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## **Prologue: Special Training**

Morning. After Lefi finished eating breakfast with everyone in the dungeon, she went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She stared intently at her reflection in the mirror as she did. A humanoid body of the female variety. Decidedly nondragon.

Ever since she had acquired the "Humanized Dragon" title a short while ago, Lefi had been unable to return to her dragon form. So, at the moment, this vessel was the only one she had. But in hindsight, she realized she didn't know much about it. Its composition was essentially the same as a human's, yet it wasn't identical, as this body had originally been created through magic.

Hmm. If I truly mean to seek power with this form, then I ought to understand it, starting from the fundamentals. Until now, she hadn't paid much attention to it, but she decided it would behoove her to step outside for the first time in a long time and determine what this body was and wasn't capable of. Then, while she was at it, perhaps she would also try wielding a weapon or two.

While those thoughts ran through Lefi's mind, the door to the bathroom opened with a rattle. Her husband, Yuki, entered.

"Mm."

"Oh, hey, thanks."

When she moved a bit to the side, her husband filled in the space next to her, letting out a huge yawn before starting to brush his teeth as well. She would never say so out loud because it was too embarrassing, but she loved the ordinariness of times like this when she was with him. Even though they spent every day together, warmth bloomed softly in her heart every time they had an unremarkable moment like this.

"You know very well that it is too cramped when the both of us are in here."

"Silence, wench. Ain't nothin' we can do about it."

Though they bickered teasingly, neither Lefi nor Yuki made any move to leave

the bathroom. Once they'd finished brushing their teeth, they went back to the living room, where Lefi turned to her husband and spoke.

"Ah, Yuki. I am in need of a stout greatsword. Hmm, let me think... One that you do not mind being destroyed, or conversely, a sturdy one that can withstand my wielding it. Might you have created something of the sort?"

"Color me surprised. Where's this coming from?"

Lefi waved her hand nonchalantly and replied to her husband's puzzled question.

"It is simply for sport. I find myself somewhat interested, you see."

"Ohhh reeeally? All right, then you can have this."

So saying, he extracted a greatsword from the rift in space that was his Inventory. Though the same dark gray as iron, it possessed a beautiful luster.

"Did you craft this out of...adamantite?"

"Correct! I made the whole thing out of the stuff as an experiment, but it didn't cut as well as I wanted it to. Turns out that rare metals can't be used on their own. Despite being a failed creation, it's probably stupid strong, so feel free to use it right up."

"Understood. Thank y— Hold. Yuki, I have no intention of meddling in your pastimes. I most certainly do not. However, considering that adamantite is a rare metal and that this weapon is made entirely of it, does that not mean you spent a considerable amount of that thing you call 'DP' to make it?"

"H-Hey, no need to worry about that. I restocked the coffers. I swear."

Her scowl and the way she said those words implicitly asked whether he was aware of his squandering ways. When Yuki refused to meet her gaze, Lefi huffed in rueful exasperation. Even though he hardly used any weapons besides En, he still insisted on creating them. This man never changed.

"If you insist, then it is fine. This place would not exist without you, but do not squander your funds needlessly. I remember well when you nearly exhausted them."

"Y-Yes, ma'am. I'll be careful."

She nodded imperiously in response, then headed for the Demonic Forest, carrying the greatsword on her shoulder.



"Hmm... This is pointless."

I muttered to myself, staring at the fallen tree in front of me. I had cut it down with the greatsword borrowed from my husband. Although it had been less cut and more smashed judging from the incredibly rough-looking gash in the tree. Evidence of the dull blade.

According to Yuki, this weapon was a failure that lacked the appropriate sharpness, but that was neither here nor there, as it was clear from the way it had been cut that the tree had been felled purely through brute force. Of course, this being my first time wielding a sword, it came as no surprise that I would not be good at it. Even so, the problem lay with the greatsword itself. A crack had already formed in its hilt, most likely owing to me having used too much power when I swung it.

Adamantite, a rare metal said to be the hardest of all metals, was second only to orichalcum, which was known as "divine steel." And *this* was the result of a single swing. The sword obviously wasn't strong enough to withstand the rigors of combat.

When I had first considered how to supplement my own strength, I had pictured my husband fighting and decided it would be good to learn how to handle weapons. However, swordsmanship was clearly an art form designed for the various species of mankind. At my level of skill, it would be more advantageous for me to attack with my bare hands.

"I made the correct choice in not asking En for help..."

