

been put down, so there's nothing to fear. As for the champion responsible for saving us, he will be arriving shortly. It seems he has some business here."

What...? Argos hadn't told his man to come here after executing his part of the plan. That meant something unexpected was happening again. The series of unfortunate events continued.

"Enter!"

At the king's announcement, all of the nobles turned in unison toward the ballroom entrance. They found a single person standing there. No one had heard him approach.

"Wha—"

It wasn't Argos's subordinate. No, it was the masked man, carrying an unconscious commander on his shoulders.

"Good evening. I'm here to take down the mastermind."



After I left Nell and the others, I charged right into the middle of the pack of wannabe raiders who were trying to sneak their way onto the castle grounds.

"Ready or not, here I come!"

They'd been so focused on keeping their presence hidden that they were shocked to see me appear seemingly out of thin air. I didn't care, though. I grabbed the nearest guy by the skull and flung him straight at another dude.

"Ngh—"

"Wh-Who are you?!"

The invaders were in a panic. I kicked one of them in the guts before executing a Shoryuken-style uppercut on another one, sending him flying.

"Agh! You bastard!"

A few of them got their acts together and drew their swords, waving them at me. But the difference in our stats was so huge that avoiding their slashes was a walk in the park for me. I twisted and turned my body this way and that while punching and kicking at their swords. My physical strength made destroying

their weapons easy. As they gawked at the pieces, I finished them off with a final attack and incapacitated them.

“Damn you! You have no idea what you’re doing t—”

“Shut up! I don’t care! I don’t have time to deal with you dickheads!”

“Gwah?!”

The man I’d cut off seemed to be the leader of the remaining unit. Before he could say whatever else he wanted to, I caught him with a swift kick to the face. His head slammed into the wall behind him.

With that, I annihilated the raiders in a matter of minutes.

“Well, well, Mask. Violent as ever, I see.”

I whipped around at the sound of that wry tone and saw a woman leading a troop of soldiers. That woman was Carlotta Demeyere, Nell’s boss and the lady knight commander of the Holy Order of Faldienne. The last time I’d visited the royal capital, she’d been there too, making one hell of an effort to root out all the shady shit happening behind the scenes.

“Whaddya expect? My wife is getting hit on left and right at the party, y’know. Have to finish this quick so I can race over there and protect her from the idiots who think they can lay a finger on another man’s woman.”

“The way you put it, I can certainly imagine the scene. This wife, then, must be...Nell, yes? I must admit that I’m bewildered by your announcement. When in the world did you two even get so close?”

“It’s a long story, but a bunch of stuff happened.”

“I see. ‘A bunch of stuff,’ hm?”

The lady knight commander snorted with laughter.

“Anyway, you being here’s gotta mean that you cleaned up on your end too, yeah?”

“I did. Not knowing that it was a trap, the imbeciles were all gathered at the place you indicated. We captured them all.”

“Then we just need to worry about the jerks in the castle. All right, let’s wrap

this up lickety-split, then haul ass to Nell.”

“Agreed. I won’t show any mercy to those intent on being her enemies.”

The lady knight commander and I looked at each other with the same savage smiles on our faces.

If it wasn’t clear already, I was currently working together with members of the Church. My investigation had turned up only a few folks within the organization who wanted to ruin Nell. The “enemy” consisted of the cardinal I’d eavesdropped on, another cardinal who was a friend of his, and an order of holy knights under his command. A different one than Carlotta’s, obviously.

In short, the Church as a whole still believed in Nell. The organization was still her ally, and boy had I been relieved to learn that. But even so, I’d remained wary about putting my trust in them because I didn’t know for sure how far that dingleberry cardinal and his buttmunch friend’s reach extended. Then, though, the lady knight commander had shown up at the perfect time.

Carlotta had actually come up a lot in my numerous discussions with the king. I knew she was a high-ranking member of the Church who could be trusted, but she’d been away from the capital on assignment until recently, so I’d given up on making contact with her during our recon and planning stage.

Lucky for me, I’d hit her up for some help after she’d gotten back from her mission not too long ago. Her timing couldn’t have been better. She’d agreed right away to my request to team up, saying she wouldn’t let any doddering fools from the Church have their way. Then, faster than I could say Jack Robinson, she’d launched her own investigation to determine friend and foe within the Church, after which she’d established command over the allies. Thanks to her, I didn’t have to worry about the Church, and ever since then, she’d been leading her holy knights in ways that were all kinds of helpful to me.

What ways, exactly? One, eliminating the bandits that had shown up at several vital facilities in the royal capital at the same time, and two, arresting the soldiers who were supposed to have captured the bandits. Basically, she’d stopped the bad guys from stirring up trouble and then taking the credit for handling it.

The bandits had been paid to cause chaos all across the city so that the bad

guys could send out their designated platoon to take down the so-called enemy. And that wasn't all either, because the bandits hadn't actually been bandits. Nope. They'd just so happened to have been this country's soldiers.

Most of the soldiers who'd sided with the prince during the insurrection crisis hadn't faced any real punishment once the king had returned to power. They'd just been treated with cold contempt by others and that'd made them unhappy, thus they'd been the perfect targets to manipulate. I hadn't asked about the details, but they'd made some sort of secret agreement with the bad guys before we'd gotten to the royal capital, hence they'd been playing the criminals.

There was just one problem: as it turned out, they'd had no idea they were being used as fuel for the fire. I figured that the enemy had probably been planning to keep them quiet by killing them all once their scheme was underway. The dumbasses had screwed up big-time by picking the wrong pawns.

It hadn't been hard for me to understand the enemy's intention with this plan. They'd wanted to end everything behind the scenes while Nell, the current hero, relaxed at the ball in the castle, blissfully unaware of what was happening. Since she couldn't've handled it, they would've done so, learning of the danger threatening their country and quelling it. *And that concludes the plot summary.*

Fear and anxiety apparently continued to spread in this nation. What these people needed, then, was someone competent. The reason the public criticized Nell was because they didn't know what she was capable of, and that worried them, meaning they lacked faith in her as a hero. How could they trust her to protect them when she was busy eating and drinking at the castle? In contrast, the soldiers who patrolled vigilantly and kept them safe from criminals would gain the people's confidence.

To sum it up, the bad guys needed a rock-solid pretext to attack their opponent, Nell. If their scheme had succeeded, there was no doubt that Nell's standing would've been even worse than it was now. Things would've gone down exactly how they wanted.

If they had succeeded, of course.

“You really are a terrifying man, Mask.”

“What? Why?”

Carlotta made her comment as we headed down the road toward our next goal.

“Not only are you frighteningly powerful, but you also have a tremendous talent for gathering intelligence, almost like you can see everything. And you do all this on your own, yes?”

“Uhhh... I guess you’re not wrong.”

She’d said “*like*” I can see everything. In reality, though, I *had* actually seen everything, so I *did* know everything. Thanks to my Evil Eyes, Evil Ears, and my own sneaking around.

Lately, my schedule had been stupid busy, with Nell drilling etiquette into me and the little princess and En bugging me to play house with them. Even so, I’d still found time to work in the shadows. The morons behind everything had never realized that I had them under surveillance, which had made my planning a million times easier. I’d sure enjoyed laughing behind their backs while gathering intel. Good times.

Seriously, I should thank them for just blurting out every single detail right there out in the open. That’ll teach ’em to underestimate a demon lord’s covert techniques.

Having said that, I’d been self-aware enough to know that I couldn’t take down the bandits scattered across the city on my own. The members of the royal guard stationed in the castle had been out of the question, of course. As the king’s personal guards, they had their hands full keeping the castle secure and maintaining his safety. Before Carlotta’s return, I’d been racking my brain over how to solve the problem, and fortunately, she’d come back in time and had turned out to be the solution I’d desperately needed. I was so glad she was on our side.

Strength in numbers is definitely the way to go. This fundamental truth remained even in a world where actual mighty warriors existed.

“Well, I *am* calling myself the hero’s servant, so I gotta be able to do at least that much.”

“The hero’s servant, hm? Regardless of reality, right?”

“What is reality, anyway?”

I shrugged in response to Carlotta’s grin.

“Okay, it’s go time. The royal guards have noticed the intruders and started fighting them. I can see the enemy’s subordinates behind them, waiting for the right moment to jump into the fray and ‘assist.’ Let’s pretend we didn’t notice them and take all those pissbabies out.”

“Understood. Did you hear that? Everyone other than the royal guards are our enemies. Rout them all!”

“Aye!!!”

Carlotta’s holy knights—Nel’s coworkers—sounded so fired up that I could almost see steam coming off them.

“There they are!”

I could see the soldiers who’d been tricked—er, the bandits, and the royal guard members under attack. Although that last part was an overstatement since the king had, without going into any details, told them ahead of time to be on high alert. They’d taken him at his word regardless and heightened their security, so if anyone was under attack, it was the so-called bandits who were now majorly on the defensive. Poor saps looked confused to boot.

Honestly, with just a little more time, I was pretty sure the royal guard would’ve had the situation under control even without our help.

“Carlotta, back them up! I’m counting on you!”

“Will do! What about you?!”

“I’m just gonna go and give the dumbasses who think they’ve pulled the wool over our eyes a very stern talking-to!”

Putting my DP where my mouth was, I took off toward the area right behind

the fighting royal guards. It was a blind spot for them. I drove a flying knee strike into an empty space, then grabbed another empty space and spun it around relentlessly.

An onlooker probably just saw my crazy ass jumping and flying around alone. But the sight was a whole 'nother story for me with my Demon Eyes.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! You shit for brains! I could see you crystal clear the whole fricking time!!!”

“Ngh! He— He can see us!”

I let loose my trademark high-pitched demon lord cackle before releasing my grip on the nothingness—a man's leg—I held on to, hurling the body it was attached to straight into the mass of enemies. They probably moved too much in an attempt to either withstand or avoid my attack, because a split second later, the magic concealing them dissolved. As soon as it did, I found myself surrounded by soldiers with their swords drawn.

“You... You're the hero's servant, aren't you?”

A shady dude questioned me, his face covered by a helm. He looked like the leader of this ragtag band of tools. He could hide his face all he wanted and it wouldn't make a difference because I already knew his identity from my prior intel collection. This guy was the culprit behind the stampede, one of Argos Radlio's men.

“Ooh, you know me? Guess you did your homework. That's right, I'm the hero's ever-loyal henchman. And as a dem—I mean, as a defender of justice, I'm here to punish you evildoers.”

“‘Justice,’ you say? I highly doubt it would be just to attack us after we rushed to protect the castle against these invaders. Wouldn't you agree?”

“I would! If you weren't a bunch of clowns who just stood there watching the whole time, waiting for the right moment to come to their ‘rescue’!”

“You seem to have misunderstood. What basis do you have for such an accusation anyway? If you still insist on opposing us, then we'll consider you comrades of these rebel— Ngh?!”

I pretty much stopped listening at that point. I had proof of their guilt, so I punched him in the face and resumed my charge.

“Y-You whoreson!”

“W-Would the hero’s ally do something so craven?!”

“Ooh, ‘craven.’ Great word. I’ll add it to my vocab list. Thanks!”

Once they realized I was back on my bullshit, the enemy soldiers regrouped quickly. Their military training was evident in the way they deflected my attacks. Unfortunately for them, though, they were weak. So incredibly weak. Even weaker than the goblins in the Demonic Forest.

By the way, since it would’ve caused a lot of headaches if I’d killed them, I’d just knocked them out with my patented Nonlethal Combat Techniques for Use Against Enemies. They had evolved from my Playful Techniques for Little Girls. These and my other Safety Techniques for Little Girls had trained *me* on how to successfully hold back my strength. You could say I now specialized in attacks powerful enough to render an enemy unconscious. My motor control was so fine that I could crack an egg neatly in two because I knew just the right amount of pressure to use.

Heh. My time to shine in the dungeon’s kitchen, eh? You can call me...the Egg-Cracking Demon Lord.

“Okey dokey, all done on my end. Let’s see how the lady knight commander is doing... Aha, she’s finished too.”

Hmm... Maybe I’ll leave the cleanup out here for her to handle. I was pretty confident she’d do a great job of it.

Done with my not-so-fatal purge of the enemy soldiers in my immediate vicinity, I grabbed their commanding officer by the rim of his armor. I needed somebody important for the next act. Then, I started walking toward the castle where Nell and the others were, the sound of metal clanking as I dragged him behind me.



“Mask...”

That bitter mutter came from Argos Radlio. A few aristocrats nearby heard him and murmured in surprise.

“So *that* is the hero’s servant?”

“The champion who saved our country...”

“He’s younger than I thought.”

Everyone focused on me, but I ignored them completely as I strode into the ballroom. The crowd of nobles parted naturally, making way for me. By the way, I wasn’t wearing my mask right now, so they could all see my face. I’d figured this would be a good way to pull some of the attention off Nell.

I didn’t stop walking until I reached the king and Nell. When I did, I dumped the enemy commanding officer from my shoulders to the ground and got down on one knee in front of them.

“Mask, who is that?”

“This is the leader of an enemy squadron, Your Majesty. He foolishly attempted to create havoc within the castle grounds and endanger your life.”

The look on the king’s face when he heard my formal reply was indescribable. He paused for a minute, then spoke under his breath so no one but the three of us could hear.

“I am very much not used to hearing such formal language from you.”

“I’m almost positive Mr. Yuki is having fun with this, Your Majesty, so think nothing of it. Really, put it out of your mind.”

The king smiled wryly at Nell’s soft whisper before putting an imposing expression back on and nodding firmly, to the point that it was almost aggressive.

“Is that so? Well done suppressing the commotion, then. Now, tell me why you brought the enemy’s leader here.”

“I believe his comrade has managed to infiltrate this function. Therefore, I humbly request a bit of time in tonight’s schedule to flush out the treasonous cur.”

“Hmm... Very well. For your distinguished service, I shall grant you this boon.”

“Ha ha ha. I am most grateful, Your Majesty.”

I was fully committed to my performance as I bowed my head deeply to the king. Then, I stood up smoothly and turned around.

“Now, then... A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Lord Argos. I’m the hero’s servant, Y—Wye is my name.”

Smiling cheerfully, I spoke to the dickbag noble, Argos Radlio, like we were old pals. One of his eyebrows twitched in displeasure, but he skillfully hid his true feelings and responded to me with a smile as well.

“I’m quite honored that the champion who saved our country knows my name. Might I ask why you have singled me out?”

“The engraved sword in this man’s possession. This is your family crest, isn’t it?”

I took the sword, sheath and all, from the collapsed man next to me and raised it high so everyone around us, including the son-of-a-bitch aristocrat, could see the crest carved into the hilt.

“Yes, it is...”

The bastard’s agreement created a noisy buzz of conversation. But the enemy in front of me looked unfazed by it, his gaze cool and steady on me.

“That man is indeed in my employ. What of it, though? Is there something wrong with telling my men to defend the castle’s perimeter?”

The contempt on his face now must’ve meant he was done trying to keep up appearances. Not that I cared. I just kept on smiling as I replied to him.

“‘Defend the castle,’ you say? Does that mean you were unaware of the king’s royal guard in place outside, performing *their* duty to protect the castle?”

“Of course I was aware of that. I acquired vital information beforehand regarding a possible attack, however, so I personally made the decision to install my own men as security.”

“Oho. So you admit that you knew in advance, yet you chose to keep quiet?”

“That’s not the case at all. I passed the information on to the military so that they could remain vigilant. Let me make something clear: there should be an official record of me bringing my private army to the capital. Ergo, I have done nothing illegal.”

Hmm... The way he says it so confidently probably means that there is an official record, huh?

I glanced covertly at the king. He shook his head slightly, telling me he had no idea what the asshole was talking about. The only thing I could think, then, was that one of the scumbag’s allies was doing something behind the scenes to cover for him.

“Frankly, sir, I don’t appreciate you dragging my subordinate here and accusing him of leading bandits or what have you. Clearly, you are operating under a serious misunderstanding. But I cannot let this insult pass. Regardless of your status as a champion, I *will* be suing you for slander, so I hope you’re prepared.”

The audacity of this rich sack of shit. But he could bet his ass I was prepared.

“Those are some mighty strange things comin’ outta your mouth, mister.”

With a big ole grin on my face, I stepped forward aggressively and pointed my finger accusingly at him like a certain lawyer shouting “Objection!”

“Yikes. Mr. Yuki, the expression on your face is so evil right now.”

Put a sock in it, Miss Nell.

“You don’t appreciate this? Well, *I* don’t appreciate your bullshit either. You know what your men were doing while the bad guys were attacking? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. They were just standing waaay back from the action. Almost like they were waiting for the right moment to jump in and ‘save the day.’ Curious, wouldn’t you say?”

“And what proof do you have? You can’t possibly be trying to convict me on the basis of some uncertain testimo—”

“Not for that, no. But I *do* have proof that this latest attack was planned by you.”

The bastard's face froze at my words. *Heh heh heh*. Once he knew who the eyewitness was, my guess was that he'd try to wiggle his way out like the slippery fuck he was by finding fault with their testimony. Too bad for him, I was a step ahead of his dumb ass.

I opened Inventory and took out a crystal ball.

"This is a magical tool called a mirror crystal. When activated, it records magical energy within a certain range and can display the record afterward."

In other words, it was a camera. A user could operate it by pouring their magic into it. Whenever they wanted to see a picture they'd taken, they just had to use their magic on it again. Doing so created a hologram of the image in midair.

The camera had a few drawbacks, though. Since magical energy acted as the medium for capturing photos, the tool only took them in black-and-white, unlike modern cameras. The image quality was pretty rough too. On top of that, it could only take one picture before it had to be scrapped. Its lone upside was that you could look at the picture however many times you wanted, so it went without saying that it wasn't exactly a convenient piece of technology.

I'd ended up buying it off the DP Catalog a while back. I'd been browsing the Catalog, looking for items that could come in handy for my current supersecret spy operation. When I'd chanced upon it on one of the pages, it'd been a no-brainer purchase.

To be honest, I'd been kinda disappointed by the thing because I only knew how to use modern cameras back on Earth. But maybe that was my own fault for having had high expectations. *Eh, doesn't matter. I'm still gonna use it from now on as part of my demon lord's collection of secret gadgets.*

Oh, yeah, speaking of modern cameras, if I ever felt like it, I could actually get one from the DP Catalog. I just didn't think I would anytime soon because the DP needed for tech like it was insane. Had to do with that kind of stuff being created in an advanced civilization compared to this world. It was easy to make my own shogi board or playing cards, but tech was another story entirely. I honestly didn't even want it, so it made no sense to waste that much DP on one in the first place.

“Why don’t I take a picture and show you how it works? Say ‘cheese.’”

“W-Wait, what?!”

“V...for victory.”

“Cheese? Like the kind we eat?”

I’d figured no one in this world would understand the stock phrase people back on Earth used before taking someone’s picture. Still, I’d gone ahead and said it, then activated the mirror crystal. It sucked in magical energy from its surroundings, did its thing, and stopped a few seconds later.

I wanted to check the image it’d captured, so I poured magic into it again. With a *bwoom*, the picture floated in midair. Nell, surprised by my sudden request, had hurriedly turned to face the crystal; En, expressionless as usual, had thrown up a peace sign because she’d clearly understood the assignment; and the little princess had her head tilted in puzzlement.



“And that’s how this mirror crystal works. See how it captured the scene like a painting? You know what? I just decided this will make a great keepsake. Mine.”

“Haah... Why are you like this?”

“Lord Y—Wye, you’re up to your usual tricks, I see.”

Nell looked exasperated and the king smiled ruefully. I pretended I didn’t see either of them as I took out another mirror crystal from Inventory. I pushed my magic into the new one and made its image appear.

“Now that my demo’s done, let’s get right to the real deal. You’ll see that this one already has a picture in it.”

Two men stood in a back alley somewhere, talking about something while keeping a nervous eye on their surroundings.

“The man on the right is the leader of the bandits who infiltrated the castle. He’s already been captured and is currently sitting in the dungeon. If anyone thinks I’m lying, feel free to go down there and see for yourself.”

I’d left Carlotta, the lady knight commander, in charge of him, so I knew she would back me up if necessary. Also, another thing that was important to mention was that they had a magical item like a lie detector. If they *really* wanted to make sure we weren’t trying to frame the ball-guzzling aristos as being with these criminals or something, they could just use it on us.

Honestly, all this would have gone a hell of a lot faster if they’d just brought the magical lie detector here, but the thing was apparently massive. Big enough that it couldn’t be moved from its current location and reinstalled somewhere else. *It is what it is.*

“Now, the dude next to him. Looks like he’s having a private conversation with the leader of the bad guys. But wait. That’s weird, huh? He looks *exactly* like your subordinate over there. Uh-oh. What’s wrong, Argos Radlio? Cat got your tongue?”

Grinning, I taunted the assface noble, done with the polite language. He knew damn well what this picture meant. His face was stiff and sweat trickled down it. But that didn’t stop him from trying to get smart with me.

“I... I have no idea what you’re on about. Supposing that mirror crystal reflects the truth, I can’t be held responsible for my man acting on his own. I would never have given him such an order. Moreover, *you* prepared that magical item, so there’s a good possibility it’s been tampered with.”

Ooh, so he went with the “abandon my employee” option. Once a traitorous scumbag, always a traitorous scumbag, huh?

“That’s your final answer, eh? All right, have it your way. There’s one more thing I want you to see. Sorry, one more thing I want you to *hear*.”

I made my way to the gramophone-like magical item hidden in a corner of the ballroom. It was the same one Nell and I had used during our dance lessons, and I’d asked the king to set it up in advance here. I picked it up, brought it back over to where Argos was, and took the record I was going to play on it out of Inventory. Just like I’d done earlier with the sword, I raised it high in the air so everyone around us could see it before speaking.

“This here is a record. A very interesting one at that. What did it record, you might wonder? Well, certain stupid men who chatted away carefree as you please because they never noticed that someone was near them listening. And I would *love* for all you illustrious people here to listen to their conversation as well.”

“Nh. S-Stop—”

The numbnuts noble rushed toward me, probably because he’d figured out what was on the record. He reached out to take it from me, but I grabbed his arm and forced him to the ground face-down. Then, I sat heavily down on his back.

“Hrgh.”

“Now, now. Don’t be so impatient. Just listen like a good boy should.”

I set the record on the magical gramophone and pressed play.

“So, the plan is proceeding apace?”

“Yes. They were quick to take the bait. Hearing that we would take the lead had them overjoyed.”

“Most excellent. But honestly, do they really think they have any prospect of winning? Though I suppose I should be grateful to them for saving us the trouble.”

“Evidently, they believe their sacrifice will be worthwhile if it means exposing the dangerous predicament the country is currently in.”

“Heh. Indeed. Well, so long as they work hard, we shall be sure to grant them the ultimate comfort after. Right, then, let’s discuss in more detail how the attack on the castle will proceed.”

The record continued playing the rest of their conversation about the plan. In a bunch of spy movies or whatever, these kinds of plans would be encrypted or protected by code names for discussion. That wasn’t the case here, of course.

The bastard had probably never imagined that information could be stolen right from under his nose in his very own private chamber. Thanks to his carelessness, though, it’d been easy to overhear everything and come up with countermeasures. In fact, the hardest part had been sneaking into the asshole’s mansion and installing the magical recording device I’d bought with DP.

Geh heh heh. Know the despair of being hunted down by a mysterious item whose existence you can never have predicted. Damn humans. Inferior to a demon lord even in the tools you use.

“So. No matter how you look at it—or hear it, I guess—that’s your voice. Got any excuses you wanna give us?”

I peered down into the face of the rotten noble I was currently using as a chair.

“Y-You bastard! How did you—”

“I snuck into your house, duh. Appreciate your loose lips sinking your own ship, buddy.”

“Absurd! That’s impossible!”

“Oh, yeah, I vaguely remember that there were a bunch of sensors installed in there. Hate to say it, but I broke ’em all.”

He’d actually thought that level of “security” would protect him. Hilarious. My

Demon Eyes could spot anything sus anywhere, so all those flimsy sensors had been as clear as day to me, making eliminating them a piece of cake.

“Grr... I-I don’t accept this! What you did was against the law! Yes, it was an unlawful investigation! You utilized some sort of deceitful method to entrap me!”

“Damn, dude, you really don’t know when to give up, huh? Lemme give you a piece of advice, then, considering how hopeless you are. Look around you and tell me who you think these people believe.”

The dill weed aristocrat gasped and jerked his head to survey the crowd. They stared coldly at us—no, at *him* as he railed. Well, they were probably pretty good at concealing their true feelings, so I didn’t actually know their thoughts on the situation. Plus, I had no doubt that former members of his faction were here too. They’d probably abandoned him to the wolves when they’d realized the tide had turned against him.

I inspected the throng of rich folks, looking for anyone pale with fear or sweating buckets from nerves, and lo and behold, I found a few. Judging by their appearance, they’d most likely been in deep with this turd. Some of their faces looked familiar too, since I’d seen them during my surveillance of him.

Based on what I knew of high society, there was a tacit understanding that no one would be questioned too deeply if their participation was superficial on account of them being simple opportunists. Not even the wealthy could ignore their own who engaged in clearly dark deeds deserving of punishment, though.

Dipshits. This is what you get for making an enemy out of me by trying to ruin Nell. Go repent in the next life.

“Hmm... It seems the truth has at last come to light. Take him away.”

The king’s expression was harsh when he spoke. It didn’t look like he was doing it on purpose either. The members of the royal guard standing at attention by the walls marched briskly toward us at once. They saluted me, then two of them dragged the waste-of-space noble up by the shoulders and bound him.

I rolled off my seat on his back. He yelled and fought the royal guards as they

forced him upright before they started dragging him away, but halfway through, he suddenly saw someone in the crowd of aristocrats. His gaze clung desperately to whoever it was, and he started begging.

“Nh! L-Lord Jayma, please...!”

The person in question was an older noble standing with his spine ramrod straight. He was the minister of military affairs, Jayma Ledrios. Argos stared at him like he was his last hope. But the minister, who’d watched the proceedings silently until now, put on a cryptic expression and uttered just one thing.

“Take him away.”

Shock overcame the son of a bitch at the other man’s words. The royal guards led him out of the ballroom while he remained dumbfounded the whole time.

“Oh, snap. If it isn’t the minister of military affairs. That was pretty cold, y’know. Especially since he was only following your orders. You wanna talk about it?”

Silence descended on the hall. I strolled toward him ever so casually, provoking him with a taunting smile.

“Hmph. A pleasure to meet you, Lord Mask. I’m sure I have no notion of what you might be referring to, but considering the atmosphere, I don’t sound very convincing, do I?”

Though the aristo had attempted to play dumb initially, he’d decided there was no point. Instead of offering any rebuttal or justification, he’d just answered me calmly.

The minister of military affairs, a key member of the government, being suspected of involvement in this affair broke the silence and caused an even bigger stir than before.

“I take it you’ve chosen to accept your defeat honorably, Jayma? You will not defend yourself?”

The king spoke amid the uproar. His eyes were sharp on the elderly noble, all traces of his earlier act gone.

“How vicious of you, Your Majesty, to have such a frightening man on your

side. The situation has reached the point where anything I say now will not matter. What, then, would be the purpose of doing so?"

"You're right. I already knew you were Argos's true superior. And I will have you take full responsibility for your subordinate's misconduct."

He was lying. We actually hadn't been a hundred percent sure until now. There just hadn't been enough information to arrive at a firm conclusion.

It'd been surprisingly easy to gather evidence against Argos Radlio, but not so much with the minister of military affairs. I'd had his ass under surveillance twenty-four seven, and even the king had sent some of his people to do the same thing.

We'd lacked substantive proof, though, so the only thing we'd been able to decide was that he *might* be the true mastermind. Every time he'd met with that Radlio, he'd been a lot more wary of their surroundings than that limp-dick noble. On top of that, the minister had always talked to him like they were pals, meaning he'd never said anything to make us certain about his villainous role in the plot.

The lack of incriminating evidence had been so overwhelming that there'd been a time we'd thought he might be innocent. He'd probably realized he was being watched, accounting for his extremely cautious behavior. On brand for the man who'd been promoted to the leader of the entire military.

Unfortunately for us, though, since we couldn't find any definitive proof of his involvement like we had his subordinate's, the only way to punish him was to hold him responsible for said subordinate's misconduct. It was frustrating as hell to us that there was no other way to bring him to justice.

"Hmph. It seems I have no choice. Well, then, Your Majesty, Lord Mask, I'll be taking my leave."

And so, the Minister of Military Affairs showed no resistance whatsoever to the royal guards escorting him out of the event. But suspicions continued to plague me as I watched him walk away like a meek little lamb. *What the...? What is he thinking? He has to be up to something.*

Argos was an open book. I'd known since the moment I'd started gathering

intel on him that he was greedy for more power. On the other hand, there was this guy. I had no idea what was going through his mind. Despite all the information we had on him, I still didn't know what his true intentions were.

Well, that wasn't *entirely* true. I *did* know that he was a genuine war hawk, which explained his dissatisfaction with the country's current administration. *Someone like him wouldn't fall back this easily, would they? Does he have a secret trump card to turn the tables on us?*

I mulled things over in silence for a while before shaking my head. Regardless, the fact remained that we'd dealt serious damage to his faction. There was no reason to keep obsessing over it. Instead, I'd just visit him later and talk to him face-to-face. And if he wouldn't answer me, I would *make* him.

The king, too, watched him walk away with a puzzled expression, but he pulled himself together to bring the situation under control. He clapped his hands loudly and turned to address the nobility in attendance, who remained surprised and agitated.

"Now, now, everyone. I realize how unexpected all this was, but keep in mind that tonight's ball has only just begun. It will not do to call a halt to the function over trifles like this, so please do enjoy yourselves for the remainder of the evening."

"Trifles"? Kinda burying the lede there, dontcha think, old man? Well, I could see it from the king's perspective since it *wasn't* unexpected for him. Besides, he needed to maintain his calm and composed performance no matter what happened.

The nobles still seemed a bit confused and uncertain by everything that'd transpired, but after the king urged the orchestra in the hall to start playing music again, they began to act like they normally would at fancy parties like these. A few of the attendees split into pairs to dance, while most of the remaining folks, wine glasses in hand, clumped into groups to discuss what happened.

"Lord Mask, might I have a bit of your time?"

"I would very much like to converse with the man extolled as our country's champion."

Some of them approached me, but I politely refused them all before heading toward a lone girl—Nell.

“Well done, Mr. Yuki.”

She smiled at me when I drew near.

“Thanks. I’m freakin’ exhausted, though. This is why I hate high society.”

I was grateful from the bottom of my heart for having been reincarnated as a demon lord instead of a noble.

“Unsurprising, considering your personality. Although I agree with you.”

I shrugged in response to her wry smile.

“All right, then, Nell.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

I grinned slyly at her as I took her hand.

“How ’bout a dance? Since we’re here and all.”

“Yes... I’d like that.”

Her cheeks pink, the hero girl beamed and nodded.

“Heh heh heh. Pay close attention, Nell. I’m about to show you the results of my training!”

“Ha ha. That’s true, you *did* work hard.”

Nell and I pressed our bodies close, moving ourselves to the rhythm of the music. We spun around the room while staring into each other’s eyes.

“Oh, yeah, Nell. You were the belle of the ball, huh? Those clowns have some nerve, putting the moves on a demon lord’s bride.”

“Hmm, I wonder. I think they were just drawn to me because I’m a hero. But I have to admit, it was a bit annoying having to turn down so many invitations to dance...”

“I don’t really know how this stuff works, but isn’t it rude to say no to a noble? Y’know, ’cause they’re technically higher ranking than you.”

“Yes, it is discourteous. Especially since nobles are generally quite prideful.

But...”

“But?”

“I, um...didn’t want to dance with...anyone...other than y-you, Mr. Yuki.”

What the heck am I supposed to do with this absolutely charming creature? Sneaky, hero! Very sneaky. To inflict such enormous damage on a demon lord... I won’t underestimate you again. You can take that to the bank.

“Just like I thought, a hero’s attacks are particularly effective on a demon lord. You have no idea how much damage I just took.”

“Oh, r-really? Then I suppose that means...I’ve grown up a little too, hm?”

Nell and I kept dancing while grinning at each other.

“Nooo! Lady Nell, that’s not fair!”

“Yes... Not fair, Nell.”

After that, to literally no one’s surprise, En and Ilyr badgered me the rest of the night to dance with them. Refusing obviously wasn’t an option.



Late at night, around the time the ball was coming to an end, the sounds of feet running and armor clacking could be heard in the Church’s headquarters. The group, the holy soldiers, marched through the structure steadily with their lady knight commander, Carlotta Demeyere, in the lead.

Everyone in the vicinity was asleep, so there was no noise save for what she and her group made as they rushed forward. Upon arriving at a certain room, she kicked down the door without hesitation.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!”

A portly man clad in his nightwear, from which his stomach was protruding, was inside the room. He had apparently been sleeping soundly until their unceremonious arrival had jolted him out of bed in fear and surprise.

“C-Carlotta! Damn you! Who gave you permission to enter my room as you ple—”

“Apologies for the late-night intrusion, Cardinal Afdul Dallmoor Layne. We’re

here to apprehend you for the crime of treason.”

“T-Treason?! Preposterous!”

While Cardinal Afdul stared in bewilderment, two of the holy knights pulled him up and bound him.

“W-Wait! There’s been some sort of mistake! Stop it! Don’t destroy my chambers!”

The holy knights had begun turning his room inside out in their search for hard evidence. Enraged, Afdul glared and screamed at Carlotta, who commanded the unit.

“Do you think you’ll be let off without punishment after what you’re doing here?! My friends won’t remain silent about my treatment tonight!”

“Hmph. You’re a useless old fool who can’t even comprehend the circumstances he’s in. The fact that you didn’t bother to make any preparations for absconding in the middle of night is proof of your lack of brains. Do you think I would do something like this on my own?”

“What?!”

One side of Carlotta’s mouth pulled up in a derisive sneer. She took out a roll of parchment and unfolded it for Afdul to see.

“Read this. You should know what it is.”

“Nh! A formal notice of excommunication?!”

Afdul stared in shock. The parchment proclaimed Afdul’s excommunication from the Church and bore the other cardinals’ signatures.

“That’s right. You’re no longer a member of the clergy in any shape or form. Which means the Church no longer has any obligation to protect you.”

“I-Impossible!”

“This is the end, *former* Cardinal Afdul. Take him away.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Carlotta watched her subordinates remove the pale-faced Afdul from the room. Once they had left, the man she trusted as her vice-commander stepped

inside. He saluted her before speaking.

“Commander Carlotta, Cardinal Elger has also been captured.”

“Good. Did the holy knights under his command resist?”

“No, ma’am. They’re obeying our instructions.”

“Hmm... I thought they might at least try something.”

A look of surprise came over Carlotta’s face when she heard about the unexpected development. Her vice-commander nodded in agreement with her before continuing.

“I, too, planned for exactly that to happen. But allow me to say one thing: subordinates can’t choose their superiors.”

Carlotta chuckled at his words.

“Is that so? Then I must endeavor to remain competent, else I’ll risk losing our order’s respect, eh?”

“Ha ha! Any more effort on your part, Commander, and the nobles of the royal capital will never sleep peacefully again.”

The remaining holy knights chimed in with their own comments as they listened to their two leaders’ exchange.

“Or the military for that matter.”

“I can well imagine monsters in the area running away with their tails between their legs too.”

“Perhaps the denizens of the underworld will pale and flee in terror as well, eh?”

“Well, well. If you lot wanted to increase your workload that badly, you should have told me at the start. I’ll take this as permission to abuse you to the bone.”

When her subordinates saw the evil smile on their commander’s face, they scattered to the four winds, returning speedily to their individual tasks. She shook her head wryly, then immediately turned serious as she faced her vice-commander.

“Right, then. We still have quite a bit of our own work left to do. If we don’t get a move on ourselves, I won’t be able to face the man who set the stage for us.”

“‘The man’? Oh, you mean the famed Mask. I wonder just who he is. I’ve heard so many rumors about his true identity lately...”

“I, for one, don’t care. He’s our ally, and an exceedingly capable one at that. Most importantly, he is Nell’s lover—a man she trusts wholeheartedly. That’s more than enough for me.”

“Good grief, Commander. As soft as ever on Nell, eh? Although I can understand why.”

“Of course. Among you filthy degenerates, she’s the only one whom I can think of as a younger sister and dote on.”

“Ahhh! My lady, you wound us with such malice.”

In response to Carlotta’s shrug, the vice-commander grimaced painfully, his action exaggerated for dramatic effect. With their banter at an end, the two grinned at each other before also returning to their tasks.

Before I knew it, a few days had passed since the ball. That asshole Argos was still in the dungeon. Meanwhile, Jayma’s authority as the minister of military affairs had been suspended, and he’d been placed under house arrest on his own estate.

You’d think things were going smoothly, but we still didn’t know Jayma’s true motives, so the king and I had discussed how to lure him into giving himself up. We’d deliberately left a hole in the security net around his house, giving him the metaphorical slack to hang himself, but the minister of military affairs refused to do anything incriminating.

Over the past few days, thanks to the king’s men and the holy knights led by Carlotta, those with deep ties to Argos had been captured one after another. At this point, the writing was on the wall for the bad guys; all they had to do was sit back and wait for their faction to be destroyed. I’d thought that would’ve forced them to make some kind of move, even if they knew they were heading

straight into a trap, but my prediction had completely missed the mark. Because of that, I'd decided that I had no choice but to ask him to his face what he was scheming.

So here I was now, at Minister Jayma's estate, where we had him under house arrest. The king's soldiers were stationed clearly around the perimeter to drive away any curious onlookers. But they were only positioned on the outside and not within the manor itself. This was partly because a full investigation had already been conducted, but also because the minister was still a powerful man. He would go to trial soon, with the expected outcome being that he'd be stripped of his position and power. Until then, though, he still held on to his executive role in government.

The old man had a huge cadre of sympathizers, so if the current administration bungled his punishment, there was a possibility of another coup d'état. Basically, if we were gonna stamp out any seeds of doubt, we needed hard, irrefutable proof. And in order to resolve the situation as soon as possible, we had as many hands on deck as we could get and had chosen to focus on fortifying the outside perimeter only.

But I can sneak in whenever I want! I just had to make sure not to get caught. I could do this. Also, the king had warned me not to overdo it, so technically, *technically*, I had his permission. Meaning I didn't anticipate any problems even if I did get caught. *I'll be fine. Yeah.*

After activating Stealth, I successfully infiltrated the mansion. I wound my way around the maids and butlers who worked with anxious expressions as I walked to Jayma's office. I'd already investigated the layout of the building using my Evil Eyes, so I didn't get lost.

By the way, my mask was on. I kinda felt like it was meaningless to keep wearing it since pretty much everyone knew my face now, but I seriously loved the thing. I planned on putting it on whenever I got the chance.

I went deeper and deeper into the mansion before finally arriving at my destination. I deactivated Stealth and pushed at the door, which opened with a creak as I stepped inside.

"I thought you would come, Lord Mask. Please wait a moment. I'll be done

soon.”

Alone in the office, the old man sat at his desk. He spoke quietly to me while he continued reading some sort of document. He didn’t even raise his head or seem surprised to see me.

“Sure. Thanks for having me, I guess.”

I plopped myself down on the sofa in the room. After a while, he finished up with whatever he was reading and lifted his head to look at me. His expression was the picture of calm. I didn’t sense any panic over the ongoing demise of his faction or wariness at my sudden appearance coming from him. Even his heartbeat, which I could listen to courtesy of my advanced demon lord hearing, was nice and steady. He really was calm.

“Apologies for the wait. Now, then, might I ask what brings you here today?”

The elderly noble was acting like a genial old man. In response, I deliberately made my tone and attitude as aggressive as possible when I spoke.

“Huh. You’re takin’ it real frickin’ easy even though your people are getting caught day by day. I was worried you’d be taking it hard, so I dropped in to check on you.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, then, I thank you for your concern.”

The elderly nobleman smiled politely at me, his tone breezy.

Well, damn. He sure is a wily old man.

“All right, let me ask you point-blank. What’s going through that head of yours?”

I realized that I’d probably lose a verbal battle with him, so I looked into the old man’s eyes and asked him directly to suss out his true intentions.

“Hmm... An interesting question indeed. Fine, I’ll tell you why I’m ‘taking it easy,’ as you say. There’s no longer any need for *me* to act, so I’m doing nothing.”

“What...?”

Confused, I frowned at Jayma. He replied casually.

“I simply decided to let you and His Majesty handle the aftermath, *Demon Lord Yuki*.”

Welp. I'm glad I put on the mask.

“Oh? Those are some funny words comin’ outta your mouth, funny man.”

“I *am*, after all, the leader of this country’s military. It’s only natural that I would gather any necessary information. Our first confirmed sighting of you was in Releaux’s town.”

He must’ve been referring to Iluna’s kidnapping.

“The second time was also in that town. You almost single-handedly crushed another country’s secret operations. The third eyewitness report was during the crisis here in the royal capital, the one which led to the repute of your Mask persona spreading far and wide. With the hero Nell’s guidance, you cooperated with the Church, rescued His Majesty and Her Highness, exposed the demons’ skullduggery, and stopped a civil war from breaking out. After that, you took part in the demon world’s affairs, though I’m not privy to the details. At the very least, you participated in the tournament, yes?”

Holy shit. This old man is something else. I was genuinely, honestly impressed. It made sense that he’d know basically everything about goings-on here, but the fact that he knew about what I’d done in the demon world? Spooky stuff.

He’d met with several of Nell’s associates, so maybe that was where he’d gotten his information.

“Ah, before we go any further, rest assured that I don’t intend to reveal your true identity as a demon lord. Forget about strife between internal factions. If word got out about a demon lord, other countries would invade us in full force, thinking they had just cause to do so.”

’Cause demon lords were treated as universal enemies. If other countries found out that Alisia was in cahoots with one, there’d be domestic *and* foreign upheaval.

“Despite your somewhat overbearing tendencies, I believe the Kingdom of Alisia will be in safe hands even during times of emergency so long as you remain its friend. In the event this country comes under attack by a foreign

power, the hero will most certainly be deployed as a combat asset. And you, as her lover, would come to her aid, just as you are doing right here and now.”

Damn straight. As long as Nell stayed in her role as this country’s hero, I’d be here in a flash if any kind of danger appeared again. It wasn’t just her, though, to be completely honest. The king and the old man mayor, Releaux, had helped me out a lot too, so I owed them. Not to mention the little princess. I thought of her like my cousin, y’know? So if anything happened to any of them, I’d come to their rescue too.

“All right... Hypothetically speaking, let’s say I *am* a demon lord. You don’t think it’s dangerous to let one into the country?”

“Of course I do. Demon lords are mysterious beings whose true natures we don’t know. That is why I didn’t interfere with Argos’s plan to eliminate you and the hero. The pursuit of power drives Argos, but he is nevertheless competent. If he had been able to get rid of powerful individuals like you and the hero, he would have been a useful tool in my employ.”

Inch. Resting. Basically, he didn’t care which way the pieces fell.

“Let me get this straight. You knew about Argos’s plan to kill me and Nell via a monster attack on one of this country’s towns, and you still didn’t do anything to stop him? The end justifies the means as long as it’s for the country? Even if that meant decimating an entire town?”

“Precisely.”

The old nobleman didn’t bother dodging my question. Just agreed straight-up.

“But I don’t want you to misunderstand. I was never under the impression that you couldn’t fend off the monsters. I simply needed to see what the outcome would be. If you had been unable to repel monsters and the town suffered heavily as a result, I would have known that neither of you was ever capable of protecting this country. On the other hand, if you had been able to save the town, then we could depend on your abilities. Regardless of the outcome, we would have been able to create a course for the future.”

The old man shrugged as if saying that even he hadn’t expected zero casualties or damage.

“Frankly, I’m stunned by how formidable an opponent she is. After all, she used her femininity as a weapon to seduce a demon lord. It makes me optimistic that she’ll become more pliable as a tool for this count—”

Before he could finish, I jumped onto his desk and wrapped one hand around his neck. Then, I activated my Ruler’s Might ability and, still on the desk, stood up from my crouching position, lifting him to eye level.

“The next time you treat Nell like an object, I’ll choke the life out of you.”

Since I was still squeezing his throat, the elderly aristocrat gasped out a broken reply. His calm tone never changed.

“How— rude— of me. I— apolo—gize.”

“Tch. You were testing me, weren’t you?”

I let him go with a derisive snort, then sprawled out lazily on the sofa again. In hindsight, he’d clearly picked his words with the intention of provoking me. *You’ve got guts, old man.*

He continued speaking, coughing intermittently.

“I am personally quite glad—to know—how much—you love the hero.”

He even had the audacity to smile when he said that.

I. Hate. You.

“You’re batshit crazy, man. You really wanna protect this country *that* bad?”

“I do. And I don’t think we’re all that different, you and I. The methods don’t matter when it comes to protecting what we care about. No matter what happens, we’ll do whatever it takes. The only difference between us is *what* we choose to protect. For me, it’s this country.”

I remained silent. It pissed me off to think he and I were two of a kind, but at the same time, I totally got what he was saying. I wanted to protect “Demon Lord Yuki’s world” while he wanted to protect “Minister of Military Affairs Jayma’s world.” That was what it boiled down to.

He could tell from my expression that I understood. With a nod, the old nobleman continued.

“Now, then. Since you know my true motives, I propose we strike a bargain.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“I will most likely escape serious punishment. They’ll strip me of my ministerial position, but that will be the extent of it because by punishing me, they invite greater odds of insurrection. But you, who loves the hero so much, will not allow me to get off scot-free for putting her in danger. Perhaps you want to kill me. But there are still things I must do, so I can’t die just yet. Thus, a bargain. Please listen to what I have to say, as I don’t think you’ll be opposed to the terms.”

“Fine. Talk.”

I sighed, losing my will to fight this old man.

“Since you wish to protect the hero out of love for her, I offer to protect her from this country’s evils when you’re not here. Evils arising from commoners and nobles alike. If I do, nothing like this will ever happen again.”

“That’s rich, coming from you. I mean, it was you who started this in the first place.”

“I can’t argue with that. However, I was able to take advantage of the commotion and excise the rot festering within our borders.”

Ohhh. Okay, gotcha. He must’ve been pulling strings to exact appropriate punishment on Argos and the rest of the idiot aristos clawing for power who’d allied themselves with him. In other words, he might’ve been using Argos to bring the entirety of this “rot” to light.

Now I wondered what sort of results he’d managed to get with just his single strategy.

On an emotional level, I would’ve been lying if I said I didn’t have reservations about his proposal. On a logical level, though, I could definitely see some merit to it too. After all, he had a lot of sympathizers. If he said something was black, they would too. And if he told them to stop spreading lies and stuff, they would. I was starting to understand why the king was so incredibly wary of this old man.

The Church was doing its best to put out the proverbial fires, but the fact was that Nell's reputation still wasn't great in this country. I hadn't wanted to go home by myself and leave her to face things alone. The regret would have torn me apart. But if this guy was going to do his part to extinguish the flames, that would give me some semblance of comfort.

If he acted as Nell's "guardian from the shadows" while I was back in the Demonic Forest, it'd be huge for her reputation. There was still one problem, though: I still couldn't bring myself to trust him.

"Hmm... You're trying to lure me into being your ally, aren't you? Me, a demon lord, who's not a citizen of this country or a human."

"If necessary for the nation, then yes. What we need in battle isn't quantity but quality. You see, no matter how large an army is, it can be easily destroyed by a single tremendously powerful individual. That's one of the reasons why Alisia selects a hero. As politically unstable as this country is at the moment, we need every powerful advantage we can get."

He spoke a tactical truth different from that on Earth.

"I'm not participating in any wars, my guy. If something like that happens here, I'm taking Nell back to the dungeon with me."

"I'm sure it goes without saying, but we won't be instigating any conflicts. His Majesty is very cautious when it comes to such matters. Considering our current situation, however, it's entirely possible that we will be invaded by another country. If that happens, do you truly believe she'll stand idly by and allow you to spirit her away while her nation is swallowed up by the fires of war?"

Okay, you've got a point there. She was too kind. If her homeland was ever under attack, she would charge straight to the front lines. And I'd follow her there if it ever came to that.

"In any case, the people of this country are striving to make sure war doesn't find us. Supposing there is some sort of hostile outbreak, we can crush any of the smaller nations easily, without the need to deploy the hero. As for the larger ones, we're all well aware of how much damage both sides would incur, so none of them will seek war for anything less than a grave reason. Yet with

the world as it is right now, I can't say that the probability is zero. Should such a breaking point ever be reached, don't you think that you yourself would be involved regardless of the hero's presence?"

I reflected silently on the elderly aristo's words for a while before muttering my response.

"I hate you. All I wanna do is kill you. Right here, right now."

"Heh heh. Is that so? But that you haven't tells me that the rational part of you prevails. Can I take it you agree to this bargain, then?"

It drove me nuts to see him smiling cheerfully, so I didn't bother hiding my annoyance when I replied.

"Tch... If you break this promise, I'll kill you. And if this country screws with Nell, I'll use everything in my power to annihilate it. You understand, right?"

"Yes, I do. I will bear in mind that I won't allow Alisia to perish by my own hand."

"Yeah, you do that. All right, I agree to your proposal. I'll protect Nell no matter what. You'll protect Nell from gossip and whatnot, which should stop idiots from messing with her. That about covers it, right?"

"And the bargain is struck. Thank you for giving these old bones peace of mind."

"One day, I'll sew your mouth shut."

I stood up from the sofa.

"Hmm, does this mean you're leaving? Be well. I'm glad we could talk. I hope you continue to excel in your endeavors going forward."

"Oh, hey, thanks for that. And I hope you drop dead soon."

After I spat those words at him, I activated Stealth and left the room.



"And that's what happened when I went to settle things man-to-man with that shitty old fart. I'm not sure how much we can trust him, considering how extreme he is."

“I see. So that’s what his thought process was in all this. It’s no wonder he felt no need to take any further action.”

The king looked uneasy as he nodded to himself in understanding.

“Well, at least we’ve got all the details now. How’d things go on your end?”

“We’ve apprehended every last individual who has deep ties to Argos and was involved in his machinations. We’ve also recruited neutral parties to our cause. His faction is nearly annihilated. But I’m sorry to say that we still couldn’t find any hard evidence of Jayma’s involvement.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. He may have known about their plan all along, but I’m guessing he didn’t actually interfere in any part of it.”

“That does indeed seem to be the gist of it. Everyone we captured testified that they acted primarily under Argos’s orders. Perhaps reeling from the shock of being abandoned, Argos himself has been speaking quite freely about the entire plot. The problem, however, is that the more he tells us about what happened behind the scenes, the fainter Jayma’s connection becomes to everything.”

“Really? Even though he’s spilling his guts?”

My confusion was clear in my tone of voice. Now that I knew how crafty the old noble was, it made sense that he would’ve taken countermeasures to make sure none of the blame fell on him. Still, though...

“Yes. Of the various crimes Argos is being charged with, there’s no doubt he himself devised the monster stampede and the attack on the royal castle.”

“Agreed.”

“That is why we tried to investigate the extent of Jayma’s involvement in those two charges, but... During the interrogation, despite Argos’s repeated claims of ‘Minister of Military Affairs Jayma ordered me to’ and ‘Minister of Military Affairs Jayma entrusted it to me,’ the more we dug into the root of his testimony, the more proof we unearthed of Argos making his plans independently. Thus, Jayma’s shadow became more and more faint.”

“Whoa...”

Damn, that old asshole really *had* figured out how to get out of this completely unscathed. Not to mention that he'd been slick enough to foist all the dirty deeds on Argos to perform. He'd made him the perfect scapegoat. I almost felt sorry for the poor schmuck. Almost. But this info really drove home how relentlessly vicious that old man actually was.

Jayma stood to benefit himself from our arrangement where he promised to protect Nell from the evils within the country, so I trusted him to a degree because I needed to. Even so, I wanted him to kick the bucket as soon as possible, and that feeling had only gotten stronger. The king, the Church, and that old fogey—they all had Nell under their protection, which meant that even the dumbest moron who tried to go after her would think not just twice but three times before they tried anything. Except I still felt like I'd made a deal with the devil.

"I knew I was right to focus my attack on Argos as the head of the faction he belonged to. You really couldn't have come at a better time. I thought I had managed to eradicate the rot in the country with the troubles last time, but that was clearly not the case. Regardless, this should quiet the nobles, at least for a time. I'm grateful for your support."

"Yeah, of course. I'd do anything for Nell. If anything, I should apologize for making trouble for you."

"You're wrong. The problem already existed within our borders. Your arrival merely brought it to the surface."

Thanks for saying that. I appreciate it. While I sipped on some tea the butler had poured for us earlier, I suddenly remembered something and opened Inventory.

"Oh, yeah, King. Before I forget, lemme give you this."

"Hmm? A necklace?"

The king sounded puzzled as he looked it over.

"It's a device that takes whoever uses it to my dungeon. You can activate the sorcerous circuit inside by pouring your magic into it. Once you do, it'll instantly warp you to my stronghold. You can only use it once, though, so save it for an

emergency. I'll give you five of 'em. You and Ilyr can share them with any others who are important to you."

For the record, I'd already given Releaux, Carlotta the lady knight, and Nell's best friend, Little Miss Royal Conjurer, their own dungeon-teleportation necklaces too. Carlotta was the only one who still shouldn't've known that I was actually a demon lord, so I'd deliberately kept the explanation I'd given her vague. All I'd told her was that it was a magical device that would teleport her to my house.

Little Miss Royal Conjurer, on the other hand, had had a different reaction. She was a researcher, just like Leila, so she'd taken it from me without so much as a word and studied it intently, her eyes blazing fiercely. Honestly, it'd kinda scared me. *Are all scientists like that?*

"Hmm... A sorcerous teleportation device, eh? You always present such incredible items without a second thought..."

"Well, yeah. That's 'cause I'm a demon lord."

The king chuckled wryly at my joking tone.

"Indeed you are. Thank you for this. How can I return the fav—"

"Nah, don't even go there. You went above and beyond for me, so think of that as my way of saying thanks. If you give me anything else, I'll go bankrupt from being indebted to you."

"But I feel as if I have been overly blessed now that I have such a tremendously powerful magical item in my possession, to say nothing of the bottles of elixir you already gave me."

Though I understood his feelings, both the necklace and the potions were single-use items. It wasn't like I'd spent a crazy amount of DP on them either. *Hmm, what to do... Oh, I know.*

"In that case, how 'bout some more of that wine you gave me last time? It was so good, I finished it in a jiff."

Y'know, with Lefi. She'd been so freaking cute, all drunk off her ass.

"Are you sure you're fine with merely that? If so, I can give you as many as

you'd like."

"You say 'merely,' but isn't wine expensive? I bet that kind is even pricier because of how delicious it is. Personally, I think the wine has more value than the necklace."

"I see... Understood. If you insist, I shall have several bottles prepared for you. You can take them with you when you return home."

"Cool, thanks. Can't wait."

Been a while since our fun's involved drinking. Gonna be a good time. I usually refrained from getting plastered because of the little girls, but once in a while was totally fine. *Heh heh heh.* I was looking forward to seeing how cute Lefi, Lew, and Nell would be when they were totally hammered. I kinda wanted to see Leila drunk too since I never had. That was definitely a rarity.

I grinned a little to myself imagining the fun we'd have in the near future. Then, I stood up from the sofa I'd been sitting on.

"I'd like to chat a little more, but Nell's probably waiting for me with a carriage, so this is where I say goodbye. Thanks for having me."

"Hmm. I know you're not returning to your dungeon today, so may I inquire about your destination?"

"Sure. She's taking me to meet her mother in her hometown."

At my words, the king's eyes widened and he suddenly started chuckling.

"I see. Meeting her mother, eh? Good luck."

"I'ma be real with you: I'm so nervous that my heart feels like it's gonna beat out of my chest."

"So even a demon lord like you can experience nerves like this? An excellent new discovery."

"Honestly, same."

I shrugged at the king, who grinned cheerfully, then left the room.

Side Story 1: The Wind That Blows Alongside Love

The sun's rays warmed us in this perfect weather.

"Right. This way, Mr. Yuki."

"G-Got it."

With Nell leading me by the hand, I walked carefully on one of the raised footpaths between the rice fields that stretched out endlessly around us. The plants' stalks swayed lazily in the wind. There weren't a lot of houses nearby, and I hardly saw anyone except the occasional old man or woman toiling in the fields. *Whaddya know. Guess country life is the same across worlds.*

I turned my gaze this way and that as I took in the sights. My thoughts must've shown on my face because Nell spoke to me with a smile on hers.

"Not much here, is there?"

"Nope."

For some reason, this village made me feel both tranquil and nostalgic. We were in the place Nell had grown up, located on the outskirts of the royal capital. It'd taken about three hours to get here by stagecoach from the capital. There wasn't anything particularly good or bad about this region; it was just another area managed by some normal noble.

Nell had cheerfully explained to me earlier that they technically had a local specialty—a fruit similar to mandarin orange. But it wasn't terribly hard to get since it was grown in various other regions of the country too. *Well, since we're here, it wouldn't hurt to buy some as souvenirs.*

Now, she giggled when she glanced at me.

"Will you stop already? You really needn't be so nervous, you know."

"Y-You say that, but... Which reminds me, what should I call your mom? 'Ms. Noira'? Just 'mom' since she's basically my mother-in-law? 'Mother'?"

Noira was Nell's mom's name. I really couldn't stop freaking out about what

to call her. I needed someone experienced with meeting the parents to teach me how things worked. *Somebody, anybody, please...*

“Um... Well, I suppose I can understand your nerves, then.”

“Okay, good, so it’s not just me.”

She mulled it over thoughtfully before taking her time responding.

“I think ‘mom’ is fine. ‘Ms. Noira’ sounds too stiff, like she’s a stranger, and she was never much for formalities. I’m sure you calling her ‘mom’ would’ve amused her.”

“Yeah? Then maybe that’s exactly what I’ll do.”

Though I was kinda confused as to why Nell’d used the past tense to refer to her mother, I didn’t think too hard about it. I just nodded and agreed.

A while later, after walking deeper into the farming village, we finally arrived at our destination. But it wasn’t the house she’d been born in. Instead, we were at a church. That confused me because I knew she wasn’t an orphan raised by the Church. From what she’d told me, she didn’t have a father growing up, but her mother had raised her in an otherwise normal family.

“This is it, Mr. Yuki.”

I didn’t even have a chance to ask my questions. Nell just pulled me after her, my hand still in hers. She stopped after a few steps, at a beautifully polished, white stone marker situated inconspicuously behind the church under a large tree. The cool breeze made the sunlight waver as it struck the stone through gaps in the canopy overhead.

Just looking at the sight calmed me down. I felt like time passed slowly, leisurely, in this space alone.

Ah. Now I understand.

“When...did she pass away?”

I asked Nell while staring down at the stone—the *headstone*—with a single name carved into it.

“Hmm, I think it was around two and a half years after I started my training as a hero. About a year before I met you for the first time, Mr. Yuki. It wasn’t until later that I found out how much she’d been enduring just to raise me. She had apparently hidden her suffering and continued working. Her health went on the decline not long after it was decided I would go to the Church. She fought for as long as she could against the sickness, but...”

“She must’ve been amazing, huh?”

“Yes... Yes, she was. Despite working from dawn till dusk, she always wore a smile for me. She was always so loving. She wasn’t very good at cooking, but that never stopped her, which only made her more adorable. That’s how I learned to cook.”

Nell’s voice was gentle as she spoke, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips like she was remembering days gone by. If her mother’s health had turned for the worse as soon as her daughter’s future had been determined, then relief could’ve been the cause of her body breaking down. Maybe her mother had been so relieved to learn that her daughter would survive even without her working to the bone that all the stress and exhaustion she’d built up had finally hit her all at once.

Or maybe she’d always been at her limit. Maybe she’d just spent so long hiding it that she’d finally reached her breaking point.

“I wish I’d been able to introduce you to her while she was still alive, Mr. Yuki.”

“Yeah...”

I would’ve liked that too.

“Um, there’s something I wanna ask, but I’m not sure if I should since it’s kinda hard to...”

“Hmm? What is it? You can ask me anything.”

She wanted me to ask, so I did just that, searching for the right words the whole time.

“Uhhh... You know how you told me a while back that your dad died when

you were really young? And that's why Ms. Noira ended up raising you alone? Does your dad have a grave too?"

There was only one grave here with one name on it. I didn't spot any others nearby, as if she herself had wished to be under this tree. But wasn't it normal for spouses to be buried next to each other, or even in the same plot?

"Oh, my father's grave is far from here, all the way to the southeast. He was a soldier who was evidently killed in battle. After he died, my mother wanted to give birth to me in safety, so she left their homeland, with its constant wars, and came here to Alisia because it was a large, stable country. That's what she told me."

For her daughter's sake, huh? She'd shown real resolve too. Her husband had died, she'd moved to a foreign land where she didn't know how anything worked, and then she'd given birth to a daughter, raised her, and worked her entire life. I couldn't even imagine how much hardship she must've endured.

"I know where my father's resting place is, so I'd like to visit him someday soon too. But as long as I'm a hero here, I can't leave its borders for very long."

Nell looked a little sad when she said that.

"I see... How about this, then: if you ever quit being a hero, let's go visit your dad's grave together. We can think of it as your retirement trip. It might not be just the two of us, though."

"Hmm...I like the sound of that. Heh. I can't wait. A lively journey with everyone from the dungeon. I'm getting excited just imagining it."

"Ha ha! I hear ya."

"Lively" is an understatement for our crew. But yeah, I can't wait either.

"Nell, how do humans pray to their dead?"

"Um, let's see. We place our right hands over our hearts, like this. It means, 'Though you're not here, I still think of you even now.'"

I got down on both knees in front of the headstone and placed my right hand on my chest like she'd said, then closed my eyes.

Um... Hello, mom. I know this is really sudden and I'm sorry about that, but my

name is Yuki and I'm your daughter's husband. That makes me your son-in-law.

I smiled a little to myself because it really *was* super sudden. Then, I kept talking to her.

Nell's doing an excellent job of being a hero. She's kind, charming, and full of courage despite being a scaredy-cat. It's no wonder I was drawn to her. Anyway, we've decided to live out the rest of our lives together as husband and wife.

Please allow me to take care of your daughter. I'll protect her without fail. I'll protect her and live by her side.

I would keep her safe no matter what. Risk every last part of me for her.

So, wherever you are, I hope your rest is warm and peaceful.

"All right, I think I said what I needed to say."

I opened my eyes, stood up, and brushed the dirt off my knees.

"You spoke to her, then?"

I realized that Nell had been praying too when she lowered her hand from her chest and turned her attention from the headstone to me.

"Yup. I begged her to forgive me if she could since I have two other wives too."

"Ha ha ha! You're right to have told her about that."

"How about you? All set?"

"I am. I introduced her to my very odd husband."

"Sheesh, tell me how you *really* feel."

Nell grinned at me. I shook my head ruefully back at her before turning away from the grave.

The wind blew. Lured by it, I whipped around to look behind me.

A soft, gentle smile. Just like Nell's, full of love and kindness. Her presence shifted in the sunlight dappling through the trees, then vanished, melting into the world.

I sucked in a deep breath and blinked. But all I saw was the headstone

standing upright in the tree's shade.

"Hmm? Is something wrong?"

"I wonder if that means...I have her blessing."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Wouldn't *you* like to know?"

Head cocked, Nell stared at me curiously. I laughed at her, then took her hand. I loved how good it felt in mine.

"Okay. We don't have a lot of time, but how 'bout a quick tour of the area? Oh, wait, I wanna see your house."

"Oh, um, sure, but I'm warning you, it's just a normal house. There's nothing special about it, okay? I come back sometimes for upkeep, but I've been living in the capital for so long now that it might be a little dustier than usual."

"It's fiiine. We'll just clean it up together."

Chapter 2: Visitors

“Wh-What is this...?”

Someone trembled upon seeing the sight stretching out before them.

“How did this happen...?”

Their words were soft, spoken in a daze as they surveyed their surroundings. A terrible scene lay before their eyes. Burned-down houses and destroyed fields. Crumbling windmills. Wreckage scattered about everywhere, blocking the roads.

Some time had passed since whatever tragedy befell this place because nature had begun to encroach, which only heightened the aura of devastation. They were in the ruins of a village, one absent of any trace of life.

“I can feel the vestiges of human magic.”

They lightly placed a hand over blackened scorch marks and sensed the distinctive magic of the person—no, the *people* responsible for this disaster. Humans. Several of them, according to the subtle but unique traces left behind by each individual.

A war, perhaps? But that couldn't be right because they hadn't received any information about war in these parts. The humans had to have come here hunting for slaves, then.

“To think they ravaged this beautiful village to such a stage... Godforsaken humans. They're beyond salvation.”

Fury bubbled up inside their chest, directed toward the ones who had instigated this blight. However, they intentionally separated themselves from the emotion, forcing themselves to calm down. Despite the destruction, not a single corpse lay in the village. Perhaps the dead had been buried already by any survivors. *Yes, there are survivors.* That truth helped them regain their composure.

Something else took precedence over exacting retribution. There would be time enough for revenge later.

“The child who accepted my protection... Where did she go?”

While they murmured to no one in particular, several orbs of light suddenly appeared. They were colorful and appeared to possess wills of their own. As they flickered faintly, they started spinning in the air.

“You say the child was taken by the humans?”

They decided on a new priority over searching for the village’s survivors.

“I must find her. I can yet feel the waves of my protection, so she must be alive...”

With resolve firm in their heart, they left behind the destroyed village.



“All righty, King. You’re absolutely, positively sure about this, right? Since I have your permission, I don’t mind letting Ilyr visit us for two or three days.”

“Indeed I am. As long as you two are with her, I need not worry about her well-being regardless of where she is. Besides, my wife, may she rest in peace, would be extremely angry with me if I remained overprotective of our daughter.”

The king shrugged as he replied.

“Oh, yeah, I totally get it. Wives are scary as hell.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.”

The king and I chuckled together.

“Isn’t that wonderful, En? Princess Ilyr can go home with us.”

“Yes... I’m very happy we could invite her.”

En nodded in response to Nell’s comment. Her face was expressionless as usual, but I could tell the subtle difference in this particular look—one of joy in her heart. *Heh heh*. As the resident expert on En’s expressions, I could always tell at a single glance exactly what was going on behind her stoic face.

“Zaien, thank you for treating my daughter so well.”

“Of course... We’re friends.”

“I see. Well, as her father, I’m incredibly delighted she has such a wonderful friend in you. She hasn’t been able to make any because of her standing as the princess, you know.”

Radiating a fatherly aura, the king thanked her with a pleased smile. Although Ilyr seemed like nothing more than a little kid full of energy, she was still very much the real deal as far as princesses went. It came as no surprise that she had a hard time making even a single friend.

“Mr. Demon Lord! Lady Hero! EnEn! I’m heeere!”

Speak of the little princess devil, Ilyr bounded energetically into the parlor we were in. From the looks of it, she’d finished packing for her sleepover. All smiles, she carried only a satchel on her shoulder as she traipsed toward us. The main reason she didn’t have much was because we’d assured the king she could borrow clothes from any of the little girls in our dungeon.

By the way, Nell was coming with us too. Though she’d decided to continue being the country’s hero, she wanted to stop by the dungeon and let everyone know about everything that’d happened.

“Oh, there you are, Ilyr.”

“Thank you for inviting me!”

“Ilyr, I don’t mind you visiting, but make sure you don’t trouble them. You must obey them. Understood?”

“Yes, father!”

“Good girl. Now, then. Lord Yuki, I leave her in your care.”

“You got it. I won’t let anything happen to her. Swear on my life.”

After responding to the king, I turned to the other three.

“Okay, troops, time to head home. Use your magic on the things I gave you earlier.”

“Got it, Mr. Yuki.”

“Okay...”

“This necklace, right?!”

As soon as each of them answered me, they activated their dungeon-return devices. Instantly, light surrounded them, and I waited as they vanished from view.

“Cool. Right, so, thanks for everything, King. Let’s meet again soon.”

“My thanks as well, and agreed.”

I waved casually at him before activating my own dungeon-return device with my magic.

“Hmm...? You are returned, then?”

Lefi was the first one to greet us. She’d been lazing away like she always did, so when she’d seen us pop back in the dungeon, she’d slowly sat up to speak to us.

Since it was just past noon, the little-girl gang was probably playing in the meadow area. Lew and Leila would be there too, bringing in the laundry.

In the meantime, though, Lefi walked up to Nell and En and patted their shoulders vigorously.

“Welcome home, Nell, En. Well done on being his watchpeople. Is this imbecile guilty of committing any imbecilic acts?”

“Don’t worry, Lefi. We kept a close eye on him and warned him every time he was on the verge!”

“Yes... Don’t worry.”

“Ugh. Come on, ladies...”

I smiled wryly since I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Next, Lefi turned to me with a sassy grin.

“Welcome home, Yuki.”

“Thanks. It’s good to be home.”

Y'know, it's kinda annoying that hearing those words from her makes me feel at ease.

“Well, I see you are as incorrigible as ever.”

Her expression exasperated, Lefi stared pointedly at Ilyr.

“And where, pray tell, did you lure this wee lass from? Honestly, Yuki, the moment I take my eyes off you, you are up to your old tricks.”

“H-Hey, wait a sec, Lefi. It's not like that. Ilyr is En's friend, so she's here just to hang out with her. I know exactly what you're thinking, and you're so far off base it's not even funny.”

“Hmph. I wonder.”

While Lefi and I argued, Ilyr curtsied neatly to her just like the princess she was. She'd been quietly observing us until now, taking the opportunity to introduce herself.

“My name is Ilyr Glorio Alisia! Please call me Ilyr! Thanks to Mr. Demon Lord's kindness, I shall be staying here for a short time! I look forward to making your ac-quain-tance!”

“Oho, what a well-mannered little thing. My name is Lefisios. You may call me Lefi. I am that imbecile's wife.”

“His wife, you say? But I thought Lady Hero was Mr. Demon Lord's wife.”

“Yes, well, he is a lecherous man. Ergo, he has several wives. You shall meet the third one shortly.”

I took issue with her argument. It wasn't like I was *trying* to be a lecherous man—or even *was* one, for that matter. I liked women, the same as any other normal, healthy man. Still, I couldn't find a good way to refute her since I did, in fact, have three wives, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Several wives? Excellent. Then, as promised, I can become his wife too once I grow up, yes?!”

“Well, well... *Fascinating* news, that is. To confirm, he said he will marry you once you are of age?”

“Yes!”

Ilyr nodded extremely happily.

Lefi smiled, her head turned in my direction as she watched me. Her smile was very lovely. Incredibly lovely. So lovely that I could almost see a terrifying hannya, the grinning horned demoness mask, lurking under the surface.

I started shaking with fear induced by the scarily overpowering pressure coming from her. Meanwhile, Ilyr studied her surroundings with great interest.

“Woow... This is a demon lord’s castle? This room has a very lived-in feel, doesn’t it?!”

That’s ‘cause this is the living room, kiddo. Despite the throne and the overall strangeness of the decorations, it was basically still a living space.

“The outside...is more amazing. I’ll show you.”

“I would love to see it, En!”

Lefi waited for En and Ilyr to leave before she spoke again.

“Now, then, Yuki. You *will* tell me in great detail what transpired, will you not?”

“I-I mean... Look, when a little kid says she wants to be your wife, you can’t just be a jerk about it and turn her down cold, right? B-Besides, I don’t think we should worry. ‘Cause, you know, the things kids like change day by day. I doubt she’ll still feel the same way in the future.”

Once she grew up, I was sure Ilyr would completely forget about the likes of me. It was a foregone conclusion in my mind.

Lefi listened silently as I strung words together in a panic. Then, she exhaled quietly and replied, sounding fed up.

“You fool. That is precisely how you always destroy your own escape routes. Am I not correct, Nell?”

“I would agree. Mr. Yuki, you really need to be careful of evil women. You know that, don’t you? If you ever end up with a serious wound, it will be because a woman tricked you.”

“O-Okay, okay, I get it. I’ll be careful, so get off my back already.”

“Hmm, you are correct, Nell. In that event, it will fall to us to protect him. This one is much too soft and useless when facing women.”

“He really is. Mr. Yuki, you remain undaunted against opponents when they’re men, but you’re surprisingly spineless against women. Case in point, you gave in to Ronia’s badgering about your wings quickly and showed them to her during our time in the capital.”

“I-I didn’t have a reason to say no to her...”

Plus, considering how uncommunicative Little Miss Royal Conjurer was most of the time, I would’ve felt bad turning down her passionate pleas on the subject.

“Hmm... We must hold a conference later. I shall summon Lew as well so we can convene the Fifth Council of Wives.”

“Oh, perfect timing. I actually wanted to tell you both something as well. About the future.”

“Understood, Nell. Then your topic will be the focus of this upcoming conference.”

Question. If this “council” has already held four meetings, why am I only hearing about it for the first time right now?

The two girls understood each other on instinct alone the second they saw each other.

“Grr...!”

“Grrrr...!”

Each realized that the other might prove to be her rival.

“Well-come back, En! You got new friend with you, huh?! What her name?”

“Yes... We became friends in the capital. Ilyr.”

“Oh, really?! Nice to meet you, Ilyr! I’m Shii!”

“Nice to meet you too, Shii! Um, can I ask what you are?”

“I’m a slime!”

The light-blue little girl answered her with a happy smile.

“A slime...?”

Was there a type of slime that could take on a human form? The situation perplexed her, but perhaps it wasn’t so strange since she was within the confines of a dungeon ruled by a demon lord. Ilyr was satisfied with that explanation.

She turned toward the other girl, who had set off alarm bells in her head the minute their eyes had met—Iluna.

“And what’s *your* name?”

“I’m Iluna. Nice to meet you, Ilyr.”

Though they exchanged words pleasantly on the surface, they were both eyeing each other intently. Their first point of contention was height, which was more or less the same. However, if one looked *very* closely, Ilyr was just the tiniest bit taller. Iluna growled deep in her throat at Ilyr’s cute but triumphant expression.

A second later, they regrouped, their expressions serious again for the second battle. This time, they scrutinized each other’s chests. The girls knew that men found big-breasted women appealing, though they didn’t really understand why. And just like with their heights, there wasn’t much of a difference on that front between them. However, Iluna’s chest swelled just the slightest bit more than Ilyr’s. Now, it was Iluna’s turn to look triumphant, while Ilyr harrumphed and scowled in aggravation.

“One win and one loss each, which means we have a draw. Our next battle is when we come of age, Iluna!”

“Yup! And I won’t lose!”

“That’s my line!”

The young rivals acknowledged each other with a firm handshake.

“What the matter with them?”

“I don’t know...”

Shii and En had been watching them the whole time, their heads tilted in befuddlement.

“Okay, Ilyr! Since you’re out here, that must mean you wanna see the castle, right?”

“Yes... I brought her here. I want to introduce her to everyone else too.”

“Okay! Let’s go together!”

“Thank you so— Eep!”

Ilyr let out an adorable shriek of surprise when three faces suddenly appeared out of nowhere near her feet. The ones who’d startled her were the mischievous triplets, Rui, Rei, and Roh.

“G-G-Ghosts?!”

“Nope. They’re wraiths, and they’re sisters. The one in the middle is Rei, on the right is Rui, and on the left is Roh!”

Iluna hadn’t so much as flinched because she was used to their tricks. She introduced them to Ilyr.

“Huh? B-But aren’t wraiths ghost monsters?”

Iluna cocked her thoughtfully at Ilyr’s nervous question.

“Hmm... *Are* they ghosts?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know...”

Shii and En said the same thing, their expressions just as quizzical as Iluna’s. The wraith sisters also looked confused by the question, staring at each other as they tried to find an answer.

Uh-oh. Am I wrong? Just when Ilyr began doubting her own knowledge, Iluna smiled cheerfully and spoke again.

“Ghosts or whatever, it doesn’t matter! They’re our friends too!”

“O-Oh, I see... A-All right, I understand. Nice to meet you, Rei, Rui, Roh.”

The wraith triplets replied to Ilyr by spinning happily in the air around her.

Looks like Ilyr and the little-girl gang are getting along well. I'd summoned the residents of the dungeon together for some casual introductions and then the girls had whisked her away outside to play. My heart felt purified just watching them play together so happily.

"Wow. A real princess, huh? You work fast, don't you, my lord?"

"Lew, for the love of all that is unholy, stop making it sound like I seduce women left and right."

I wouldn't deny that there might be something to them calling me a lecher, what with my track record of relationships with women so far, but that didn't mean I'd seduced or tricked anyone. I *never* chased women around one after another, hitting on them like some Casanova.

Aside from Shii and the wraith sisters, the rest of the women who lived in the dungeon had just sort of fallen into my lap. It wasn't like I'd personally gone on a quest for any of them, so how could I be blamed for having gone with the flow? *Right. And that's why I'm not a seducer of women. Definitely not. QED.*

"My lord, methinks thou doth protest too much considering all the women you're surrounded by. You have no excuses, you lady killer, you!"

Lew grinned cheerfully while poking me in the side with her elbow. Annoyed, I grabbed both of her cheeks and pulled hard.

"Auch! Dah hursh! Whad ah yew doin?!"

"Mm, yes. I sure have missed these sublime cheeks..."

Soft and velvety as they were, I could touch them forever. Lefi's wings were dangerously addictive too, but Lew's cheeks had their own unique charm. It was like touching a silk fabric versus touching a fuzzy blanket. Both were appealing in different ways.

I rubbed and played with her cheeks until her eyes became teary. Then, I saw her arms coming my way. Clearly, she intended to retaliate.

"Grr! I wond losh! I'll addack yur heeks choo, my lawd!"

“Oho! You dare challenge Demon Lord Yuki?! Fine! I accept!”

Having gone off the deep end for reasons unknown, I shot those words back at Lew. Thus began the desperate battle between a demon lord and his wife-
maid!

“Both of your cheeks are red. Dare I ask why?”

“It’s nothing...”

We replied in unison as Lefi stared at us curiously. Lew and I grinned secretly at each other while rubbing our respective reddened cheeks.



In the inn behind the castle.

“All right, ladies. We shall now commence the Fifth Council of Wives.”

The attendees clapped politely. It wasn’t the sort of situation that strictly required applause, but they had watched Yuki do so with similar events, so they, too, ended up mimicking him.

“On this occasion, Nell will provide us with the details of his stay in Alisia’s royal capital. Lew, you were not informed in advance, but that is the main reason we are convening today.”

“Great! I’d love to hear more about my lord’s antics.”

The conference attendees were, of course, Yuki’s three wives, Lefi, Lew, and Nell. Iluna and En, and sometimes Shii as well, sat in the seats—floor cushions—reserved for members of the public. They weren’t here this time, though, because of their guest.

In truth, that wasn’t technically the case. Anyone aside from Yuki was free to participate in these meetings because a variety of topics for discussion were always encouraged. If their little guest had expressed interest in attending, they would have certainly allowed her to join them. However, all the little girls were already asleep, having exhausted themselves playing, which was the real reason for their absence. They must have really enjoyed themselves to the fullest with their new friend.

Incidentally, Leila had an open invitation to their gatherings, but she always politely abstained from participating. In Lefi's estimation, Leila most likely harbored some affection for Yuki. The only issue was that other powerful desires took precedence for the young woman, which naturally meant that she thought of essentially everything else as being low priority.

"First, I would like to ask about that child. Did she become attached to Yuki during your stay there?"

"Yup, more or less. Um, I don't know how much you two know about it, but do you remember the problem Mr. Yuki solved in the Kingdom of Alisia sometime ago? The crisis in the capital?"

"Yes, he did indeed give me a general summary of events. I believe the crown prince was brainwashed by demons and eventually murdered, his corpse becoming the plaything of a necromancer?"

"I remember feeling kinda sorry for the prince when my lord told us."

"Good, then you know the story. So, during the crisis in the capital, His Majesty and the princess, Ilyr, were captured and held in the dungeons. Mr. Yuki was the one who rescued them."

"I see. I am beginning to understand now. That young child latched on to Yuki, who would have seemed like her knight in shining armor when he came to her rescue. In short, the same pattern as you, Nell."

"W-Well, gee. I suppose you're right."

Nell's reply sounded a bit embarrassed.

"There isn't really much more to say after that. Princess Ilyr was simply overjoyed to see Mr. Yuki again when we visited the royal capital this time. She and En became friends very quickly. I always got along well with her too, so one thing followed another and she ended up visiting here. Although I'm almost positive her original reason for coming was Mr. Yuki. So here we are now."

"Since Ilyr's a princess, I guess that means her father, the king, gave her permission to leave the castle, huh?"

Lew looked amazed by the idea.

“Because His Majesty knows Mr. Yuki’s true identity and is well aware of his strength. He said he felt secure as long as Princess Ilyr was with him, that she was probably safer anywhere with him than she was simply staying in the castle like usual. He also thought it was better for his daughter to make friends her own age than remain cooped up inside.”

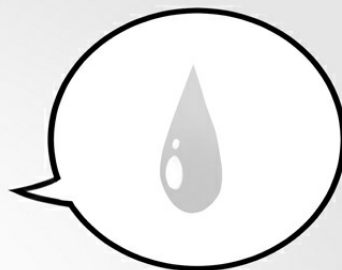
“Gah ha! A man who knows his own mind. He and Yuki sound quite compatible, especially since Yuki takes a shine to such people.”

“Yes, Mr. Yuki’s very relaxed around His Majesty. He even gave him those special elixirs and a dungeon-return necklace in case there’s an emergency.”

“Oho, then they are indeed close. He finally has a male friend, eh?”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right, Lefi. I just realized that he really doesn’t have any male friends. I guess Rir is the only one? Even though he’s not a person.”

“Lord Rir is indeed a male. Though if we have to count him as one of my lord’s friends, I suddenly feel kind of bad for my lord...”



“You have a point too, Lew...”

Lew and Nell exchanged wry smiles.

“Another query for you. Did you learn anything new about him?”

Nell nodded affirmatively in response to Lefi’s question.

“I found out Mr. Yuki isn’t very good at dancing.”

“D-Dancing?”

Lefi stared at Nell in surprise. She hadn’t at all expected those words to come out of her mouth.

“Heh. Yup, you heard right. The king hosted a ball when we were in the capital. During our practice sessions, Mr. Yuki couldn’t dance to save his life.”

“Hmm... For some reason, I can well imagine the sight.”

“In the end, he used his special power as a demon lord to acquire an ability called Dance, so he managed somehow. Even then, though, he has no sense for rhythm, you know? He would mutter and groan and grumble every time he fumbled his steps, like he was in dire straits. I feel bad for saying this, but I thought he was super cute like that.”

Nell grinned as she spoke, probably recalling her memories from that time.

“Ooh, I bet it was super fun watching him! I would’ve loved to see that too... You think he’ll do it if I ask?”

“Honestly, I doubt it. I remember him mumbling that he would never do it again once he realized he’s not good at it.”

“I can readily envision that as well.”

The three of them burst out laughing.

After that, the trio entertained themselves with more tales of happenings in the royal capital and Yuki’s behavior. The Council had become more akin to a chat. A while later, however, Nell’s expression became serious as she broached another subject.

“One more thing... I’m sorry, you two. I decided to continue being a hero, which means I won’t be able to come here as often. Mr. Yuki said it was fine, but...”

“No way! You’re going back to the humans’ country, Nell?”

Sadness clouded Lew’s face.

“I am. Forgive me, Lew. There’s trouble brewing in my country, and I just can’t leave it alone right now. Until they don’t need me anymore, I’ll stay there to help the country achieve stability. After that, I’ll hand the reins to the next hero and come back here. I promise.”

Lefi spoke next.

“You are firm on your decision, yes?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And Yuki said he accepts?”

“Yup. I wouldn’t have been able to make it if he hadn’t given me the push I needed.”

“I see... Then there is nothing more to say. But do not forget this, Nell.”

“What is it?”

Lefi’s lips turned up in a smile at Nell’s puzzled look.

“You are a resident here. Thus, you have a duty to return. And should anything befall you, call upon us without reserve. I have said it before and I will say it again now: we are *family*.”

“Thank you, Lefi.”

Nell beamed happily.

“Th-That’s right! We’re family! I can’t believe I’m complaining even though you have so much to deal with, Nell! Just like Lady Lefi said, lean on us if anything happens! Well, I say that, but there isn’t much I can personally do to help. Not like Lady Lefi or my lord can...”

“You’re wrong, Lew. Your energy gives *me* energy, and I have so much fun when I’m with you.”

“R-Really? Oh, well... Heh... Tee hee... Then I’ll share my energy with you, Nell!”

Lew raised her hands and faced her palms toward the hero, then shouted, “Hyaaaah!” as she began sending some sort of energy toward her. Nell giggled and raised her own hands. With a “Got it!” she caught the invisible waves and curled her fingers to form fists, trapping the energy.

“All right, you two! I leave Mr. Yuki in your very capable hands. Since I can’t be here all the time, it’s up to you both to support him when he feels weak, okay?”

“Of course. We would fail as that imbecile’s wives if we caused you to worry while you are away.”

“She’s right again! You can count on us, Nell! Lady Lefi and I will protect my lord or die trying!”

They nodded fiercely.



In the kitchen, Leila had just finished preparing food. She picked up the plate it was on and headed toward the living space that Yuki called the real throne room and everyone else referred to as the living room.

“Everyone, the snacks are ready!”

“Oho! I have been waiting an eternity, Leila! That is...a pound cake, yes?!”

“Indeed it is, Lady Lefi,” she replied. She couldn’t help chuckling at the dragon girl’s childlike excitement as she placed the plate on top of the table.

“Ooh! Looks delish. Thanks, Leila.”

The master of this dungeon commented from his position at the workbench situated off to the side of the room. Taking a break from whatever latest project he was working on in his area with its collection of scattered goods, he stood up and started walking over to them. However, the dragon girl marched over and blocked his path.

“You are forbidden from drawing any closer, Yuki. If I recall correctly, the last time I was enjoying a confection, you had the gall to tell me, ‘Jeez, you really

are such a glutton when it comes to sweets.’ As such, I have decided that you need not partake of this one. Be grateful, for we shall eat your portion for you.”

“Whaaat? Nuh-uh, you’ve got it all wrong. I only said that because I’m always amazed you don’t get tired of eating sweets since you devour them like crazy. I didn’t say a single word about me not eating them myself.”

“Clearly, our memories differ. I distinctly remember explaining to you at length the wondrous charms of confections after your uncalled-for statement, yet you hardly paid my words any mind. In fact, you seemed quite disinterested. You lack the proper respect for sweet things and are therefore not worthy of consuming them.”

“‘The proper respect for sweet things’? What the hell?”

They continued their fruitless quarrel for some time after that, each ready with their own argument. But the young hero, already sitting at the table, put a stop to it.

“If you two don’t get a move on, I’ll eat it all myself. Do you hear me? Leila, a piece for me, please.”

“Of course. Here you go.”

Used to their antics, Nell chided them as usual. Then, she picked up a fork, dug it into her slice of pound cake, and carried a morsel to her mouth.

“Ngh! W-Wait, Nell! Gah, I should not be wasting my breath on this imbecile. Hmph. So be it. I shall relent since I am magnanimous of heart. You may have a piece despite your lack of respect for sweet things.”

“Stop acting like you’re the one who made it when Leila did all the work. Don’t you dare forget to thank her.”

“Fool. As if I would ever think so little of Leila when she is the only one who can make such delicious things. In my personal hierarchy, Leila rests at the very top, followed by the other residents of this dungeon. And I shall let you know that *you* are at the very bottom.”

“Am I really? You do know that *I’m* the one who taught Leila how to make it, don’t you?”

“Disregarding the items you can produce using the dungeon’s power, did you not fail at making it yourself? *Leila* is the one who successfully baked it after putting forth considerable effort.”

“Okay, fair point.”

“However, I shall give you credit for helping her learn how to make this confection.”

“Yeah, yeah, thank you *sooo* much.”

Leila beamed at the pleasure on their faces as they started eating their own slices of the pound cake. A few moments later, Lew peeked in on them from the kitchen.

“Leila, can I bring this cake out too?”

“Yes. Please take it to Iluna and the other children playing outside. And make sure they wash their hands first, hm?”

“You got it! I won’t screw this up!”

With that cheerful response and a separate plate of pound cake in hand, Lew walked through the door connected to the outside.

Leila had just finished washing all the plates after everyone ate the cake. Now, she was in the meadow area, with its unbroken view of the preposterously humongous castle. She started taking down the laundry she’d hung up this morning.

It always piled up quickly because of the number of residents here, but Leila was extremely efficient in everything she did, so she made quick work of this task as well. It was then that she heard a young voice calling out to her.

“Oh, Miss Leila, you’re here! Do you need help?”

Leila turned her head to find Iluna.

“Hello, there, Iluna. I’m fine, but thank you for the offer. Are you in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek?”

The little girl was crouched low to the ground at one end of the laundry line.

She'd been hidden by the sheet Leila had just taken down, so neither had noticed the other until now.

"Yup! We usually play in the courtyard, but we all know where everyone hides. Plus, Ilyr's here too, so we decided to play outside today!"

"Heh, is that right? Isn't the meadow a bit large for your game, though?"

"Yeah, I think we might have made a mistake choosing it. Since it's so big, we decided how far away we can hide, but no one's found me yet, even with two people who are 'it'..."

The little girl's dramatic sigh was adorable as she trailed off in a mumble. Leila smiled and spoke to her while her hands remained busy with the laundry.

"Then you have no choice but to narrow the boundaries further, hm? I'm certain the other children are looking for you, so don't lose heart."

At that very moment, they heard voices from afar calling Iluna's name.

"Iluuunaaa! Where iiis youuu?!"

"Iluna! Where are you?!"

The first belonged to Shii, and the other to Ilyr, the human princess who had come to visit their dungeon a little while ago.

"Oh, they're coming! Okay, I'll do what you said. Thank you, Miss Leila! Good luck with work!"

Iluna waved energetically at Leila, then raced away eagerly in the direction of the voices. Having finished taking down all the laundry, Leila picked up the basket and started walking back to the door connected to the real throne room. She knew the girls would come back covered in dirt, so she murmured to herself, "I must remember to have everything ready for their baths later."

Evening.

"Sup, Leila? Anything I can help with?"

Yuki, the man who employed her, poked his head into the kitchen, where she was preparing dinner.

“Are you sure, Master Demon Lord? I thought you were busy working on something.”

“Yeah, a ring. But I’m free as a bird now. Figured it must be tough for you all alone here, so I’m here to lend a hand.”

Leila was currently cooking by herself. Normally, Lew and Nell—and sometimes Lefi and Iluna—would be in here helping her, but they were all taking a bath in the inn behind the castle, leaving her alone in the kitchen. She had politely declined their invitation to join them because she’d been worried the bathtub wouldn’t fit everyone.

She didn’t actually find it overly difficult to make meals on her own, but she felt that it would be discourteous to her master to turn down his offer of help, so she nodded.

“Thank you very much. I appreciate it.”

“You can count on me. Let’s see what’s on the menu tonight... Based on these ingredients, I’m guessing it’s curry?”

“Indeed. I thought it would be nice to serve Ilyr something she’s never tasted.”

“Great idea. Besides, no kid hates curry.”

“Tee hee. Very true, sir. After all, Iluna and the others love it too, hm?”

“I know, right? Okay, cool. Why don’t I chop up the vegetables, then.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

Having split up their tasks, Leila and Yuki worked side by side in a comfortable silence.

A maid and her master. In a normal household, two people with such a distinct gap in position would hardly ever interact, much less be in the same room together. Yet here they were, standing shoulder to shoulder as they prepared dinner. Moreover, this master was a demon lord feared by society at large, while she herself was a maid who worked primarily as a scholar. Only here could such a sight even be seen.

The world is such a wondrous place, full of fortune and misfortune alike. That’s

what makes it so fascinating in the first place. And how lucky I am to be a part of it.

“Hmm? What’s up? Wanna let me in on why you look so happy?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing at all.”

Leila smiled cheerfully at her master, who stared at her with a bemused expression, and continued cooking.



Right around the time the little girls were playing outside.

“Wh-Whaaat?”

Courtesy of some elbow grease, I’d succeeded at creating a prototype ring. I’d wanted to store it in Inventory, so I’d called up the spatial rift that acted as the opening. But when I’d gone to put my prototype in there, it’d snapped back, landing on the floor and spinning a few times before coming to a stop.

“Huh? Wait, why?”

I picked up the prototype and moved it toward the rift again, and the same thing happened again—it bounced back and clattered to the ground, whirling around. After that, I tried opening and closing Inventory a few times, my attempts to put the ring away becoming more desperate each time, but Inventory still refused to accept it.

“I-Is it bugging out? That doesn’t make any sense, though. How can Inventory be bug—”

Wait a sec. I’d just remembered something. I hadn’t been worried about it before, but I was pretty sure this Inventory had a storage limit. I’d completely forgotten that it was designed to change how big it was inside depending on the amount of magical energy I had.

“Don’t tell me it’s at max capacity...”

Compared to Lefi, my demon-lord-level magic energy pool was more like a puddle. Compared to the average person, though, I basically had an inexhaustible supply. That was why I’d never given it a single thought as I tossed one thing after another into Inventory. Not until now, anyway.

But I was pretty sure I'd done a little spring cleaning of Inventory a while back, before I'd drunk the weird potion that'd transformed me into a child, like the famous detective. Now that I thought about it, though, I'd just checked what was inside and tossed out actual garbage while leaving everything else alone.

Well, shoot. Finally hit the limit, did I?

"Maaan... Looks like I'll have to clean it out and organize it for real this time."

I was in the meadow area now.

"Yuki... You amassed this much, did you...?"

Lefi had tagged along with me on my trip outside, probably because she'd looked bored right as I'd left and had wanted to see what I planned on doing. She muttered those words as she stared at the small mountain of items in front of us, an astonished expression on her face.

"Guess so. Can't say I expected this either, honestly."

I'd figured that taking everything out of Inventory would be a good start, so I'd done just that. But it'd taken me a while because the stuff had just kept coming, and coming, and coming. It was all the things I'd collected since being reborn in this other world.

To break it down, about sixty percent of Inventory's content was monster carcasses. This part didn't surprise me too much. I'd known it was probably a lot since I had a tendency to basically hoard them for food or emergency rations.

What *did* surprise me, though, was the collection of weapons I'd crafted, which made up about thirty percent of Inventory. Greatswords I'd used forever ago as my main weapons. Heavyweight weapons like greataxes and supermassive hammers. And then there were the relatively normal swords and daggers.

I also had weapons I'd made as a joke—one a scythe, the other a sword absolutely *dripping* with ornaments. Plus a few others that were all form and no function because I'd modeled them after what I'd seen in anime. The only way I could see them being used was for cosplay.

Somewhere along the line, I'd made a habit of making something whenever I had free time. I knew that, so I also knew I'd made a lot, but even I had no idea I'd created *this* much.

The remaining ten percent consisted of board games, potions, and other small things. Those were still in Inventory, though. I'd checked them in the living room—correction, the real throne room earlier, then put them back because I didn't want them getting dirty out here.

Hmm... Even if there's a lot, finding a solution to the problem shouldn't be too hard. Converting around half of the monster parts to DP was one easy option. I'd chosen to hold on to such a huge supply on purpose for emergencies because of the last time I'd run dangerously low on DP, but this was a little much, even for me.

As for the weapons collection, I felt kinda bad for thinking it, but tossing them was probably my best option. I wasn't gonna use anything else as long as I had En. *Ahhh, but I really don't wanna get rid of the things I made. I'd prefer to keep as many as I can... You know what? I'll think about it later. Future me can deal with this specific issue.*

In the meantime, I went to work converting monster carcasses to DP. While I did, Lefi, still next to me and still looking astounded, picked up something from the pile of weapons I'd created. Now, her expression conveyed a hint of interest.

"Yuki, what is this?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's a magical girl wand."

"What?"

"A magical girl wand. You hold it like this and say something like, 'On behalf of the moon, I shall punish you!'"

I took it from Lefi and posed for her, acting all energetically cute and girly.

"..."

"Starlight Breaker!"

"..."



“Hey. Don’t look at me like that. It was a joke, okay? A joke.”

I’d originally made it for the little girls, thinking a magical girl wand would make them happy. But my memory of one was so faint that I’d ended up creating some eerie wand mixed with lots of random elements from different lores. It looked more like something you’d see an actual conjurer use instead of a magical girl, so I’d tossed it into Inventory, where it had sat unused, collecting proverbial dust.

“Well, if you say so. In any case, what is this?”

“A gunsword. You see the middle part there? It’s a long-range weapon that fires lead balls, but the knife I added to it also makes it good as a close-combat weapon.”

“Hmm... Based on what you have just told me, this one at least seems useful.”

“‘Seems’ being the key word here.”

What Lefi held in her hands wasn’t some normal rifle with a bayonet slapped onto it. No, it was a straight-up gunsword, with the barrel being the literal blade of a sword. It was the kind of thing you’d see in anime and shit—a weapon that tickled the heart of every person afflicted with main character syndrome. So, naturally, I’d tried making it, but, well...

The frame of the weapon itself posed a problem for me. It’d wound up being really brittle, making it easy for the blade to break. And every time I slashed at something, the barrel itself would warp, meaning bullets couldn’t shoot out of it properly. In practical terms, it was useless. *Turns out the only thing cool about a gunsword is the way it looks.*

Also, there was my Magic Pistol. Y’know, the one I used a lot? While it might’ve been a special case because its power depended on magic, frankly speaking, guns in this world were useless. Muskets actually existed here, so I’d been pretty stoked to try one out. Imagine my disappointment when I found out how hard it sucked.

If I were to shoot one, first and foremost, I’d miss basically every shot because of my noob status. Second, on the off chance I actually hit what I was aiming at, if it were anything like a monster in the Demonic Forest, the bullet would just

bounce off without inflicting any real damage. And even supposing a bullet *did* pierce my target, a lot of monsters were huge, so bullets wouldn't be all that effective against them in the first place. To put it bluntly, En was much more powerful, whether I used her to bash or slash. Muskets supposedly worked great against normal monsters, but from what I'd heard, even humanoid species could use magic to defend against single-fire varieties if they so chose.

I had no idea if this world's technology would undergo some sort of rapid advancement in the future and reach the level of modern rapid-fire guns. I did know one thing, though: I definitely couldn't make something that advanced, and neither could DP. As someone who lived in the Demonic Forest, if I couldn't wallop an opponent with a weapon, it was garbage.

"This is...a normal log, is it not? Why do you even have such a thing?"

"Nah, you're wrong. That log is a weapon."

"What? A weapon? Surely not."

"Surely yeah. The most powerful weapon there is against bloodsuckers. You hold it like this and then you say, 'Everyone, you've got your logs, right?!'"

"And you say this proves effective against them?"

"I mean, it's a blunt instrument, so it would pretty much work on anyone, not just bloodsuckers."

"..."

Lefi stared at me like she was thinking, "What the hell is he even saying?" Except I couldn't help her out with that. *It is what it is*. She just needed to take my word for it. End of discussion.

Then, she stared at the mountain of weapons for a while before nodding as if she'd thought of something.

"Right, then. I shall be glad to set this ablaze."

"Whoa! Wait, wait, *wait!*"

She produced brilliant, dazzling flames from both hands, and I rushed in front of her to stop her.

“Why? You intend to dispose of them, do you not? So allow me, for I can accomplish the deed in an instant.”

“I-I haven’t decided what to get rid of yet, though! Let me do that first! Don’t just burn the whole thing down without my say-so!”

“But everything here is rubbish.”

“Incorrect! Everything here is *not* rubbish!”

These are all my beloved creations, ones I’ve poured my heart and soul into! A small sigh escaped Lefi’s lips at my desperate argument.

“Haah... Fine. Then you will clean this up at once. Oh, but I will incinerate this magical girl what-have-you and the log. I find them irksome.”

“What?! My magical girl wand and log?!”

The flames she unleashed started consuming the two items like a raging wildfire. The log made sense, sure, but the magical girl wand not so much. That was made of iron, so it shouldn’t’ve been burning as quickly as it was. *Cripes, how hot are her flames?*

“Come, now. Stop dithering and get a move on. As the children’s de facto guardian, you should at least be able to clean up after yourself. Otherwise, they will laugh at you.”

“A-All right, I get it. I get it, so will you *please* extinguish those scary-ass flames first?!”

And that was how, spurred on by the fear of Lefi mercilessly cremating anything I couldn’t immediately decide whether to toss or keep, I found myself working diligently to organize Inventory.



While hanging up laundry outside the castle, Lew spoke, her tone slightly exasperated.

“Sheesh... My lord, you really do wear the same clothes *all* the time, don’t you?”

She’d known this for quite a while since she was often responsible for the

laundry, but it nevertheless struck her every time how limited Yuki's wardrobe actually was. It consisted primarily of thick pants called "jeans" and shirts; he possessed no other varieties of clothing. The only real difference between his shirts was whether or not there was a design on them.

"H-Hey, that's not fair," he protested. "You wear the same clothes all the time too. You're always in your maid uniform."

The girl's master stood next to her, helping her hang up the laundry.

"Well, yeah, since these are my work clothes. What else would I be wearing?"

"Uhhh, then... Aha, I know! These clothes are basically *my* uniform. They're easy to move in, which is my number one priority, so there's no problem at all with them! Perfect for my daily bouts of making and enhancing weapons or monster hunting!"

Lew could admit that they seemed quite comfortable. He didn't mind getting them dirty either, so she supposed they were suitable as work clothes.

"All right, my lord, but I still think you should wear heavier equipment whenever you go out into the Forest. You always leave the dungeon wearing your everyday clothes, and I don't like it."

"Oho, what's this? Are you worried about me?"

"Of course I am. Do you even have to ask? You *are* my future husband, after all."

"Y-Yeah, you're right. I'm kinda embarrassed now, hearing you say that straight to my face..."

He scratched a flushed cheek before continuing.

"Okay, so, I did actually try out different kinds of armor a while back, and I learned that any half-assed armor gets obliterated by one hit from anything in the Demonic Forest. When I realized halfway through my experiment that there was no point, I stopped wearing any. Besides, an amateur like me can't move very well in heavy armor."

"Then what about light armor like the type Nell wears?"

"I actually tested out some light armor back then too, but even the good stuff

didn't last long, so no dice. And the truth is, the main reason I choose not to wear any armor whatsoever is because it's just not my thing. I mean, even a dragon's attack couldn't blast this body of mine to pieces. I won't deny that I've had some parts bitten off, but yeah, that's pretty much why I honestly don't think I need to worry about armor."

"I-I suppose that's a pretty convincing argument, my lord."

"Right?"

Lew smiled wryly, acknowledging how unusual her master's defensive strength was.

"Also, Lefi wears the same dress every day, right? Since I'll change up the color of my jeans or shirt design depending on the day, I'm at least a step above her, dontcha think?"

"I don't think it's a fair fight if the bar is so low, my lord."

Still, Lew couldn't deny that every article of her mistress's clothing was exactly the same. Lady Lefi showed zero interest in fashion, albeit probably because, as a dragon, she never actually wore clothes in the first place. It was no surprise, then, that she favored her dress, with the reasoning, "It is easy to wear and remove." Lew secretly thought the dress was wasted on Lefi since she knew it was made of high-quality materials.

"Honestly, it's so annoying that you two think the same way about clothes. You know that Iluna and the others keep up on fashion because they love that sort of thing, right?"

"Well, yeah, they're girls. Only natural that they wanna be stylish."

Many of the clothes in this pile of laundry belonged to Iluna and En. Iluna often wore a dress that matched Lefi's, but she also wore shorts and pants because they were easy to move around in. They suited the active little girl very well. With Princess Ilyr also currently in residence, the amount of laundry had increased slightly, as Iluna had lent the other girl her own clothes due to their similar frames.

Most of En's apparel consisted of traditional clothing. Lew didn't know its origins, but the color combinations were unique, as was the craftsmanship.

Given her foreign features, though, they fit the little girl's aura strangely perfectly.

Regarding En's clothes, whenever the little girl switched from her human form back to her sword form, her clothes didn't simply fall off and remain behind. They stayed on her, so she would be in the same outfit when she switched back to being a human. It was a very mysterious phenomenon, to say the least.

As for Shii, she didn't have any clothes since, on account of her being a slime, she could take on any shape she wanted. She had tried on Iluna's clothes once, but the little slime girl hadn't enjoyed the experience. Lew hadn't seen her wear clothes again since then. Perhaps she just couldn't get used to the feeling of her skin being covered, considering she acquired nutrients directly through the surface of her body. Thus, her "clothes" could be more accurately described as "a part of her body in the form of clothes."

For Lew, the most interesting items in the laundry were the dolls. The wraith girls possessed these as their "physical" bodies, so she washed them whenever they became dirty. A variety of these dolls existed, but each triplet used her own specific ones, forsaking any of the ones her sisters had claimed.

Clearly, each girl in the household had her own clothing preferences.

"Speaking of clothes, I just realized that I don't think I've seen Leila in anything other than her maid uniform. Maybe just her pajamas. You, on the other hand, wear different clothes when you go out."

"Ahhh... She doesn't really care about clothes, so she's a lot like you and Lady Lefi in that respect, my lord. Before she came here, she apparently only wore pants and button-downs made out of hemp. I'm almost positive she likes her maid uniform for being so easy to work in compared to those."

"Huh, you may be right. She's a scholar through and through, which means she pretty much ignores everything unless it piques her curiosity."

"You're sure right about that."

Lew and Yuki smiled ruefully at each other.

"If you don't know her well, Leila might seem like a superwoman, but she's got a surprising number of chinks in her armor."

“Yup. For example, she’s not really a morning person. She spaces out for ages whenever she wakes up and it’s so cute.”

“Ooh, I kinda wanna see that.”

Yuki laughed as adroitly hung up laundry.

Incidentally, the women of the house thought nothing of Yuki doing such things. And Yuki himself wasn’t perturbed by their clothing, underwear, and such since he considered them all members of his family; he merely hung everything on the line like it was entirely ordinary. He didn’t know that the women found that very attitude of his interesting and puzzling.

“Which means, out of all the residents here, Nell is probably the most fashionable, huh, my lord?”

It hadn’t taken Lew long to learn how thoughtful and careful Nell was with even the smallest things. Her attention to detail also showed in her choice of apparel. A single glance at her stylish clothes in the pile of laundry would tell anyone of the care she’d put into selecting colors and combinations.

“Yeah, Nell’s super feminine. And I found out recently that she’s really ladylike too,” Yuki said. Lew responded in an understanding voice.

“Hmm... Thinking about it, I have to agree. I wonder if that was part of her education as a hero.”

“Probably. I remember her telling me she often has to meet with important folks. Oh, wait, she also told me she actually did have lessons in etiquette and stuff. I just forgot until now.”

Lew giggled at Yuki’s careless shrug.

“Heh. You’ve never been a fan of formalities, huh, my lord? I bet if you ever became a hero, you’d escape almost immediately so you could run around doing whatever you wanted.”

“Oh, so you *do* know me, eh? You’re right, ’cause the job I’m best suited for is being a demon lord! No way does ‘hero’ fit my vibe.”

“Who knows? You might find it interesting if you ever get the chance. Let’s see. If you were a hero, Nell could be a priest, Leila a sage, and I’d be a warrior?

Iluna and the others would be children living in the orphanage on our base. As for Lady Lefi...I can't think of a role for her."

"Lefi, huh? She'd be the final boss. Except we'd raid her lair during her nap and lure her to our side with sweets."

"Oh, wow. I can *easily* imagine that now."

They both laughed as they visualized the lazy dragon girl in that scenario. The two of them continued chatting while hanging up the rest of the laundry. Once they were finished, they picked up the empty laundry basket and walked side by side back to the real throne room, also known as their living room.



"Miss Nell. I will now have you participate in a loot roll."

"Huh? I'm doing what now?"

Nell responded to my sudden words.

"You don't have to say that like a main character who suddenly can't hear something at the most inconvenient time. But I'll be nice and repeat myself. I will now have you participate in a loot roll."

"N-No, it's not that I didn't hear you. I just don't understand what you're saying. That's why I asked in the first place. Wait, what kind of main character even acts like that?"

I am of the belief that it'll create a whole host of other problems if I try to explain in detail, so please allow me to ignore your question instead.

"A loot roll is a loot roll. You can see my display now too, right?"

"R-Right. Your demon lord—no, wait, it's the dungeon's power, yes?"

"Yup. There's a category called 'Loot Roll' in there. This particular dungeon function allows me to receive various items in return for paying a fixed amount. That's how I got Rir."

"Oh, wow! I had no idea. What an amazing power indeed."

Nell looked incredibly surprised by Rir's origin.

"Yeah, it sure is. A power that enthralled countless warriors, leading them to

an explosive doom...”

“Doom?! You’re going to die in an explosion?!”

“That’s right. Something good demands a high price, y’know. The darkness that is the loot roll system plunges people into the bottomless addiction of microtransaction hell. It spurs their anxiety and frustration until those who are unlucky die explosive deaths from bombing their rolls constantly.”

Nell sunk into an overwhelmed silence. She must’ve sensed something from my words, which I’d spoken with a faraway look in my eyes.

Thinking about it now, my Luck value might’ve been low ever since my old life. *The next one. The next one for sure.* A hell of uninterrupted suffering as I fell into the gambler’s trap. And when I *did* pull an SSR, either I’d already had it or it’d been a new one with some dogshit ability. *You know what? Let’s not remember that anymore.*

I took a deep, deep, *deep* breath and chased away those dark, unlucky memories. Then, I cleared my throat before continuing to talk to Nell.

“Ahem. But I think you should be fine. You have the highest Luck value out of anyone I’ve seen so far. I seriously doubt such a fate is in your future.”

“Um, M-Mr. Yuki? I-I don’t really want to do something that terrifying, though...”

“Yes, yes, loot rolls are indeed terrifying. But never fear! I have a boatload of DP to spare. Anyone foolish enough to challenge loot rolls without doing their due diligence deserves the explosive death that awaits them. Your luck and my wealth. By combining these two, it’s crystal clear that everything will go well.”

“Ummm... A-Are we *really* going to do this?”

“Don’t worry! It’ll work! I know it will! Because you’re you! It’ll *definitely* work! Don’t give up!”

“Mr. Yuki, you *do* know that your attitude isn’t exactly reassuring me, right? You yourself don’t look convinced that everything will be fine.”

Nell wasn’t exactly on board with my plan, but like I was a certain pro tennis player, she couldn’t refuse my zeal. She let out a small sigh of defeat.

“Ughhh... Fine. I do understand that there’s no real danger involved or else you wouldn’t make me do this. So, what should I do?”

“Ahhh, thank you! Gimme a sec.”

I pulled up the interface and opened the Loot Roll section. Out of the four DP options—100, 1,000, 10,000, and 100,000—I wanted her to pull the biggest one, the 100,000. After that, I planned on having her do the 10,000 roll a few times, and finishing off with 1,000 at least a dozen times or more.

To be completely honest, I was scared. Scared shitless, even.

A hundred thousand DP could buy me superstrong monster summons from the Catalog. Our family could live off that amount for over three months. More specifically, when I would think back to this day in the future, it would be to remember how one-fifth of my hard-earned DP had been lost to loot rolls.

But I was a demon lord, and demon lords weren’t afraid of risk. They didn’t let opportunity pass them by. They always staked their lives, living on the edge of danger. Even then, they pursued their ideals and bet everything on their life choices.

That’s right! Demon lords are natural-born gamblers! Mwa ha ha ha!

“Okay. I’m going to push this. Are you *sure*?”

Nell stared up at me, her finger hovering over the 100,000 DP option.

“Awoooo!!! Do iiit!!!”

“Omigosh! D-Don’t just howl out of the blue!”

Despite the rebuke in her eyes, she pressed the button...

“...”

“...”

“...’Scuse me?”

...but nothing happened.

“Mr. Yuki, nothing’s happening.”

“Th-That’s weird. There should be beads of light...”

Beads of light showed up every time I pulled, like when I'd summoned Rir or gotten my hands on the Magic Pistol. *Don't... Don't tell me...I got a fat lot of nothing...*

"I-Impossible... I spent 100,000 DP for nothing...?"

"Oh, Mr. Yuki! Mr. Yuki, symbols of some kind are appearing on your thing!"

I snapped back to reality at Nell's words and snapped my gaze to the interface in a panic. How could I have forgotten that a results notification always showed up after I did a loot roll? As was standard, there was a message on the screen that hadn't been there before. It was written in my mother tongue, reading, "Acquired: Waterfall Hot Spring."

"What the? 'Waterfall hot spring'...?"

"Wait, these aren't symbols but an alphabet of some sort? I always wondered what they were since I've been catching glimpses of them for some time. Very angular alphabet, isn't it?"

Hold up. Does this mean...?

"A structure, huh?!"

My guess proved right when I dug into the display's Dungeon category and saw "Waterfall Hot Spring" included in the Add-On Facilities section. Judging from the fact that its price was listed as '0 DP,' I'd probably obtained the rights to it from the loot roll.

"Nell, come with me! We're gonna verify the loot roll results!"

I grabbed her hand and twisted the doorknob to take us outside to the meadow area.

"H-Hang on... Oh, I get it. You're so far gone right now that you won't listen to anything I say. All right, I'll go with you."

Her expression was both amused and exasperated as I dragged her from the real throne room to where the waterfall hot spring should've been installed.

"Whoooo!!! I'm on top of the world!!!"

I pumped both fists into the air as I shouted joyously for all to hear. Before me was a waterfall and the plunge basin it created. Based on the steam rising from the falling water, it was all hot spring water.

Though it was kinda small, the waterfall still made a wonderful rushing sound courtesy of the considerable amount of water pouring down. The plunge basin was big enough to fit ten people very comfortably, with room for all ten to stretch out. It wasn't super deep, but if you thought of it as a tub of sorts, it was perfect for bathing.

By the way, this waterfall flowed from what looked like a pile of stones, and I'd installed it right next to the inn. I could connect it directly to the inn's changing room if I built a small path between the two.

"So this is a waterfall hot spring, huh? Fantastic."

When I checked the DP Catalog to see how much this would've cost me if I'd just bought it straight-up, the starting price was well over a hundred thousand DP. In other words, I'd definitely hit the jackpot on the loot roll. Now, if it'd been a normal hot spring with a waterfall attached, I wouldn't have thought it wasn't worth the price, but the amazing thing about this particular waterfall hot spring was what it offered in the way of Special Effects.

First off, it had all the standard ones you could think of for a hot spring—Beauty Treatment, Rejuvenation, Metabolic Acceleration, Exhaustion Recovery, HP Recovery, MP Recovery, and so on and so forth. On point for any secret, secluded hot spring. But the truly terrific points to note were HP Increase and MP Increase, because wonder of wonders, you could *increase* your HP and MP just by soaking in this baby.

The increase rate was only one point, which was pretty measly in the grand scheme of things. But what if you got in it every day? Every day for ten years, or even twenty? My life span had increased drastically when I was reborn as a nonhuman, so what if I took a dip in this hot spring every day for a hundred years? Two hundred years? *Five* hundred years?

I couldn't even imagine how insanely high my stats would get. So, in terms of the future, this thing was the jackpot of all jackpots. I'd won myself a Rir-level prize. Since it was a dungeon facility, it would only stop working if the dungeon

itself were destroyed, making it a semipermanent feature.

Hot damn. Excellent work, Lady Hero. You sure didn't disappoint.

Speaking of, Nell had been watching me the whole time I'd been standing in front of the waterfall hot spring, unable to contain my delight. Her expression screaming "exasperated mom looking after her kid," she spoke to me.

"Mr. Yuki, you really do love bathing, don't you? Although I'm one to talk, since I don't think I can imagine a life without such bathing facilities anymore."

"Nell, Nell, Nell. You sweet summer child. I'ma teach you something important, so listen up."

"Oh, uh, sure."

"I am Japanese. And more than anything else, we Japanese all love bathing and hot springs."

The country was known for its high temperature and humidity, y'know? Also, it wasn't just me who thought that way. If any other Japanese person suddenly found this hot spring in their home, they would be overjoyed too.

"'Japanese'? Are you talking about demon lords?"

"Yeah, I am."

I responded absentmindedly to her while using the dungeon's functions to fix up the area around the waterfall hot spring. In one area, I built a small, bamboo-enclosed walkway made up of pebbles and stepping stones covering the ground, and in another...

"W-Wow! Incredible, Mr. Yuki! You created such an elegant environment for the hot spring in the blink of an eye!"

Nell oohed and aahed in amazement as I continued designing the area around my new addition. *Heh heh heh. Something like this is a piece of cake for a creative demon lord like me.*

"All right! Maintenance complete! Time to go back to the real throne room and do some more pulls, Nell!"

Once we got back to the dungeon, I had Nell pull the 10,000 DP option six times. The drops were:

Gear Creation Ability Scroll

Awareness Priming Ability Scroll

Limitless Halberd

Ice Prison Katana

Poison Fang King

Pot lid

To address the elephant in the room, yes, a pot lid apparently *was* a potential drop from the 10,000 DP roll.

For a frame of reference, killing around fifty monsters in the southern part of the Demonic Forest, where the weakest monsters lived, would net me 10,000 DP. In the eastern region, where the intermediate-level monsters lived, it took twenty monsters. As for the west, it was too hard to come up with a concrete estimate because while it hosted the strongest monsters, their strength levels were all over the place. There was some minor variation in the “price” of each monster converted to DP, but those were the general values. My household could live off 10,000 DP for around ten days.

In other words, it was an expensive-ass pot lid, wasn't it? A very high-class item. Hooray for me—*not*. I didn't need that shit. Freaking ridiculous.

I had to say, though, I was kinda relieved to find out that even Nell would pull something like it. And fortunately, everything besides the lid was pretty damn good.

First, the Ability Scroll for Gear Creation, which seemed to be a special ability. It had a pretty similar name to Weapon Enhancement, but it worked very differently. While both abilities produced things, Gear Creation wasn't limited to just weapons; it could create armor too. Also, the gear that could be created with this ability had a time limit. When its time was up, it disappeared.

What sort of equipment was it possible to make with the ability? Anything. Whether it was something the user had already seen or a brand-new design they thought of, they could make anything as long as they had the magic for it.

The only caveat to this special ability was that, like Weapon Enhancement, the user's mental image needed to be rock solid or the creation attempt would fail. Beyond that, though, it allowed them to produce whatever gear was best suited for the situation they found themselves in. *Hmm. Seems kinda tough to handle, but there's a lot of potential here, isn't there?*

It was a special ability, after all, and those couldn't be acquired with a normal amount of effort. And if anything, it was harder to find weak ones that fell in

this category than it was to find strong ones. I could totally visualize a future where mastering this skill would transform it into a ferocious one.

I still hadn't checked the Catalog to see how much this particular ability cost, but I at least knew that special abilities across the board cost a buttload of DP. The cheapest one was over 30,000 DP *and* quite powerful to boot. No surprise that I felt like this one basically paid for itself.

Honestly, the ability itself seemed really interesting. It was just too bad that it was probably wasted on someone like me who sucked ass at using weapons. *Okay, I'll just give it to Nell.*

The next Ability Scroll was the one for Awareness Priming. This was a normal ability, not a special one. When activated, it could be used to force an enemy's focus to any location the user wanted. *But, like, how exactly can this be use— Wait. Wait just a gosh dang second.*

Was this ability similar to how a magician tricked their audience into looking at their right hand while setting up an illusion in their left? Then, in battle, it would mean keeping the enemy's attention in one place so the user could launch an attack from somewhere their opponent didn't expect. *Oho. I figured out how to use it.* I planned on having Rir help me test my theory later.

As for the next three items, Limitless Halberd, Ice Prison Katana, and Poison Fang King. If the names hadn't made it obvious enough, they were all weapons.

The Limitless Halberd contained the sorcerous circuits for Expansion and Size Change. The user could freely control both the length of the spear and the size of the axe blade on the weapon.

The Ice Prison Katana contained the Ice Prison sorcerous circuit. When activated, it froze anything the weapon cut through, tremendously hindering an opponent's movements. Basically, it was the ice version of En's Crimson Flame.

Finally, the Poison Fang King was a knife containing the King of Poisons sorcerous circuit. It was the deadliest poison there was, and it killed any opponent the blade cut. Of the three weapons, this one was likely the most valuable.

Though they were special, I could probably create similar weapons if I so

chose. Plus, as far as rarity went, Nell's holy sword and En ranked much higher. Still, the quality ranged from A+ to S-, making their individual worth far more than 10,000 DP.

It was no wonder, then, that the hero, our resident weapons geek, went nuts for them.

"Wow! Wowowow, Mr. Yuki! So this thing you call a 'loot roll' can produce weapons like these?!"

"Yeah, well, you know. Pretty sure anything's possible. All right, Nell, you cool with me taking the Ability Scroll for Awareness Priming?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. But I thought all of this belonged to you already."

"Nah, I'm giving you the Gear Creation Ability Scroll. All the weapons too."

"What?! Truly?! Are you certain? B-But you paid for them, Mr. Yuki. Not to mention that I have my holy sword I earned through hard work, as well as Gekka, the knife you gave me... Plus, I don't have anywhere to store these new weapons."

"Honestly, I probably won't use them, which is why I'm giving them to you if you want 'em. Storage *is* a problem, though. What happened to the others I gave you a while back?"

"I hung them up as decorations in my room in the castle..."

"Then you can toss these in there too."

"You... You're sure, right? Absolutely, *positively* sure? I won't give them back even if you ask me to, okay? And I'll use up the Ability Scroll too."

"Whoa! Y-Yeah, dude. I really mean it."

Nell thrust her face close to mine, making doubly sure while excitement continued rolling off her. I nodded, feeling slightly overpowered. *Jeez, woman. Ain't no way anyone would be able to say no if you asked them with such sparkling eyes.*

"Th-Then I gladly accept! Thank you, Mr. Yuki! Oh, this curved, single-edged sword! It falls into the same weapon category as En, doesn't it?!"

“Yup.”

I responded to Nell with a rueful smile because she couldn't stop grinning. *Dang geek.* I mean, I knew about her weapons mania from her particularly heated gaze at some of the stuff I'd created—which I'd given to her already—but still.

Aaand I'd just realized that I'd given her most of the loot drops too. I wasn't all that bothered, though, since I'd gotten a seemingly useful Ability Scroll out of the pulls too. Besides, she'd hit the jackpot big-time on that first roll, where she'd won the waterfall hot spring, so overall a huge win for me.

“I expected nothing less from the esteemed hero, though. Outside of the one dud, everything else was a winner.”

Her luck was so good that it almost scared me. Maybe, just maybe the reason half the drops this time had been weapons was because of Nell's love for them. A luck so strong it even changed the drop rates. *Terrifying.*

“After having done it myself, I can completely understand the fun in doing this loot roll thing. Speaking of, the pot lid has a strong presence, doesn't it?”

“For real. Feels like a rare drop in comparison to the rest, huh?”

“Oh, what's all this? My lord, did you make something again?”

Lew spoke to us with her head tilted curiously as she stared at the drops we'd just finished going through.

“Sup, Lew? Good timing. You try too.”

Her Luck value was pretty average, but that was no reason to not let her have a go.

“Huh? Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Here. Push the button. C'mon, try it.”

She seemed confused, uncertain about what I was forcing her to do. But she replied gamely enough with an “O-Okay... This thing, right?” and tapped the 10,000 DP option in the Loot Roll category.

“Ooh. Something came out. What... What is it?”

“Mr. Yuki, what is this?”

Both of them stared expectantly at me.

“Well...”

High-Grade Kombu: Makes dashi extremely delicious when added. Quality: A+.

“This is...kombu, eh?”

Lew’s drop was unmistakably kombu, otherwise known as edible kelp. But it wasn’t just any normal kombu. Nope, it was the fancy kind, apparently. High-grade kombu. High-Grade Kombu. *Yup, just rolls off the tongue. Very pleasant indeed.*

“Lew.”

“Wh-What is it, my lord? Why are you staring at me so affectionately?”

“Just thinking that you and I really are cut from the same cloth.”

“Omigosh! I feel like I understand exactly what you mean even though I don’t want to?!”

Miss Lew, this indescribably exquisite sense of wonder exists only for beings like us. How can it ever be defined, anyway?

“What is kombu?”

“Ah, right. This black thing is called kombu. I’ve seen my lord and Leila use it as an ingredient in the hot pot stock you call ‘dashi’ to enhance its flavor. You leave it in for a while and then take it out, right? It makes the hot pot taste even more delicious.”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know something like that existed. I’d like to try it.”

“Why don’t we have hot pot for dinner tonight, then? Leila couldn’t decide what to make, so she hasn’t started cooking yet.”

“Hmm. That sounds bomb, actually. All right, hot pot it is today. Although I wanted to do a few more pulls... Oh well. This is a good time to put a pause on

the loot rolls and get started on dinner.”

“I’ll help too, Mr. Yuki.”

“Me too, my lord!”

The three of us headed to the kitchen together.

By the way, after Lefi woke up from her nap, I’d let her pull once on the 10,000 DP option. Thought it couldn’t hurt since the other two had gotten their tries. This was the result:

Scrubbing Brush: A cleaning tool. Quality: C+.

“Yeah, so, you can definitely keep being the butt of the joke.”

“I am what?!”

Lefi sulked for a while after that.



“Hmm... This really is such a fascinating place, isn’t it?”

“Fas-ci-na-ting?”

The aqua-colored little girl, Shii, questioned Ilyr, who nodded in response.

“Yes, indeed. There are so many new things that I’m tired of being surprised all the time.”

The standard of living in this dungeon was incredibly high. She could say this precisely because of her status as royalty. Of course, it wasn’t like the people here led a life of excessive luxury or anything, but many of the daily necessities and other items just lying around nonchalantly could be considered valuable rarities.

For example, the borrowed clothes she was currently wearing. Though they weren’t extravagant by any means, they were nonetheless crafted from high-quality fabric that felt absolutely wonderful to wear. It was very possible that they were worth more than even nobles’ apparel.

And then there were the assorted magical tools they used regularly, many of which she had never seen before. When she'd been taken on a tour of the dungeon's various facilities, she'd seen a washing machine, a refrigerator, and more—all cutting-edge tools she had never before encountered until then. Despite similar appliances existing in her own home, the ones here looked overwhelmingly more refined, making her feel as though she'd strayed into some fairy tale.

Ilyr had been unable to contain her excitement and surprise, marveling over every new discovery. The children who lived here didn't understand why she was so amazed by everything, though. Their expressions were so befuddled that she could practically see question marks floating over their heads. Only then did she realize that all these convenient magical tools were the norm for them.

She felt the need to rave about the delicious meals here as well. Though Ilyr liked the food the chef in the castle prepared, there was something special about the things the demon lady named Leila prepared. Her food had a mysterious warmth to it that, for some reason, reminded Ilyr of her deceased mother, whom she didn't have many memories of. Sitting at the dining table a long, long time ago with her father, mother, and serious but kind big brother...

For a moment, tears threatened to spill from her eyes. But she vigorously shook her head, banishing the sad thoughts. Then, intentionally brightening her tone, she continued talking to Shii, who was next to her.

"Anyway, this bath is so very lovely and soothing, isn't it? Has it always been here?"

She was referring to the enormous bathing pool made from the hot water rushing down the waterfall. The temperature was just right, and the size made sinking leisurely into it a real pleasure. Ilyr suspected that it was even bigger than her bath in the royal castle. At the very least, this one was much more high-class than hers.

Shii, the pale blue girl, responded in the negative to her question.

"No. I don't 'member this being here yesterday."

"Huh?"

“Master said he builded it today.”

“He...built it?”

“Yup.”

“Today?”

“Yup. Stuff like this happens lots.”

“Oh, well, I-I see...?”

Ilyr had honestly thought they used this bath all the time since they’d stepped in so naturally. Evidently, though, she’d been wrong. Moreover, it apparently wasn’t at all shocking to the children here for a new bath to appear between one day and the next.

“Ah, I wanted to ask you, Shii, because I’m curious. Are you all right like that? You won’t melt or anything?”

“Yup, yup! Don’t worry! ’Cause I’m a slime!”

“Shii...always dissolves anyway. So don’t worry about that, Ilyr.”

The black-haired little girl, En, spoke while standing under the rushing waterfall.

“W-Well, that’s good to know. Slimes are amazing, huh?”

This time, a cheerfully beaming Iluna responded to Ilyr’s comment.

“It’s called a ‘special race trait’!”

“Yeah! My spe-shul race trait is de-solving in the bath!”

“Yes... A cute and fun special race trait.”

“I-I see...”



While Ilyr couldn't deny that there was a certain charm in becoming an amorphous blob, she felt like calling it a "special race trait" wasn't quite right. But she didn't say that out loud, instead keeping her thoughts to herself. She knew how to read the room.

From all the time she'd spent with them so far, Ilyr had arrived at the conclusion that the little girls here were more or less eccentrics. Discussions like this latest one made her realize how different her perspective and sense of values were from theirs. That was probably why she found her interactions with them not only fun, but refreshing and novel too.

I know I can't stay here forever, but I still want to be with them lots and lots more. Such a thought ran through her mind while they chatted cheerfully.

In the unusual inn next to the castle, the girls were in the process of retiring for the night. On her first night here, Ilyr had been surprised to see the bedding directly on the floor instead of on a proper bed. Now, however, she almost preferred sleeping like this instead, as this sort of bedding meant they could all loll around and have fun together. Though they had worn themselves out playing in the afternoon, they still somehow found the energy to frolic on these floor mattresses. As a result, it took them a while to even fall asleep at night.

This was Ilyr's first experience enjoying a sleepover with friends, and she was having so much fun from morning until night every day.

"I shall return shortly upon drying my hair, okay?!"

"Okaaaay! Oh, do you know how to use the hair dryer?"

"I think so, since I learned yesterday!"

Ilyr's hair didn't dry right away since it was the longest of all the little girls', so she went by herself to the bathhouse's changing room. She took off the towel cap covering her wet hair, then sat down in a chair by the washbasin. Picking up the dryer hanging on the wall, she froze.

"Huh? It's not turning on..."

Though this one wasn't the same shape as the one she had at home, she'd

thought the mechanism would work the same, so she'd tried activating it with her magic. For whatever reason, though, it remained silent. Ilyr didn't *think* she was using it differently than how the other girls had the day before, but upon thinking about it, she recalled that she had only used it after it had been made to produce warm air.

Just when she'd decided to go back to the inn and ask how to operate the device, a voice suddenly came from behind her.

"Hmm? Ah, Ilyr, it is you. Whatever is the matter?"

When Ilyr turned around, she found the silver-haired lady with the mysteriously lovely and symmetrical features standing there. It seemed she had just entered the changing room.

"Oh, Miss Lefi! Um, I forgot how to use the dryer..."

"Ah, I see. Well, since I am here, shall I dry your hair for you? Come, come. Face the mirror."

"Oh, um, thank you!"

Lefi took the dryer in hand and warm air started blowing out of it immediately. Then, she positioned herself behind Ilyr and started drying her hair, moving her fingers gently through it. She didn't know why, but the sensation made Ilyr feel somewhat bashful. She didn't hate it, though. It actually felt really nice.

"Tell me, Ilyr. Are you getting on well with the others?"

"I am! Everyone is sooo nice and friendly, to the point where I wish I could live my life like this every day."

"Gah ha! I am most pleased to hear you say so. Every day may not be possible, but you are free to visit us whenever you are seeking a spot of fun. I am certain Nell will bring you here should you ask her to."

"But... But I'm royalty. I have a lot of things I must do, so I don't think I'll receive permission to play so much..."

"Do you mean from your father?"

"No. My father is very kind and always tells me I can do what I like. But I have

a lot of instructors who will tell me I can't play..."

"You must be responsible because you are royalty." "You must become capable of at least this much because you are royalty." She had heard those words on countless occasions.

Ilyr was proud of her royal status. Not once had she ever hated being born as the daughter of her kind, beloved father. Even so, she couldn't deny her longing for more freedom, her desire to do things *she* wanted to do.

Her morose thoughts made her a bit sad. Having picked up on her low spirits, the silver-haired miss spoke to the princess in a gentle voice.

"Hmm... Ilyr. Let me teach you something good. A child's job is to learn many things but also to enjoy many things. Therefore, so long as you are a good girl in the castle, I am certain you can play as much as you like."

"Really...?"

"Really. Regardless of what anyone else says, that is the truth of this world. Royalty, standing—none of that is relevant whatsoever. I give you leave to ignore such drivel. You should live your life as you please, doing what you want."

Her heart squeezed unexpectedly at Lefi's words, and tears fell from her eyes. They rained down her cheeks relentlessly, welling from the depths of her soul, cleansing her of everything she had suppressed inside.

"Before you are royalty, you are simply a child. There is no need for you to practice self-control and obey everything adults tell you to do. Well, that is not to say that you must not at least put *some* effort into your studies. Academics are, of course, important."

"Tee hee. You're right."

Ilyr giggled softly even as her tears continued to flow. Behind her, Lefi smiled in response. Then, she gently smoothed down the little girl's hair, soothing her.

This comforting place, on top of being full of wonders and surprises, was inhabited by a variety of races and personalities. She knew she would never forget her time here.



It happened without warning. I'd stepped out into the Demonic Forest not too long ago to summon my pets home, thinking of introducing them to Ilyr since she was here and all.

"Grrrrrrr..."

Rir rushed to me faster than the other four and started growling deep in his throat, his gaze fixed in one direction. From his grim expression, I could pick up on two emotions that he'd never felt so powerfully before: tension and panic. For as many powerful enemies as he and I had faced off against together, this might've been the first time I'd seen him so fiercely cautious.

"Rir...? Is something out there?"

His nerves had infected me. I could hear the strain in my voice as I questioned him. In the next instant, Maps opened automatically with a *whoosh*. There was an intruder. Out of habit, I tapped on the display to read the details on the screen.

Name: Y?? D??sil

Race: ?

Class: ? Emperor

Level: 9??

HP: ?2?,??? / ?2?,???

MP: ?,6??,??4,??? / ?,6??,??4,???

Strength: ??,?8?

Stamina: ?,???

Agility: 3?,???

Magic: ?3,???,?9?

Dexterity: ??,???

Luck: ?,???

Titles: The ?, The ? of ? ?, The One Who ? ?

“Ho...ly shit... What the hell *is* this...?”

I blurted those words out from a throat that had suddenly gone dry. Based on the fact that I couldn’t see most of the stats, it wasn’t hard to figure out this opponent was waaay out of my league. Unlike Lefi, they didn’t seem to be exposing their stats on purpose, but even then, I could more than make out their level—and it was over 900. On. Freaking. Par. With. *Lefi*.

That means Calamity-level. The moment that thought flashed through my mind, I made my move.

“Orochi, Yata, Byaku, Seimi! Change of plans! All of you, get back to the castle, now! Even if you run into something on the way, don’t fight! Just run! Understood?!”

While I used Telepathy, one of the dungeon’s functions, to send those instructions to my pets scattered across the Demonic Forest, I activated all the traps installed in the dungeon’s territory. Based on what Maps was telling me, the intruder was somehow walking in a straight line toward my home. There was still some distance between them and it, but it would only take a few hours for them to reach the cave connected to the castle.

“Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*. This is *so* bad. All those kids under my care... Rir, we gotta get outta here! Run back to the castle as fast as you can!”

“Grr!!!”

The second I jumped onto his back, Rir shot off like an arrow from a tightly drawn bowstring.

“Everyone, listen up! No one’s stepping foot outside today, got it?! All of you, stay together in one place! Where are the little ones?!”

After we’d raced back home at full speed, I’d tumbled into the real throne room and immediately started barking orders and asking questions.

“Um, th-they went to the meadow area, my lord. I-Is something wrong?”

“An enemy?”

Lew sounded a little flustered, and Nell’s gaze sharpened as she reached for her holy sword, which was resting upright against a wall.

“All I know is that whoever they are, their stats are off the goddamn charts! I’m sorry, Lefi, but I have no idea how to deal with this one! Will you help me—”

I hadn’t stopped using the dungeon interface while my mouth was moving a mile a minute. Busy setting up more traps with all the DP at my disposal, I finally snapped out of it when I felt Lefi’s hand thump onto my shoulder.

“Hold, Yuki. Calm yourself. You are saying a powerful being suddenly appeared in the Demonic Forest?”

“Yeah, I am! You must’ve sensed it too, right?! A Calamity-level something or other is infiltrating the Forest! I dunno how they did it, but they’re heading straight toward the castle!”

“Yuki, I think it likely we are acquainted with each other.”

“And that’s why we need to come up with counterme— ‘Scuse me? What’d you just say?”

The hand I’d been using to work the dungeon’s menu froze as I focused my attention on Lefi.

“We are acquainted. Oh, to be clear, it is not at all like how I was acquainted with Gyuohga, the weak-minded black dragon you killed. This one is an old friend. You will not be fighting to the death, so calm yourself.”

“I... I can take your word for it?”

“Are you saying you cannot trust me?”

Lefi grinned slyly, enunciating her words carefully. I shook my head after regaining a hint of composure.

“Nope. Nuh-uh, I’m not saying that at all. There’s nothing I believe in more than anything you say.”

“Heh heh. Indeed, indeed. Well, on the slim chance something happens, I shall generously protect you, worrywart of a coward that you are. So be at

ease.”

“Uhhh, that’s reassuring, I guess.”

Smirking daringly, she patted my head like she was trying to comfort me. Against my better judgment, I found myself feeling relieved, so, with a wry smile, I closed the Traps menu and lowered my arm from the interface.

“So, your friend, huh? I wonder what they’re like.”

“Hmm... I believe the word ‘enigma’ describes them perfectly.”

“Come again?”

“I will not deny that they are an old friend, but we are not especially close either. You could say we are linked by fate in a sense. Beyond that, however, I cannot say I know much about them.”

“Mm. Okay, I think I understand.”

Meaning they’re probably not more than acquaintances? Just casual friends?

“As far as I know, they do not eat, nor do they drink anything. In fact, they do not possess a corporeal form.”

“Aaand that just made me fifty percent more suspicious, not to mention weirded out by the people you know.”

They didn’t eat, drink, or have a physical body. Could they even be called a living being, then?

“Well, technically speaking, they *do* have a body. I suppose? It is simply unlike ours made of flesh and blood. The best way I can describe it is...‘light with a purpose.’”

“Lefi, what you just said makes them *twice* as much of an enigma. I can’t even *imagine* what they look like, for frick’s sake.”

“I-I cannot help it. Even I do not understand the nature of their existence well.”

She said those words defensively, then cleared her throat imperiously before continuing.

“At any rate, I shall head out to welcome them. They have probably noticed

my presence here as well, so it is best that I go instead of you. I fear you will only needlessly complicate things.”

“G-Got it... Then I’ll only go with you as far as outside the cave.”

I still made the dungeon’s residents stick together inside the real throne room, just in case. Then, in the meadow area, I told my pets they could drop their guard a little as they waited on standby. Once I did so, Lefi and I walked outside and through the tunnel.

“This presence... I know it.”

Deep in the forest, they suddenly stopped walking upon feeling the nostalgic sensation.

“Hmm... I detect the young child and my old comrade... How peculiar.”

They resumed walking, intrigued by the notion that both existences seemed to be concentrated in one location. Their steps were so quiet that it was almost as if they had assimilated into the stillness of the forest itself. Nothing appeared in their path, not even monsters. Every living thing in the vicinity had fled the moment they became aware of the powerful presence treading through the forest.

The being continued its smooth journey deeper in, uninterrupted by anything or anyone. Eventually, they arrived at an open clearing where the trees didn’t crowd so closely together. Ahead lay a steep cliff and a massive hole in it. A cavern, by the looks of it. And in front of that cavern stood a young girl within whom dwelled a colossal amount of power, as well as a young man possessed of a strange magical quality.

They approached the two and spoke quietly.

“You have grown quite small in the short amount of time we have not seen each other, conquering dragon.”

“And your overly stiff manner of speech has not changed one whit, old man.”

Their tone remained detached as they replied to the girl—the Supreme Dragon.

“I am one who does not change. A few centuries will not alter this fundamental truth of my being. Yet I see you have changed overmuch, Silver Dragon.”

“Well, perhaps that is because I have experienced a great many things.”

With a small, chagrined smile, the Supreme Dragon continued.

“More importantly, your visit here is sudden, just as they always were in the past. But why have you come?”

“Hmm... Before I tell you why, let us first give one another a proper greeting.”

They turned toward the young man standing next to the Supreme Dragon.

“We meet each other now for the first time, lord and master of this labyrinth. Ah. Forgive me. Lord and master of this labyrinth and of dragonkind. My name is Ygg Drasil. I am the emperor of spirits.”

They, the Spirit Emperor, inclined their head and greeted the young man, introducing himself.



Inch. Resting. So this is what Lefi meant by “light with a purpose,” huh? Now that I’d actually met the Spirit Emperor, I could see how spot-on her description was.

In front of me, a robe ever so slightly taller than a child was holding an ancient-looking wand in one “hand.” I didn’t mean someone or something that was wearing a robe, though. I meant the robe itself. More specifically, a robe floating in the air with nothing inside, the cloth having spread out in a humanlike shape.

A hollow occupied the space where a flesh-and-blood body would normally be. A fist-sized orb of faintly glowing light rested within that hollow. Naturally, without a face, it lacked a mouth, but I could still hear a voice. It was a vaguely inhuman voice, like the being was speaking directly into my brain.

The wand, too, floated by itself in midair, in the general vicinity of where a hand would be.

And what battered at me more strongly than anything else upon our meeting

was the intense feeling of oppression. To put it another way, an overwhelming sense of presence. *Definitely on Lefi's level.*

I could tell that the life in front of me exercised some degree of control over their aura, but they couldn't suppress the formidable energy completely. My entire body throbbed with the knowledge of this being's tremendous, unattainable level of power.

Holy baloney. I guess there really are people like this out there.

"Nice to meet you, Spirit Emperor. I'm Demon Lord Yuki. First things first, I gotta ask: what do you mean by 'lord and master of the labyrinth and of dragonkind'? I get the 'labyrinth' part, but not the 'dragonkind' part."

"You killed the King of Dragonkind, did you not? The title is an inherited one through combat. Therefore, it and the throne passed to you with your victory."

The Spirit Emperor replied to me in a quiet, indifferent tone.

Huh... "Demon King of Dragonkind" *had* ended up on my list of titles after I'd murdered that black dragon. I remembered the description for the title saying something about me being the current king of dragons. When I'd asked Lefi about it, she'd literally waved me off, saying, "I do not think you need to concern yourself with that. Though you may be considered the current dragon king, it is merely a title in the end." I'd taken her at her word back then, especially since nothing had actually changed and I hadn't felt any different.

"Hmm, I had indeed heard talk about chaos in the dragons' hamlet, and I now understand why. It is because the king's throne has passed to an outsider."

I gave Lefi a sidelong glance and she immediately turned her face away.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"N-No, not at all. I could not have imagined such an outcome."

Her nonchalant tone only made me stare harder at her. Unable to bear the weight of my gaze, she finally, slowly started fessing up.

"Well, I suspected that our settlement had fallen into turmoil the moment that fool Gyuohga became the dragon king. And then I wondered if perhaps the situation had worsened after you defeated him."

“But why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

“A long time ago, I went on a rampage through that hamlet. Some might even say I laid waste to it. Surely you can understand why it has been difficult for me to approach it since then. Had I explained the situation to you and you requested that I take you there, it would have created quite the conundrum for me.”

“Wait, time out, what? Are you at war with the other dragons or something?”

“No, no. We are most certainly not enemies. Rather, I would say the opposite...”

Lefi looked like she didn’t know what to say, which was super unusual for her. Obviously, I found her wishy-washy attitude puzzling. While I was questioning just what the heck was up with her, the Spirit Emperor answered my question instead.

“The dragon who stands next to you rules the world. Thus does her own kind worship her very existence. Consequently, she was invited to accept the very same title you yourself now hold. Yet this Supreme Dragon violently rejected their wishes, tore through their village, and fled. As far as I know, not only did she leave the hamlet on the verge of total destruction, but roughly half the dragons also suffered injuries so severe they were immobilized for a month.”

Uh-oh, Lefi. Sounds like you were a bad, bad girl.

“Jeez... Way to add new alignments by coming here instead.”

“I-I had no other choice! They were beyond aggravating with their incessant pleas. And whatever do you mean by ‘alignments’?”

Lefi looked embarrassed as she blustered in response at me.

Weeell, she doesn’t seem the type who likes being tied down, so I guess her reaction makes sense. The Lefi I knew now got along really well with the little girls and everyone else in our dungeon family, but when I’d first met her, she’d been really self-centered. Actually, it’d been more like she’d had a complete lack of interest in others.

Honestly, though, I could relate to that a lot since I was the same. I would’ve

bet that she'd hated having others interfere in her life.

"Ahem... Let us put that aside! While I do not mind standing here talking, I think it best if we take you to our dwelling instead."

"Yeah, okay, fair enough. I've still got a ton of questions, but first, lemme give you a tour of our humble abode."

I still didn't detect any sort of hostility from the Spirit Emperor. I mean, technically speaking, I had no idea what they were thinking since a ball of light didn't have any expressions, but Lefi remained totally relaxed. I took her attitude as a sign that it was okay to invite them inside. Never mind the most important fact being they were friends. *Good enough reason for me to trust them.*

"I am grateful for your hospitality and humbly accept it."

And so, we took our visitor to our home.

"Ahhh! Spirit Teacher!"

I definitely hadn't expected Iluna to address the Spirit Emperor the second we got back to the real throne room, but that was what happened. Eyes wide and completely frozen as she stared in our direction, she looked extremely shocked by the being's entrance.

"'Teacher'? You two know each other?"

"Indeed. We are bound by fate. I see now... Most glad am I to learn you are safe, child."

The Spirit Emperor sighed in relief. Well, not actually, but it sure felt like they were relieved by the way they spoke.

"Then it was *you* who placed their protection upon Iluna. I could not see the specifics of the blessing because it was concealed."

"Oh? I find myself surprised to learn I can hide anything from you. But yes, it was indeed me."

The Spirit Emperor agreed with Lefi, who looked satisfied now that she'd finally figured it out.

“Huh? What are you guys talking about?”

Question marks filled my head. I couldn't even begin to follow their conversation. To solve that problem, the Spirit Emperor started telling us everything that'd happened leading up to their journey here.

I found out that Iluna had been gifted with their blessing, resulting in her title being “The Spirit Emperor's Blessed.” The Spirit Emperor wandered the world, never staying in one place for very long. By chance, though, they'd visited Iluna's village a few years ago.

Apparently, Iluna had been born in an incredibly beautiful place. It was a place whose inhabitants lived in harmony with nature. This had made the village a comforting location for the Spirit Emperor. When the being had first appeared, the villagers had been surprised to say the least, considering their form. But in some regions, the Spirit Emperor was treated as a god native to those lands, meaning the villagers had welcomed them with open arms, overjoyed to have gained their favor.

Because of that, they'd stayed in the village for some time, which was when they'd gotten to know Iluna. The more they'd connected with her, the more they'd learned about her. During their time there, they'd realized that she had the aptitude to enlist the aid of spirits, which was why the Spirit Emperor had given her their divine protection.

“Spirits will only attach themselves to individuals with the purest of hearts—ones who can look upon the world impartially. Even fewer are those who possess the ability to enlist their aid. It is one of my duties to help these gifted few.”

So said the Spirit Emperor.

Apparently, the number of people who could wield spirits really was crazy low, because Iluna was the first one in centuries they'd bestowed their blessing upon. Very recently, they'd suddenly become curious about how she was doing, so they'd decided to visit her again. That was when they'd found the village destroyed.

“Ah, okay. Now I understand why you went looking for her. You were worried

about the child you gave your protection to.”

“Her people treated me exceptionally well. In order to repay their kindness, it was my duty to confirm the well-being of the child they so dearly loved.”

Another thing I’d learned from them was that Iluna’s village was an isolated one, with a population numbering just a few dozen. And she’d been the first child born in a long time. Naturally, all of the villagers had loved her, showering her with affection like she was their own daughter. *That explains why she’s such a good kid, huh?*

“Then, I discovered the child here. Pray tell me how...”

“It’d take forever to tell you the whole sordid tale, but long story short, I annihilated the kidnappers, so you can’t take revenge against them even if you want to. Just give up on the idea.”

I shrugged, my tone playful. The Spirit Emperor sounded deeply impressed when they replied.

“Yes, I see... So you’ve done all the world that favor already, then. I thank you for exacting vengeance on behalf of my fallen comrades.”

“My pleasure. I can tell Iluna is important to you, and the same goes for me. She’s like my little sister, y’know.”

I’d only done what I’d wanted to do. Not for anyone’s sake, and not even really for Iluna’s. It’d been my own and just my own, so the Spirit Emperor’s gratitude was completely unfounded.

“Hmm... Silver Dragon, this man is the primary reason for your newfound depth of emotion, is he not?”

“Bah. It really is quite bothersome to deal with old friends like you.”

“Geh heh. I must say, I’m feeling rather delighted to see you wearing such an expression. You, who never betrayed so much as a hint of interest in others. You, whose manner was akin to the sharpest of blades.”

“Hmph. Unlike you, I happen to change with the times. That is all there is to it.”

Lefi spat those blunt, rude words out looking like she’d swallowed a bitter pill.

I had to say, I was enjoying seeing all these rare expressions on her face today.

“It is indeed as you say. Though I highly doubt anyone in this world ever envisioned a day when the Supreme Dragon would take a mate. Frankly, I still find the news astonishing, as if the balance between heaven and earth has shifted.”

“Stop exaggerating, you fool.”

“Am I exaggerating, though?”

Based on the way the Spirit Emperor spoke, they clearly had Analysis too. That had to have been how they’d figured out we were married, by verifying Lefi’s titles.

By the way, I’d found out why I couldn’t see their blessing even when I used Analysis on Iluna. Turned out that the Spirit Emperor had deliberately used a special magic to conceal it from others’ view. It made sense, considering how they and I weren’t even on the same planet as far as stats went.

“Yukiki, Lefifi, I’m sorry for not telling you about my spirits and Spirit Teacher...”

Iluna, the center of our discussion, apologized to us timidly. *Shoot and damn. Don’t tell me she feels guilty about staying quiet until now.* I silently mulled over what to say to her about it, and once I’d decided, I cocked my head curiously at her.

“What’re you apologizing for, Iluna?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to be honest about every little thing, you know. I have secrets, and Lefi has secrets too. Hell, everyone has them. So you didn’t do anything wrong, Iluna. Not even a little bit.”

I grinned cheerfully at her, and Lefi backed me up.

“He is correct. You have nothing to apologize for, Iluna. After all, this strange old man foisted his nuisance of a blessing on you without so much as a ‘by your leave.’ Therefore, if anyone should apologize, it is this codger.”

“Ha. You are the only one who’d dare to look upon my protection so

unfavorably.”

“Oh? Is that truly the case? Then I shall continue to insult you on behalf of all the poor souls you have deceived.”

“Does this mean I should request your leniency on any forthcoming disparagement?”

I couldn't help mumbling my thoughts out loud as I listened to their exchange.

“Man, it's so weird seeing Lefi get treated like a little kid.”

“Hmph. Anyone would be a whelp compared to this ancient fossil.”

“Whoa. Does that include you too? We're talking about a huge amount of time, then, huh?”

Iluna watched us chatting like we usually did before she spoke again.

“Yukiki, Lefifi, thank you!”

A brilliant smile bloomed on her face. She rushed toward the two of us, who were standing next to each other, and hugged us tight.

After that, I went to calm the rest of the dungeon residents down, then introduced them to Lefi's friend, the Spirit Emperor.

“Ummm...shall I serve you some tea?”

Leila, our family's very capable maid, asked the being that question. She sounded a bit unsure. Didn't surprise me at all that even someone like her, who usually took everything in stride, would be flustered when it came to dealing with such an enigmatic living thing.

“Daughter of the ovine race, I neither drink nor eat. Nevertheless, I thank you for your consideration.”

“Then how the heck do you even survive?”

Do they consume mist or something?

“I am a spirit. I sustain myself on magical energy and also use it as a means of existence. Therefore, unlike you all, I don't require physical substances for my nutritional needs.”

Oh, okay. So that's how it works, huh? Definitely a living being in another world.

Lefi could tell I only sort of understood what the Spirit Emperor meant, so she quipped accordingly.

“Do not be deceived, Yuki. In an age long past, during a great battle against the Dark King Corpse Dragon—a dragon who had lost all traces of his sanity—this one was responsible for the explosion of magic in the area right in front of my eyes. The entire vicinity was left devoid of magical energy, and frankly, I thought they were dead...but then this mossback regenerated like nothing out of the ordinary had happened and proceeded to unleash a bloodbath of epic proportions on the enemy. As such, I would take their pronouncement of utilizing magical energy as a medium for existence with a very large pinch of salt.”

“Hmm, did that truly happen? How nostalgic.”

The Spirit Emperor very casually affirmed Lefi's words. *No denial, huh?*

“Ya know, there's a lot to unpack here, but let me start by asking about this Dark King Corpse Dragon. Who or what is it?”

“Mm, well, long ago, there existed a dark dragon who excelled at necromancy. Then, one day, the activation of his magic failed, and he found himself joining the ranks of the departed. Unfortunately, he began feasting on the flesh of the living and transforming himself into the living dead. It was not long before he lost his mind and ran amok. The humanoid creatures called him the Dark King Corpse Dragon.”

“Pardon me, but might this story be related to the mythology of the underworld?”

Leila inserted herself into the conversation automatically, like she couldn't help herself.

“The mythology of the underworld?”

“Yes, I believe Lady Lefi's telling represents one of the folk traditions found throughout the countryside. The anthropoids' follies enraged the dragon who ruled the underworld, so he ascended to the surface and unleashed a plague of

the dead on all mortals in an attempt to annihilate the world. However, he and his minions were driven back and exterminated by divine envoys. Or so the story goes...”

“Hmm, yes, I believe so. I do recall that hopeless, dour dragon summoning many dead souls. Although the reality is a bit more mundane than that. He was just a sad, gloomy dragon who very much did not reside in the underworld. No, the fool just gave in to his foolishness and rampaged destructively. And the old man currently sojourning with us is certainly no divine envoy. Not then, and not now.”

“Oh my. I can’t believe I just learned the true origins of a legend.”

Excitement colored Leila’s voice as she whipped out her handy-dandy notebook and started scribbling in it. *Do my eyes deceive me, my dear, or did you just pull that notebook out from under your skirt?* On second thought, I hadn’t seen jack shit. Nope, nothing whatsoever.

“Hmm? What is the matter, Yuki? Why are you staring at Leila with such a vacant expression?”

“Kinda curious about what’s under Leila’s skirt...”

“Yuki, do not tell me... Have your perversions become even more twisted?”

“Huh? Wait, no, no, no! You’ve got it all wrong! I didn’t mean it in a weird way!”

I finally realized exactly what I’d blurted out without thinking and hurried to defend myself against Lefi’s accusation. She stared at me with a hint of disgust in her eyes.

“Does there even exist a normal way to survey what is beneath another’s skirt?”

“Sh-Shit! You’re right.”

Her sound argument had me at a loss for words. I legit couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I would gladly oblige if such is your wish, Master Demon Lord...”

“Dude, do you *want* Lefi to kill me?!”

Leila spoke bashfully, but her expression did a one-eighty at my aggressive retort and she suddenly snickered. *Grr... She's getting too good at messing with me.*

"Geh heh. I can see how well you all get along. Is it always like this here?"

"Yup! It is, Teacher! Oh, but, but I think Yukiki and Lefifi are probably the closest to each other? It makes me a little jealous just watching them!"

"I see, I see. That is a very good thing indeed, then."

The Spirit Emperor laughed in delight. Based on how Iluna addressed the being, it was easy to figure out that when he—well, considering they were made of light, I didn't actually know their gender. But Lefi had called him an old man, so "he" was fine, right?

Anyway, it was easy to figure out that when he was in Iluna's village, he'd taught her a lot of different things. My guess was that she'd ended up calling him "Teacher" because he knew all kinds of stuff that the rest of the villagers didn't. She must've had a blast learning from him. I wouldn't've been surprised if everyone there had called him that too out of admiration and affection.

"Ahem. Moving on. Lefi, there's something I've been wanting to ask you. Are you originally from the dragon settlement?"

After clearing my throat in an attempt to weasel my way out of the sticky situation I was in, I posed that question to her.

"I suppose you could say as much since I was born in the general area there."

"Does that mean you have parents?"

"No, I do not. There are two subspecies of dragons, you see. Do you remember what I told you of demonkind's origins?"

"Yeah, I do."

She was talking about the theory that mana condensed for some reason at some point in time and the people born from that event had become the ancestors of the demon race.

"The same can be said of dragonkind. There are those born from mating, and those born spontaneously like demons. I am one of the latter and therefore do

not have parents.”

“Hmm, I see. Then you and I are two of a kind, huh?”

“Indeed we are.”

Hearing that honestly made me kinda happy—which I would never tell her as long as I lived.

Since we were on the topic of dragons, from there, I asked her about the dragons who’d helped us rescue Iluna. Unlike Lefi, who’d moved here from afar, those dragons were actually native to the Demonic Forest. I would actually run into them every now and then, but they stared at me with equal measures of fear and unease whenever we happened to catch sight of each other. It was sorta weird seeing as my stats were still a good deal lower than theirs.

Also, I got the feeling they were afraid of me in a different way than they were of Lefi just because I was the Supreme Dragon’s husband. I could tell from their attitudes that they probably thought something along the lines of, “His fortitude must be beyond the pale to live together with that terrifying creature...” As the folks who’d lent us a hand in Iluna’s rescue as well as members of Lefi’s species, I wanted to build friendly relations with them, but whenever I tried to approach them, they always ran away. Made me sad, TBH.

There was a little more to the story, though. A long time ago, when Lefi had first migrated to the Demonic Forest, its native dragons had launched an attack on her using their strength in numbers. They hadn’t appreciated an outsider infringing on their territory, so in their arrogance, they’d threatened her.

To no one’s surprise, even as a group, they’d been no match for the Supreme Dragon. My dearly beloved wife had ended up turning the tables on them. Except the situation had gotten a bit out of hand. Not many had challenged her after she’d become the Supreme Dragon, meaning she’d been bored for quite some time until the Forest’s dragons had confronted her. She’d enjoyed thrashing them so much that she’d ended up going a little overboard with the beatdown.

I didn’t ask for details because honestly, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. As I was thinking all this info through, my ears picked up a somewhat difficult-sounding conversation.

“Then does that mean the existence of the species known as spirits depends on the circumstances of the natural world? For example, if something were to change in the generation of mana in a particular region, it might distort the spirits’ existence and result in an unforeseen transformation?”

“Correct. Depending on the nature of the transformation, a being such as I, possessed of a clear sense of self, may appear. But this isn’t limited to spirits alone. Living creatures who absorb mana and possess magical power can, to a greater or lesser extent, undergo the same transformation.”

“Which means magical power is involved in the formation of the self and soul. Hmm... I believe this applies to mankind’s various species as well.”

Watching them, I realized that Leila had started interrogating the Spirit Emperor at some point. *God damn, woman, you really are fearless.* When he talked to Iluna, he was like a knowledgeable grandpa. With Leila, though, he was more like a university professor instructing his student. Her thirst for knowledge was more than a little amazing.

I felt the need to apologize to him for her being a nuisance—actually, no. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the Spirit Emperor was really enjoying himself too. It might’ve been fun for him to interact with a student so quick on the uptake. In that case, I’d leave them to it. Who was I to burst their bubble?

“Well, then, lord and master of the dragon who rules over all. To you, who saved this child, who is both a dear friend and beloved daughter of my allies, I extend my thanks.”

“Naaah. I told you, don’t worry about it. It’s not like I did it because I wanted to be thanked or whatever, y’know.”

“Perhaps it is so for you, but this is very important to me, for you fulfilled my duty in my stead. So please, do allow me to thank you properly.”

“Yeah, all right.”

I gave in with a nod because I felt like it would’ve been rude to keep refusing him. The Spirit Emperor continued speaking when he saw me acquiesce.

“Excellent. Will you show me your heart, then, demon lord?”

“My heart?”

Does he want me to strip or something?

“Ohhh, you must be talking about the dungeon core, right?”

“Correct.”

The dungeon core. The heart of me and my dungeon. The thing that, so far, hadn't had its chance to make a real debut because we'd never had any serious invaders coming after it. Not that I was complaining, of course. It was a *good* thing that it'd faded into the background, 'cause the moment it ended up involved in, well, anything, would be the moment I found myself in a life-or-death situation.

I kept it safe right behind my throne, in a small but super thick cage I'd generated using the dungeon's power. I was pretty fanatic about its security, so, like, this request made me hesitate.

“I trust you on account of you being Lefi and Iluna's friend, but...I'm begging you not to be rough with it, okay? I'll die if you break it.”

“I understand, for I have destroyed a few myself.”

Reading between the lines, he's killed Satan knows how many demon lords. I really didn't wanna show it to him all of a sudden. Honestly, I kinda had the willies now. But if anything *did* happen, Lefi was right there. Knowing that, I changed my mind and walked to the cage behind the throne. I opened it, pulled out the glowing, rainbow-colored orb, and set it down in front of the Spirit Emperor.

“Here you go.”

“Indeed. Now, please excuse me as I work.”

So saying, he held his wand over the dungeon core.

“Nh— Gaaahhhhh?!”

The second he did, a massive amount of power raged throughout my body, like it was trying to burst out from within me. My knees buckled and I dropped down onto them, putting my head to the floor. I pressed hard on my chest with both hands, feeling my heart thunder underneath.

Tears spilled from the corners of my eyes and my lungs started working overtime to help me breathe as I gasped from the intense torrent of power storming through every one of my cells.



“Y-Yukiki?!”

“Mr. Yuki!”

“M-My lord?!”

“Y-You cur! What have you done to him?!”

Iluna screamed, which made the other little girls even more anxious. Nell and Lew rushed toward me, both looking like they were about to cry. Lefi shouted angrily at the Spirit Emperor.

“Haah... Haah... L-Lefi, I-I’m fine...”

I stopped her from lashing out anymore as I slumped into Lew and Nell’s hold. They supported me from either side.

This sensation... I knew this sensation. It was the same as the monstrous pain I’d felt the first time I’d touched the dungeon core. The pain that had been so acute I’d felt like I was dying. In short, the dungeon was currently in the process of reconstructing my body.

“Be at ease. I am only pouring my power into him, so calm will be restored before long.”

Lefi’s glare intensified at the Spirit Emperor’s laid-back tone. But he remained unruffled and ignored her.

“Ha ha... Feels pretty good...to see...how worried...everyone is about me...y’know?”

“Enough of your silly prattle! Do not move until this is over!”

Despite her anger at my casual tone, Lefi worriedly checked me over from head to toe, her hands patting me everywhere. Honestly, it made me feel really loved at times like this, which in turn made me super happy.

Finally, *finally*, the power running wild throughout my body started weakening little by little. Actually, no, that wasn’t quite right. It was more like my body was adapting to it, slowly making it easier for me to handle.

After some time had passed, I was able to speak normally again. Still leaning on Nell and Lew for support, I lifted my torso up and turned to face the Spirit

Emperor.

“What...did you do to me?”

“All I can do is give you the ability to control spirits. Therefore, I tuned your body to be able to do exactly that. How do you feel?”

“Uh... Not bad.”

That was probably because the Spirit Emperor, a being as strong as if not stronger than Lefi, had shared his power with me. I had a feeling this experience had increased the dungeon’s level—its *rank*—by one. I couldn’t be sure of the details until I actually checked, but I was pretty sure my stats had gone up a ton.

“Not bad at all. Except it woulda been real nice of you to have given me some kind of *warning* about what was gonna happen.”

“Well, pure souls like the young will not feel pain when power is given to them. But this...you present an intriguing case. I suspected you would be fine, and I was right. You acclimated to my power without incident. Is this proof, then, of the indeterminate vessel possessed by a demon lord created by a labyrinth?”

The Spirit Emperor returned my reproachful stare with a deeply curious one of his own. Never mind his lack of eyes. *Ah, shit, he’s a goner.* He looked exactly how Leila did when she was obsessing over some topic or another. No matter what I said now, it was totally just gonna go in one of his ears and out the other. Ugh, researchers...

“Y-Yukiki, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Sorry for making you worry.”

I ruffled Iluna’s hair as she stared anxiously at me. Then, I turned back to the Spirit Emperor and continued speaking.

“Okay, so, this means I can see spirits now too?”

“Correct. Child, you may show the lord.”

“O-Okay, here I go! Fire Spirit, please come to me!”

It took a fraction of a second after Iluna spoke for the empty space in front of her to stop being empty. A red, fiery ball of light suddenly winked into

existence.

“Oh, wooow!”

Inch. Rest. Ting. So this is a spirit, huh? The red ball of light—presumably, the Fire Spirit—spun in circles around Iluna. Maybe it was happy she’d summoned it? Based on that, it seemed like it too had a sense of self, though I didn’t know if it was as distinct as the Spirit Emperor’s.

“Hmm... There is a spirit there, then?”

“Yup, there sure is. Lefi, you can’t see the floating ball of fire?”

“Floating ball of fire? No, I cannot. All I can sense is a mass of magical energy hovering in that spot. Leila, what say you?”

“I just have a vague sensation like something is there. That’s about it. And I wouldn’t have known at all if you hadn’t told me.”

“Whaaat? For real? I can’t feel a thing.”

“I...have to agree with Lew. I don’t sense anything either.”

By the way, Shii, En, Ilyr, and the wraith sisters were all here too. But they stayed quiet, not wanting to interrupt our serious conversation. *Good girls.*

“Daughter of werewolves and daughter of humans, you two are in the minority, so you need not trouble yourselves over this. As far as I myself am aware, very few people can sense the presence of spirits despite lacking the aptitude for it.”

“Wait, so, like, does that mean I originally had some sort of latent talent for working with spirits?”

“No. Your case is a little different. You were birthed by a labyrinth, which makes your vessel different from ours. Through me, you have now acquired the aptitude to handle spirits.”

I what now? Did I hear him right?

“There’s that word ‘vessel’ again... Basically, what you’re saying is that it’s easy for my nature to change?”

“On the whole, your understanding of the matter is correct. I suspect this is a

special characteristic of the living thing known as the labyrinth. Ordinary beings possess a fixed nature—the shape of their vessel hardly changes after they acquire it. You, however, are different. The shape of your vessel changes and acquires the power to survive as required. It would make sense if your race has evolved, but even without that, changes have occurred. In essence, your vessel is an amorphous one.”

“Inch...resting.”

When he put it like that, it was easier to connect the dots. It was like using DP to unlock functions I couldn't use before. For example, Maps. In the beginning, it hadn't shown me anything except hostiles as red dots in the dungeon's territory. But now, I could see enemies on it even when I was outside the dungeon's territory.

And not too long ago, using DP-related functions had also become possible outside the dungeon's territory, although some restrictions still applied. All this had happened not only because of the changes in the dungeon, but also due to the changes in my own body. The power of the dungeon changed me so I could do things I couldn't before.

I often jokingly thought of myself as a cyborg human—no, a cyborg demon lord. Apparently, I hadn't been completely wrong seeing as the Spirit Emperor had basically pointed it out with his “amorphous vessel” bit. That was probably my special trait since I'd been born from—created by—the labyrinth.

“Hmph. At the risk of parroting Yuki, you should have informed us at the start that this is what you intended. You have always been this way, old man. You speak as if you are the only one who understands everything, and you believe that gives you the right to act in whatever way you choose. Have you any notion of how close I was to incinerating you?”

“That is a terrifying prospect indeed. I certainly have no hope of emerging victorious against you, who rules the world. Therefore, I shall be more careful in the future.”

The Spirit Emperor sounded like he was laughing at Lefi's grumbling. Then, he turned back to me and continued.

“You may ask the child to teach you how to use the spirits. I have taught the

wee lass everything I know about them. I'm sure you will have no trouble studying under her tutelage."

"Yup, I'll be fine."

"Yukiki, I'll teach you looots and lots!"

"Awesome, thanks."

Listening to our exchange, the Spirit Emperor nodded and stood up.

"Right, then. I believe I shall take my leave now. Though our time together was short, I found our discussions truly worthwhile and pleasant."

"Wait, what? You're leaving? Why not chill for a little before you go?"

"Yes, why don't you? I would love to speak with you some more..."

Leila agreed with me, her disappointment crystal clear. I could understand why; she'd really been enjoying her chat with him earlier. Curiosity monster that she was, I was sure she cherished anyone who could meet her on an intellectual level.

"Go on. Get out of here. I cannot laze around with you in the vicinity."

"Heh. So speaks my old friend. Moreover, I still have tasks I must accomplish. I will find the survivors from the village and inform them that the child is safe."

"Oh, yeah? All right, then. Please and thank you."

"Thank you very much, Teacher."

Iluna bowed her head meekly to the Spirit Emperor, her expression worlds apart from her usual beaming one.

"Now, now. None of that. This is also one of my duties. Well, then, residents of the labyrinth. I'm grateful to have been afforded the chance to meet you in this wide, wide world. And you, conquering dragon. I pray you remain the loving being that you are."

"Be well, old man."

The Spirit Emperor bowed one last time before walking through the door I opened for him.



The Spirit Emperor walked through the forest.

“Heh, heh... It’s been quite a long time since my emotions were stirred so. And I am glad to know the young one is well. If she stays with them, she will be even safer than before.”

They were an interesting lot. First, there was the young bloodsucker herself. Then, the daughter of the ovine race, every member of which possessed an insatiable spirit of inquiry, and the incredibly lively beast girl. The human hero and the wee human royal, as well as the small child wearing traditional dress who clearly had a deep bond with a sword and the slime who resembled his bloodsucker pupil and could speak in the humans’ tongue. Lastly, there was their old, old friend the Supreme Dragon, and the demon lord who was the master of that labyrinth.

How could such a disparate group of people have come together as if by design? The fact that no problems existed among them was a tremendous feat in itself. Coexistence with other species sounded well and good on the surface, but it was simply an attractive sentiment. Reality seldom bore out the notion. Feeding habits, ways of living, knowledge, values, and more—great disparities in these areas made it overwhelmingly difficult for different races to live together in harmony. The Spirit Emperor had seen many countries fall as a result of internal strife despite holding such lofty ideals.

Others who saw their views as exaggerated would respond with only one question: how many examples existed of towns and villages where a multitude of species, whether human, demi-human, or therianthrope, lived together in harmony? While there were demons who didn’t concern themselves too much with species segregation, living easily enough with others, most still tended to congregate with their own races. That was just more proof of how difficult it was for different species to live in the same community. That those young women could live freely while holding each other in respect most certainly marked them as an unusual breed of people.

Moreover, after their many conversations with her, the Spirit Emperor had been surprised to learn of their old friend’s transformation. Before—when

they'd first met in centuries past—she had been indifferent to everything, her personality characterized by an utter coldness. But seeing her in the labyrinth, a wealth of expressions crossed her face, accompanied by love for those around her. A happy face, devoid of the old disinterest, that told the Spirit Emperor in no uncertain terms that her identity as simply a woman superseded that as the Supreme Dragon.

They had found immense joy in seeing their friend so happy. And there was but one reason for her dramatic change.

“Yuki, I believe his name is. I shall commit it to memory.”

An image of the demon lord they'd met surfaced in their mind. They had been aware of the variety of personalities in the class of beings known as “demon lord,” yet that particular one towered above the rest as an exceptionally odd character.

For a demon lord, he was not arrogant despite his power, was intelligent, and most importantly, had a different sense of values than many of his kind. There was more as well. He viewed the world and judged it from a unique perspective, not only as compared to other demon lords but also as compared to all the rest living in it.

In that place, that young man was the *most* different. Even more so than the Supreme Dragon.

The Spirit Emperor knew from their discussions with the women there that he'd had quite an impact on those around him. And the one most influenced by him was his old friend.

“The Demon Lord from Another World... I knew a world separate from this one existed, but to think it had a demon lord, of all creatures.”

They chuckled softly to themselves.

Though their time in the labyrinth had been short, it had been crystal clear to them that a special bond existed between that demon lord and the Supreme Dragon. They trusted, loved, and lived for one another. Each needed the other. They understood that she had changed precisely because that young man had taught her the warmth to be found in the world.

It was still hard for them to fathom what strange forces were at work to have created such a situation, in which someone had taught the Supreme Dragon, who was powerful enough to be a contender to stand at the top of the world's hierarchy, of the thing known as "love." They supposed it shouldn't have been surprising, though, considering the young man who was her husband. They suited each other so well that one would be hard-pressed to find a more harmonious pairing.

"I wish for those two to live happily and blessedly for all eternity in this world."

With things as they were, the Spirit Emperor realized that it was highly unlikely they would see a future in which they would fight their friend. As one who had become the world's guardian, they would be forced to contain the Supreme Dragon were she to run wild. That was their duty even if it meant sacrificing themselves. And they knew that she would defeat them if such came to pass.

As far as creatures who were as powerful as her went, they could think of a few. But they would all have to attack her together in order to have any hope of winning against her. That was just how far beyond anyone's level the Supreme Dragon was. And the shock waves of such a terrible battle could destroy two, perhaps even three civilizations.

There had existed such an unsettling danger in her before, and it had been all too easy for them to imagine a conflict like that taking place. For that reason, the Spirit Emperor personally wished for nothing more than for her to continue living in joyous harmony with that young man.

"What a wonderful time I had. Heh, heh... This world is indeed quite interesting."

That labyrinth would most likely become one of the greatest in the world. They decided it would be quite amusing to visit again when that happened. Thus, the Spirit Emperor smiled cheerfully and left the Demonic Forest.

Epilogue: Fate's Powerful Ties

"You sure this is all you're gonna take with you, Nell?"

"I am. Thank you."

"Okey dokey. This isn't much, though, huh?"

"Probably because I came here with nothing but the clothes on my back."

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

I continued putting her small pile of things into the large pochette I'd bought using DP. It had dimensional-storage magic cast on it, meaning it was basically a lower-grade version of my Inventory, allowing the user to fill it beyond its normal capacity. Obviously, though, it would be impossible to shove anything bigger than the bag's opening into it. And while I'd called it lower-grade, it could still hold a pretty good number of items, so outside of stuffing it full of monster corpses, I seriously doubted it'd go over capacity.

"You know, Mr. Yuki, I'm pretty sure I could make a small fortune from the bag itself."

I responded playfully to Nell's wry comment.

"Oh, yeah? Then if I ever need money, maybe I can start a transport service using it."

"Something along the lines of 'Demon Lord Courier Services'?"

"You got it. Our company can meet our clients' needs with three fantastic options. The Demon Lord Express Service, the Fenrir Express Service, and the Supreme Dragon Express Service."

"Tee hee. I bet the Supreme Dragon Express Service would be the safest and fastest delivery method. Which would also make it the costliest, hm?"

"Yeah. And payment is only accepted in the form of sweets. Y'know, on second thought, that would be the cheapest method."

“Ah, right you are.”

We grinned at each other before I continued talking.

“I put a bunch of stuff in here for if you’re ever in danger, so use whatever you need whenever you need it.”

“Thank you. That really helps. What kinds of items are they?”

“First, you’ve got the usual Super Potion—twenty bottles of it. Ten of the dungeon-return devices. Five mythrill knives with the Explosive Roaring Blaze sorcerous circuit so you can exterminate an entire enemy army if you have to. Just be careful how you use ’em. You’ll blow yourself up if you botch it, so make sure you put plenty of distance between you and the enemy first. I also put in an upgraded version of that Communication Orb I gave you in the demon world. It’s called a Communication Orb: Revamped, and it actually allows people to communicate over long distances, so use it whenever you wanna get in touch. Watch out, though, because it consumes a lot of magical energy when you use it. There’s also a bunch of food and snacks Leila and I made together, plus emergency rations—”

“W-Wait! Hold on, Mr. Yuki! Wait a second!”

“Huh? What’s up, buttercup?”

Panicked, Nell tried to stop me as I listed off the things I put inside the pouch.

“I-I really appreciate everything you’ve readied for me, but honestly, I’ll be fine! It’s not as if I’m going off to war.”

I heard her repeat the “exterminate an entire army” thing I’d said under her breath. She sounded kinda bewildered.

“You’re talking nonsense. My cute wife is leaving our home, okay? I gotta give her gear, or else I’m not gonna be able to sleep at night. Hmm... You know what? I think I’ll add a few more things, ’cause I’m *definitely* feeling uneasy—”

“F-Fine! I understand! I understand and accept all that! So please, no more!”

With that, she snatched the bag from me in a rush like some sort of purse thief.

“Honestly, Mr. Yuki. You’re much too overprotective. Although I’m very happy

to know you're *that* worried about me."

"Yeah, but I still feel like I'm being pretty hands-off..."

"I don't think you know what 'hands-off' means."

Nell's smile was both exasperated and charmed.

We were currently in the dungeon's inn. Since she was leaving tomorrow, the others let us be alone here. And by 'others,' I meant Lefi, who'd said, "You may speak in private," and Lew with her, "Tee hee. Time for you two to be lovey-dovey!"

Well, Ilyr was still hanging out too, so we planned on going back to the real throne room for dinner later. I'd planned a "Temporary Farewell Party" for the two of them.

Real talk, I still couldn't figure out where kids got all their excess energy from. While playing with the little-girl gang all afternoon, I hadn't been able to help thinking, "I'm getting old." Never mind that it hadn't even been a full year and a half since my birth here.

Anyway, back to the present. After a bit more of our nonsense chatter, I spoke to Nell while scratching my cheek and hiding my embarrassment deep inside.

"Uhhh... One more thing, Nell."

"Hmm?"

"Can you give me your left hand?"

"Okay..."

When she saw what I was holding, her cheeks turned pink, though she smiled happily as she stretched her hand toward me. What was I holding? A ring. Taking her slender, pale left hand, I slipped it onto her ring finger.



Instead of using my Weapon Enhancement ability to make her ring, I'd actually crafted it all on my own. Thanks to my incessant engineering projects ever since arriving in this world, I'd gotten pretty good at detailed work like that. I was positive that my highest value, Dexterity, also had something to do with it. Then again, I still sucked hard at using a sword, which Dexterity *should* have helped with.

"Um, sorry that your ring's got basically the same design as mine and Lefi's. I did try to think of something else, but I decided against it in the end."

I'd worried myself silly over the idea of creating a different one for her. I could only put one ring on my finger, though, so I'd figured the best thing to do was to make hers match.

By the way, I'd already finished a prototype of Lew's ring too. I planned on making a real version in time for our official ceremony in a few months.

"Oh, I don't mind at all! Thank you, Mr. Yuki. Tee hee hee."

Nell held her hand close to her face, inspecting the ring and beaming cheerfully the whole time. *She's too cute.*

"Wow... This officially makes me your wife, doesn't it, Mr. Yuki? Th- Then...perhaps I should start calling you 'd-d-darling' — Nope! I can't do it! It's too embarrassing to say out loud!"

"Whoa. Deep breaths, Miss Nell."

Having fired herself up, she now covered her flushed face with both hands. I couldn't help laughing ruefully at her. She was just way too cute.

"You don't have to force yourself, y'know. Especially since Lefi still calls me plain ol' 'Yuki.'"

Besides, I actually really liked her calling me "Mr. Yuki." Made me feel super special.

"Oh, r-really? Then I'll stick to the usual. But someday, I *would* like calling you 'darling' to be as natural as breathing for me..."

A small smile curved her lips. She must've been imagining that future. What the hell, though? It was like she was *trying* to kill me with how cute she was. By

my count, I'd taken a three-hit combo so far. *Darn you, hero. Sneaky as always.*

"Man, heroes are scary. Heroes are *super* scary."

"Huh? What? Where did that come from?"

"I bet you could exterminate every demon lord in existence with your cuteness and you don't even know it."

"Um, Mr. Yuki? What are you talking about?"

"And with Demon Lord Yuki's annihilation, the world finally knew everlasting peace..."

The end! Thank you very much for reading!

"Seriously! What *am* I talking about?!"



"Ilyr, you *better* come play with us again, okay?"

"We'll waiting!"

"Yes...we'll be waiting."

"Of course! In fact, next time, why don't you all come to *my* house?! Please say yes! We'll have so much fun!"

Ilyr had gotten really tan from playing out in the sun these past few days. I felt the cockles of my heart warm as I watched her and our little girls squeeze each other's hands tight. Then, I turned to Lefi and spoke.

"Okay, I'm gonna escort Nell and Ilyr outside the forest."

"Indeed. Do your job well since we will not be seeing them for some time. Oh, and Nell."

She turned to Nell.

"I know I have already told you, but do not forget. We are with you always. Should anything occur, do not hesitate to rely on us. Understood?"

"Yeah, it's just like my lady says!"

"Yup. Thank you both."

After replying to Lefi and Lew, Nell turned to Leila, who stood next to them.

“Leila, I’m sorry I won’t be able to help you with the housework. But please do look after everyone, okay? You’re the only one who can support a family as large as ours...”

“Nh— W-We can assist too, you know!”

“Y-Yeah! We’ve gotten a lot better at chores!”

“Tee hee. Yes, you can count on me.”

Once everyone had said their goodbyes, I spoke to Nell and Ilyr.

“All righty, Nell and Ilyr, it’s time to head out. En, you’re coming with us.”

“Yes... I will join you.”

“Nellie, Ilyr, see you again soon!”

“See you soon!”

“Yup! Take care, Iluna, Shii, and everyone!”

“I can’t wait to see you all again too!”

I helped Nell and Ilyr onto Rir, who’d been waiting patiently for us. Then, we left the dungeon’s meadow area for the world outside.

“Mr. Demon Lord, thank you very much for allowing me to visit you! I had so much fun!”

Rocked by the rhythm of Rir’s gait, Ilyr spoke to me while happily rubbing his fluffy fur. She kept muttering, “Sooo fluffy...”

“Ha ha! Glad to hear it. I couldn’t ask for anything more than your enjoyment. And thanks from me as well for being such good friends with Iluna and the others.”

“Of course! I’ve never been so close to my friends until now. Next time, please come with them to my castle! We’ll give you a grand welcome!”

“Sure. Looking forward to it.”

While we chatted away in a relaxed manner, I continually checked Maps en

route to our destination. *Uhhh, I think it's this way.*

"Hey, Mr. Yuki? Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm? What's up?"

"I don't think this is the way to the city. Where are we going?"

"Ooh, figured it out, didja? Even though you have no sense of direction."

"Huh? Lady Nell, is he telling the truth? You don't have a 'sense of direction'?"

"She sure doesn't. Let me tell you about the first time I went somewhere with her—"

"Gah! M-Mr. Yuki, there's no need to bring that up!"

Nell covered my mouth in a panic, and I grinned at her before replying to her question.

"Here, take a look. *This* is where we're going."

I manipulated the ivy, grasses, and other flora I'd grown using the dungeon's functions, pushing it all aside. In doing so, I revealed a door, camouflaged by the nature surrounding it.

"This door... Could it be the same as the one in your castle?"

"Yup. This one's connected to Alfiro."

"Huh?"

"Alfiro. You know, the frontier town. Well, technically speaking, it's connected to the forest *near* the town."

Nell stared at me in shock, having a hard time processing my very unexpected words.

"But...when?"

"I worked on expanding my dungeon a little at a time whenever I was home. I figured it would be handy to have at least one door that connects us directly to the human town."

"Does Lord Releaux know?"

"Nope. He doesn't have a clue. I set it up myself to connect to the part of the

forest near the town without his permission.”

You heard right, folks. My dungeon’s territory had grown a ton by now. I’d had the thought a while back that I’d probably earn fat stacks of DP if I could incorporate a highly populated town into it. Working off that idea, I’d kept expanding little by little until I’d finally covered enough of the town that it’d become a part of the dungeon’s territory.

I knew there weren’t many strong humans like Nell and that old butler dude, but despite them being weak overall, they had numbers on their side. Alfiro being under my domain also meant that I could immediately detect the presence of any armed troops gathering there. That was just a bonus effect, though, because I trusted Mayor Old Guy and King Reyd not to pull any shady shit.

Thanks to my efforts, I was now raking in a buttload of DP just like I’d originally planned. In fact, I was making so much that I wished I’d incorporated the town into my territory way earlier, since my expansion there was pretty recent. That said, my daily income was still less than what I’d been pulling in thanks to Lefi way back when. It was times like this when I really, truly felt the impact of her monstrous power.

Also, I obviously wanted to make a door near the royal capital too, what with that being where Nell would be staying. Unfortunately, though, that goal wasn’t possible right now because my dungeon’s territory definitely didn’t reach that far. At least not yet.

Somewhere down the line, I planned on adding not just the entirety of the Demonic Forest but also the lands around it to my domain. But that work was for ten, twenty years from now. Maybe even later. After all, I’d only incorporated about a quarter of the Forest so far.

Mwa ha ha ha. Without anyone knowing it, the demon lord’s territory continues to grow. No one can stop his relentless invasion, and soon, the world will find itself governed by this unseen demon lord.

Oh, yeah, by the way, this door was different from the one in my home. I’d made sure it didn’t actually connect to the dungeon and could only be used to get to and from the town. Just in case any enemies found it and thought they

could raid my dungeon. That was also the reason I'd installed this door extremely far from my castle and had made its exit point the part of the forest *near* the town instead of directly *in* the town. Having said that, only the dungeon's residents could actually use the door, so maybe it hadn't been totally necessary to think so far ahead. *Eh, better safe than sorry.*

I hadn't told the mayor about the door's existence, but I *had* let him and the king know that Ilyr would be returning to the capital via Alfiro, so there were no problems on that front. Plus, I was confident that the mayor would stake his honor on ensuring Nell and Ilyr's safe journey to the capital.

"I imagine if Lord Releaux learned of this, he would hold his head in his hands and despair at how far your evil clutches have extended, Mr. Yuki."

"But he's not the only one in this demon lord's evil clutches, now is he?"

"Shut up."

I cackled like a maniac at her retort. Once I was done, I spoke to them both.

"All right, ladies, I guess this is goodbye for now. I really wanted to take you as far as the capital, but..."

"No, no, Mr. Demon Lord! We certainly don't want to cause you so much trouble!"

"Yes, indeed, since we decided Lord Releaux and I would see the princess safely to the capital from Alfiro. Don't worry, Mr. Yuki, we'll be fine. I might not be able to handle the monsters in the Demonic Forest, but I'm confident I can take on any other enemies."

"Yeah, I have faith in you. Then I leave the rest to you, Nell."

"Yup, you can count on me. Oh, one last thing, Mr. Yuki."

So saying, Nell moved close to me and hugged me real tight. I flinched for just a second, but almost immediately, I wrapped both arms around her. Her body was warm and soft. I could feel her heart racing, which conversely calmed my own.

Standing next to us, Ilyr stared up at us but said nothing. She was probably being considerate.

“Okay, I have my fill!”

A minute or two later, Nell unlinked her arms from around me and grinned, her face close to mine. *Goddammit. She really is too friggin’ cute.*

“We’re off, then, Mr. Yuki. Bye, En, Rir.”

“Sounds good. See ya soon. You too, Ilyr.”

“Yes! I absolutely, positively believe we *will* see each other again! EnEn, until next time!”

“Yes... Bye-bye, Ilyr, Nell.”

While waving at us, they passed through the door and disappeared to the other side. After that, the door closed with a *creak*.

“Haah...”

After sighing, I used the dungeon’s functions to hide the door by making it blend in with the surroundings. Then, I spoke to my pet and the sword girl.

“All right, En, Rir. Ready to go home?”

“Master...you’re not sad with Nell gone?”

I shrugged playfully in response to her question as she stared up at me.

“Of course I am. How could I not be when my cute wife isn’t here? I’m super-duper sad. Which is why I’m gonna need everyone to cheer me up when we get back to the castle!”

“Okay, understood... I’ll cheer you up.”

En strained up onto her tiptoes as far as she could go and vigorously rubbed my head to comfort me. With a laugh, I returned the favor, then we returned to the dungeon.

Special Story: A Memory to Last for Eternity

On a day when everyone was home.

“Hmm...”

I was in the living—no, the real throne room. As usual, I was hard at work on a project at my workbench. I’d never worked with my hands in my old life, but since coming to this world, handicrafts had become one of my favorite hobbies. They were honestly loads of fun.

My life here came with a lot of free time and there wasn’t much else to do in terms of entertainment, which was one of the main reasons I picked up this hobby. But even I could never have predicted I’d become so obsessed with making stuff. Well, though I said I had a lot of free time, it didn’t mean I was ever bored. I was always playing with the little-girl gang, sunbathing with Lew, teasing Nell, having informal magical discussions with Leila, or continuing my never-ending battle with Lefi.

While I continued working on my project, Iluna popped up behind me and peered into my face.

“Yukiki, what’s that?”

“Oh, this? Wait just a second here... Okay, done!”

I grabbed it—a small, square boxlike item—and stood up.

“Iluna, strike a pose for me.”

“Pose? Okay!”

Iluna raised her hands next to her head and curled her fingers to resemble claws. Her face took on a ferocious scowl. Not that it was a surprise, but she looked super adorable like that too.

“Graaawr! I am a kaijuuu! Be afraid! Be *very* afraid!”

“Ha ha ha! Oh, man! I’m shaking in my boots!”

Laughing, I activated the sorcerous circuit in the thing in my hand. When I did, it stopped moving after sucking in all the magical energy in the air around us. I pushed magic into it again, and the item projected an image into the air. It was an image of Iluna acting like a cute little kaiju.

“Wow! Amazing! It’s me!”

“This is what’s called a ‘photograph.’ This thing can capture and freeze a specific moment in time.”

“Woow!”

Her eyes sparkled as she stared at her own image hovering in the air.

It was a mirror crystal, the magical item I’d used in the royal capital when I’d gone there with Nell. Today, I’d been working on improving it. The version of the device I’d bought from the DP Catalog recorded images by sucking up the surrounding magical energy, but there were two issues with it: that it only captured images in black-and-white, and the relatively crappy quality of the images themselves.

Wanting to at least improve the picture quality, I’d fiddled with the thing in various ways. Now that my tinkering was done, I was pleased to report that improving the item had been surprisingly easy. Why? The answer was easy too. The reason the preupgraded image quality was so low was because the crystal had a very low capacity for magic, meaning it couldn’t absorb a decent amount of it.

With Leila’s assistance, I’d been able to analyze and extract the sorcerous circuit inside the mirror crystal. Then, I’d carved the circuit into material from the Demonic Forest because it boasted an extraordinary capacity for magical energy. This had allowed me to improve it to a level where I could use it as a normal camera for everyday use. Though the quality still wasn’t crazy high, it was much better than before.

But wait, there’s more! Wonder of wonders, this improved version of the mirror crystal could now take pictures in color instead of black-and-white. When I’d asked Leila for her advice on how I could make it record images in color, she’d been quick with a solution by revising the sorcerous circuit to allow it to take color photos.

She'd given me a detailed explanation about what she'd done, though I couldn't remember every last word. Something about the part of the sorcerous circuit involved in preserving color, the characteristics of colors imbued with magical energy, and so on and so forth. In any case, as usual, my Ultimate Weapon Maid had not disappointed. My personal doctrine was to consult her whenever I was stuck on a problem, because one way or another, she'd help me find a solution.

The only downsides to the improved version of the device were that I now needed to use a little bit more magic to activate the sorcerous circuit and it remained single-use. Beyond those, though, I was of the opinion that it was pretty damn good considering an amateur like me had developed it.

I'd also made it portable with the little girls in mind. Thinking they'd be interested in using it, I'd made it small and light enough to hold in one hand. The addition of a cord made it even easier to carry by slinging it around your neck.

"Oho. I see you have created another intriguing item, Yuki."

"A new magical device, my lord?"

Lefi and Lew put their game of Othello on pause to stare curiously in my direction.

"Yukiki, I wanna try it too!"

"Sure thing. To use it, you—"

Just when I was about to show the three of them how the makeshift camera worked, Shii, En, and the wraith sisters cheerfully barged in carrying a plate full of snacks. I was fairly certain they'd filched the booty from the kitchen, right out from under Nell's and Leila's noses.

"It snack tiime! Huh? What are you doing?"

"Looks fun..."

"Oh, hey, you're all here too. Okay, I just had a great idea. After we finish eating these snacks, let's have a photo contest!"

“I must say, Yuki, you are quite proficient indeed at creating one thing after another like this.”

Lefi had come out into the courtyard with me. She was holding the new and improved mirror crystal— Nah, forget that. It was long past time to just call the thing a camera. Anyway, she was holding the new and improved camera in one hand. She’d sounded half impressed and half exasperated when she’d made that comment.

The rules of the photo contest were simple: everyone took whatever picture they wanted with their camera, and whoever took the best one was the winner. We would all vote on the pictures later, with the winner receiving a mini trophy I’d bought off the DP Catalog as well as a three-day supply of sweets.

Just like the two of us, everyone else was super gung-ho about capturing a good picture.

“I can’t really say I made it, though, since Leila did half the work. Plus, I know how advanced these things can get. You’d be stunned too if you saw the kind of things my old world was capable of.”

“Hmm... I suddenly find myself interested in this world you used to inhabit. I believe I would like to visit this ‘Earth’ of yours at least once.”

“I think the only way we can do that is by passing into the next life. But there’s no guarantee we’d even be reborn there.”

I figured the odds of me meeting everyone again in our next lives were astronomically low. Besides, if you asked me which world I liked better, it was this one. There was no comparison.

“Gah ha! You have a point. Well, as long as I can spend my days with you, I do not mind which world we end up in.”

Those manly words fell from her lips so smoothly. My heart slammed hard in my chest for a moment, but I couldn’t afford to get all flustered right now. Not when she looked calm and relaxed. I felt like I’d lose if I did, so I pretended to be composed and made a sudden “Ah!” sound like I’d just noticed something.

“Yo, Lefi.”

“Hmm?”

When I waved her over, she came obediently toward me. I wrapped my fingers around her well-shaped jaw and forced it open. Then, I activated my camera.

“Nice. Got a shot of your dumb mug.”

“How dare you?!”

Aghast, she slapped my hand away and snapped angrily at me. I tossed a shameless grin at her before running away at the speed of light. You might ask why I fled. And I would answer that it was because I saw a future where I was being chased.

“Nh... S-Stop right there! You *will* hand over that magical item!”

As I’d anticipated, Lefi started her hot pursuit of me right away.

“Mwa ha ha ha! Dumbass! You *know* I’ll never give it to you now that you said that out loud!”

“Then I shall use all my power to take it from you! Gird your loins, Yuki! It seems you have forgotten the vast difference between your physical abilities and mine! But fear not, for I will remind you of it forthwith!”

Just like she’d said, when it came to running ability, my dearly beloved wife’s was definitely better than mine. Within seconds of commencing the chase, she flew at my back. But...

“I have apprehended you, Yuki! Be a good boy and— Dwah?”

I smirked evilly at her as she basically piggybacked me. Her confused response came after she’d seen me open and close my hands repeatedly, silently revealing to her how empty they were.

“I already dumped the camera into Inventory. And you know what that means! That picture is stored for eternity!”

“Ngaaahhh?!”

I knew better than anyone how far out of my league my wife’s physical abilities were. Thus, the moment before she’d leaped at me, I’d opened up

Inventory real quick and tossed the camera inside. Now, Lefi's stupid, gaping, "my guard is totally down" expression belonged entirely to me. I planned on asking Leila how I could make a magical device that would allow me to print the images off later.

"Ahhh! You— You infernal— You!!!"

"Ow, ow! Ha ha ha! My battle tactics prevailed today, Lefi!"

She had both legs clamped around my torso since she was still riding me piggyback style. That left her hands free to squeeze and pull my cheeks mercilessly over and over again.

"Hmph. I know you are merely hiding your embarrassment with your childish antics!"

"Wha— N-No way! You're way off base! What the heck do I have to be embarrassed about?!"

"Because you are an unexpectedly pure man! You can imagine how difficult it is for me to deal with a husband who is so wet behind the ears!"

"Sh-Shut yer trap! That's the pot calling the kettle—"

Before I could finish, she lifted the camera hanging around her neck and activated its sorcerous circuit to take a selfie of us.

"Aha! One shot, as you say, of your shy, red, foolish face as you attempt to wiggle your way out of this!"

"Ngaaahhh?! Y-You— Th-This— That's so mean!!!"

"I do not want to hear that from *you*!"

We'd completely forgotten we were in the middle of a photo contest as we continued to battle it out with our words.

"All righty, folks! Let the exhibition begin!"

Everyone was gathered in the real throne room again. They all clapped politely at my announcement.

"Yes, yes, thank you, my friends. Right, so, uh, Miss Lefi, why don't you give

the commencement address?”

“What?! U-Understood. Um... I am quite looking forward to seeing all of your pictures. I expect great things from everyone.”

“Well, since that was exceedingly normal and boring, let’s get right into the displays!”

“You are in for a walloping later, Yuki.”

I ignored Lefi, who stared at me with a stunningly ghastly smile, and continued speaking.

“Okay, who wants to go first?”

“Yes! Me! Shii wants to!”

Shii jumped up and down excitedly, both hands raised in the air. *So cute.*

“Go right on ahead, Shii! Show us the picture you took!”

“Okay! I took this! Ta-da-da-da!”

She lifted her camera high for everyone to see, then projected the image in midair.

“Ooh, this is... Uhhh, would you like to tell us what this is, Miss Shii?”

“This is the ree-frih-juh-ray-ter!”

Ayup, it sure is. That is definitely a refrigerator. She’d taken a picture of the middle of our fridge.

“Miss Shii, why did you choose to photograph the refrigerator?”

“Um, um, um. ’Cause the ree-frih-juh-ray-ter holds our hopes and dreams! That’s why I took a picture of it!”

“What a wonderful picture... We should make it a family heirloom.”

“Ah— Aha ha ha... W-Well, I can certainly see how it makes one happy, considering all the food inside.”

Sporting an awkward smile, Nell followed up En’s impressed comment with one of her own. When I saw Iluna, Lew, and the wraith triples nod emphatically in agreement, I realized how unexpectedly high Shii’s photo was being rated.

The more I thought about it, though, the more it made sense that her picture captured most of my ladies' attention, them being such gluttons and all.

"Um... An excellent, creative photo, wasn't it, folks? Thank you very much, Miss Shii. Now, then, who'd like to go next?"

"Me... En."

So spoke En as she stood up. Though her expression remained stoic as usual, it also conveyed confidence for some reason.

"Right-o. Without further ado, please show us your photo!"

"Yes... This is mine."

The image she projected into the air was clear at a single glance: a worm's-eye view of a ring of flowers. You could see the castle in the far-off distance, making the whole scene quite, well, picturesque.

"Oho. A splendid picture. No one would object if we hung it up on a wall."

"Hm, hm, hm! Good job, EnEn!"

Lefi and Shii praised her picture while the others murmured admiring comments of their own. Honestly, though, it really *was* something else. Overdramatic as it might sound, for someone who didn't know a thing about how a camera worked since it was her first time using a camera, she'd managed to capture an absolutely lovely image. And it made me wonder if that was how she saw the world, beautiful in all its splendor. I didn't care if my thoughts made me seem like an overly doting parent; it made me happy to think I was right about her perspective.

"I think we can all agree this receives very high marks for artistry. Thank you very much, En. Third up—ah, the wraith sisters, eh?"

Apparently, the three of them had taken a picture together. The middle sister, Rui, folded her arms and puffed her chest out proudly. Next to her, the oldest, Rei, and youngest, Roh, smiled cheerfully like they were up to something.

"Okay, show us what you got, trips!"

Rei nodded and used her telekinesis to activate the floating camera. The image displayed... *Hmm?* The photo showed Rui in the form of a mermaid for

some reason. She was lying on one of the banks of the river running through the meadow area, a world-weary expression on her face as she stared off into the distance.

Ohhh, so that's how she did it. Rui had probably used her illusion magic to make the mermaid's body, then layered her own body under it from the neck down. She also had two cute little horns made of human fingers coming out of her head. Either Rei or Roh had snuck in behind her and created them with their fingers.

Rui, supremely confident in the picture, looked befuddled for a moment when she finally saw it. Then, immediately, anger crossed her face and she started chasing her sisters. But the two of them had expected her to react like that. They whirled around all over the place as they ran away from her, their attitudes gleeful over having hoodwinked her. Clearly, Rui had thought they'd taken a cute picture of her, whereas the other two had conspired to play a prank on her instead.

"Ha ha ha! This photo definitely suits you triplets' style."

I couldn't help laughing as I said that. Rui looked at me like she was harrumphing and wound around me, expressing her strong dissatisfaction with all of us. *What a cutie.*

I couldn't touch her wraith form, but I patted her head through the air anyway, facing Iluna while I did.

"Iluna, you're the only one left from the little-girl gang. You cool with showing us your picture next?"

"Yes, yes! Hee hee hee. I'm really proud of my work, you know!"

"Oh, yeah? Looking forward to it, then."

Beaming, the golden-haired girl showed us the photo she'd taken.

"Here you go! It's Yukiki and Lefifi flirting!"

Yeah, so. It showed us having a heated argument while Lefi piggybacked me. Neither of us said a single word.

"Aha ha ha! This picture really gives the viewer a glimpse into how close they

are, huh, Lew?”

“For sure, Nell. Oh, me, oh, my, they take every opportunity to flirt, don’t they?!”

My two other wives made fun of us, grinning the whole time.

“Hee hee hee. Once I saw them together like that, I knew I had to take the picture!”

“They...look like the perfect example of a nice couple. Good picture.”

“Happy ever after, huh?!”

I idly wondered how our faces looked right at this very moment. Lefi and I silently exchanged looks, and Nell took that opportunity to speak to us with a teasing smile.

“How about we take a look at the flirty couple’s photos next? I’m curious about what they captured. Aren’t you all? Maybe cool poses of each other?”

You’re wrong, Mrs. Nell. But you’re not far off the mark either.

“Uhhh... Due to various circumstances, we’re unable to show you our pictures. Please look forward to the next occasion.”

“Indeed. Though I am loath to give up three days’ worth of confections, unfortunately, we have already lost the competition by default.”

Our silent glance was a way for us to wordlessly communicate our secret pact not to show our pictures. And we did just that by talking our way out of it. If one of us revealed our photo, it would undoubtedly inflict massive damage on the other. Granted, we both knew exactly what the other had in their possession, but there was still no reason to needlessly deepen the existing wounds.

“Hmm... Since they’re acting like this, it means your guess is probably spot-on! I think they both took pictures of each other.”

“I agree, Lew. We’ll need to discuss this later in another convening of the Council of Wives, won’t we?!”

“Cool. I leave the rest in your capable hands, Lefi.”

“Wha— That is patently unfair, Yuki!”

After sacrificing Lefi, I cleared my throat and spoke.

“M-More importantly! I wanna know what the two of you took photos of. Show us. Now.”

“Hmm, okay. As you can all see, it’s quite normal.”

“Heh heh heh. Feast your eyes on the picture I put all my effort into taking!”

They each projected their photo.

Conceptually, Nell’s resembled En’s in that it was a landscape photo. The meadow area stretched out endlessly in it, with my beloved castle standing majestically in the middle. Quite a lovely picture.

As for Lew’s, it was an extreme close-up of Rir’s face. He had a strained expression on it. *I really have to wonder why he’s so easy to read despite being a wolf.*

“Wow! It Rir!”

“Ta-da! You’re correct, Shii. I present to you all Lord Rir’s esteemed countenance! I basically have this contest in the bag, huh?!”

“I think we can all agree that Lew’s photo gets last place.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“What?!”

Rir’d had his photo taken without his permission. To add insult to injury, he’d ranked dead last without his say-so. *Poor guy.*

“While Nell’s photo is relatively simple, there’s no denying its beauty. Worthy enough to hang up. Not bad at all in my opinion.”

“I concur. I do not know much about art, but I do know I feel at peace when gazing upon nature’s scenery.”

“Tee hee hee. Really? I’m glad to hear that.”

“Grr! I object! I don’t agree with any of this! Isn’t Lord Rir amazing?!”

Lew folded her arms and puffed her cheeks out angrily. Jumping on the dissatisfied bandwagon, Rui, too, folded her arms to express her displeasure.

Everything you two do is just too darn cute.

“Give it up, Lew. Learn how to appeal to the masses first, then try again.”

On that note, I wasn’t sure what to do about Shii’s photo of the fridge. Since the little-girl gang really liked it, I would say it was a big hit with the masses in our family. I’d classify it as avant-garde art.

“Last but not least is Leila. It’s all up to you now, our glorious final contestant.”

“Tee hee. Understood, sir.”

She proceeded to project a picture of this place—of everyone gathered together, chattering and excited. Despite being the photographer, Leila herself was in it too, off in a corner, smiling her usual enigmatic smile. Just looking at it made me want to smile a big, happy smile. It was that kind of photo.

“Well. I guess we know who’s taking first place.”

“Tee hee hee! I like this a lot, Yukiki!”

“Me too!”

“Everyone together... Wonderful.”

And so, the photo contest’s first-ever champion, selected unanimously, continued to smile, looking pleased by her victory.



Afterword

Hello, this is Ryuyu! Thank you very much for buying volume 7! Thanks to you all, before I knew it, I'd made it this far. Time sure flies by quickly, huh? I'm really, incredibly grateful.

Right, then. On to the contents of this volume. Nell's scandal comes to a close, and she decides to continue being the hero. Unfortunately, that means she ends up leaving the dungeon on her own due to her job post being away from the family. But she fully intends to take leave often and go home, so please rest assured on that front. We all know Miss Nell is the dungeon's conscience, even if she's lowered her guard recently.

In the beginning, I'd actually intended for Princess Ilyr to be only a minor character. But now, she's basically a semiregular member of the cast. What a mystery.

Things like that happen a lot, though, don't they? "This is how I want this character to play out." "I'm sure these characters would act like this if something like that happened." "Would this enemy do something so evil?" The characters steadily make their moves, and the story winds up going in unexpected directions.

As a result, it becomes incredibly difficult later on to make the story coherent... (Stares off into the distance.)

Lew and Nell marrying Yuki was the result of the story progressing in this very fashion, in fact. Well, it felt right for them, so really, I'd say that's a good thing!

Characters don't behave following their author's will. No, they assert themselves on their own, practically shouting, "This is how we are!" The author's job, then, is to arrange situations, roles, and suitable obstacles that allow the characters to progress smoothly. Therefore, the author's skill lies in how effortlessly they can solidify and enliven the story.

To be clear, this is just my own personal theory. But I wonder if maybe most

other authors operate the same way. I'm still very much out of my depth on that front, though, so I practice and train myself every day. Yup, I have to keep working hard.

I'd like to end with acknowledgments now. To my editor, for getting my work to a state where it can be published as a book. To Daburyu, whom I secretly revere. To Note Tono, whose fantastic manga adaptation makes me grin even though I know the story as the original creator. To everyone else involved in the production of this work and the readers who have stuck with me, from the bottom of my heart, thank you so much.

Until the day we meet again!



"Magnificent!"

"So goddesses really do exist."

The Young Man
Reborn in Another World
As a Demon Lord

Yuki

"S-Stop it,
Mr. Yuki!
You're
embarrassing
me!"

Hero
Nell

Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My **DUNGEON**

No matter how small the difference,
chest size is serious business for little girls!

"Our next
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"I-I mean...
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Princess of Alisia

Ilyr


Vampire
Iluna

Healing Slime
Shii

Yuki's Weapon
Zaien
(Pet Name: En)

Ancient Dragon
Lefisios
(Pet Name: Lefi)

The demon lord is
suspected of cheating?!



"We meet each other now for the first time, lord and master of this labyrinth. Ah. Forgive me. Lord and master of this labyrinth and of dragonkind. My name is Ygg Drasil. I am the emperor of spirits."

The Spirit Emperor
Ygg Drasil

.....
Lefi's old friend.
.....
The being who granted Iluna
.....
The Spirit Emperor's Blessed.
.....

"Yuki, I think it likely we are acquainted with each other."

"Ho...ly shit... What the hell is this...?"



7

Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu

Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
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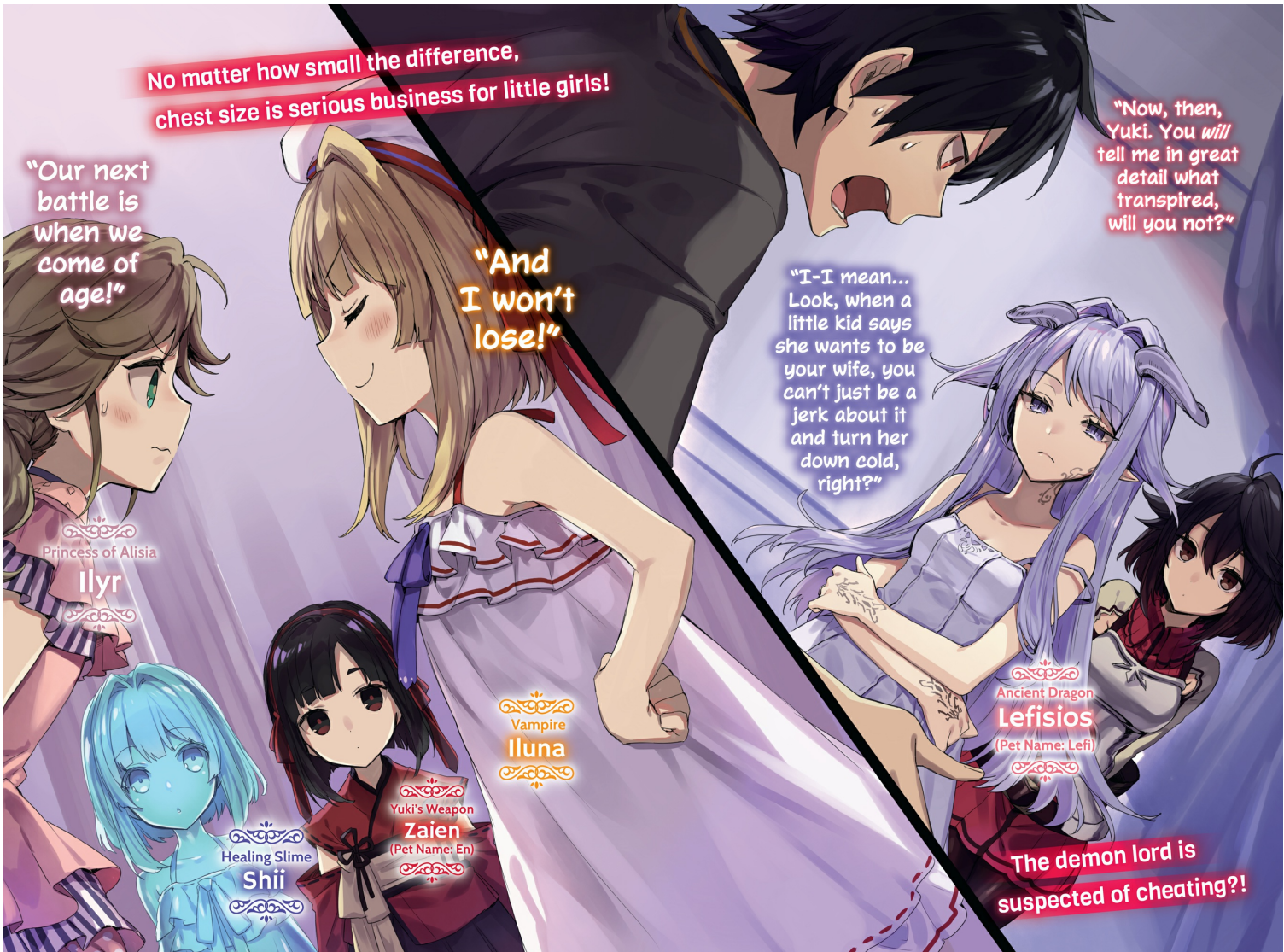
Princess of Alisia
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Vampire
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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in My Dungeon:
Volume 7

by Ryuyu

Translated by Kashi Kamitoma Edited by Adam Haffen

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MAO NI NATTANODE, DUNGEON TSUKUTTE JINGAI MUSUME TO HONOBONO
SURU Vol. 7

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