I had initially thought of asking En to help me test the utility of a weapon, but now, I was glad I experimented with this greatsword first. If I had wielded the girl in her sword form without knowing the right amount of force to use, I would have undoubtedly crushed her handle with my grip.

"If weapons are not my forte, then is magic the answer? I have always been quite skilled on that front, but...the output remains the issue. Perhaps I can

attempt to use a staff next?"

"Whatcha doin'?"

A voice came from behind as I mulled over my next idea. When I turned around with a gasp, I found my husband standing there.

"Oh, s-so you came here after all."

"Sure did. I got kinda curious when you asked me to lend you a greatsword outta nowhere. How could I not when, unlike Nell, who's obsessed with weapons, you've never shown even a hint of interest in them until now?"

"Ahhh... Yes, I see. That makes sense. Then the first thing I need to do is apologize. All it took was one swing from me for a crack to appear in the greatsword I borrowed."

I handed the sword back to him, and he stowed it away in the spatial rift.

"Guess even adamantite's a bust for you, huh? What I wanna know is why you're using a weapon in the first place, though. I mean, you have the world's strongest talons at your disposal, right?"

I stewed in thought for a bit before replying.

"I...have decided to disclose to you the truth. I cannot return to my dragon form."

"Say what now?"

"It seems I have begun to think of myself not as dragonkind but as mankind. Use Analysis to look at my titles."

My husband stared at me in silence for a few moments.

"Does that say...'Humanized Dragon'? When did that happen?"

"Quite recently. As I am now, I am no longer the world's most powerful creature. It is of no great loss as I do not care, but in the unlikely event that I am forced to battle another Calamity-level being, I will most certainly lose. Thus do I wish to train this body with real combat experience."

"Ohhh, so *that's* why you asked about weapons. But adamantite's kinda tough to use for making swords."

"Indeed. In this case, the sword is meaningless when my fists are more powerful."

"When you say you can't go back to being a dragon, does that mean you can't completely take on your original form? You can still make your wings appear with your current body, can't you?"

"That is true. I can use this humanoid form as a base to make changes in my appearance."

With that, I attempted to transform one of my arms into that of a dragon. When I succeeded, my husband started running his fingers all over the scales and sharp claws of my altered limb. His touch felt strangely ticklish, but I did not stop him. Then, he suddenly licked my hand.

"Eek! Wh-Whatever are you doing?!"

"Geh heh heh. These scales are *noice*! Your bod's not bad, wifey. Not bad at all."

"Waaah! Ahhh... Stop that, you imbecile!"

"Ow."

My suddenly frisky husband meekly let go of my hand when I smacked him on the head.

"G-Good grief... Be serious for once, will you? Though it may not seem like it, I am quite troubled by this turn of events, you know."

"Ha ha! Sorry, sorry. Your arm is just so pretty that I couldn't help myself."

"And that is why you licked me?"

"Hmm... I know! Think of it as a way married couples tease each other."

Cheeks pink, I glared at him. He was unfazed as he cackled shamelessly in response before circling back to the topic at hand.

"All right, so how big's the difference between this set of scales and claws and your original one?"

"Hmm, I suspect the level of strength is the same. The problem, however, is that neither my magic nor my physical attacks are as powerful as they used to be when I execute them. This body simply cannot exert the full strength of a dragon. The limit is half at best."

"Interesting... So it's kinda like the difference in displacement between a car's engine and a motorcycle's..."

"Are those objects from your world?"

Yuki nodded in reply to my question.

"Yeah, they're vehicles. You can think of them as evolutions of the carriage. Anyway, let me see if I've got this right. The levels of strength and performance are basically the same between your dragon and human forms, so in terms of carriages, they're both exactly the same outside of their size. But then one is being pulled by a donkey and the other is being pulled by a horse, and the difference in power between those animals is huge. Why is there such a disparity in output, though? Especially when your stats are the same in both forms."

"Continuing with your analogy, let us say that the amount of food available to fuel the power source is the same. However, due to the difference in body size between a horse and a donkey, the amount they can consume and the amount of power they can exert differ... I must say, I do not know how to feel about comparing myself to a donkey."

"All right, we'll switch to comparing fenrirs and horses instead."

"But that means a veritable gulf in energy between the two. No. That does not matter. I shall not be waylaid by this discussion. In any case, as I am now, I can still hold my own against most opponents, but I cannot win should I be forced to fight someone on the Spirit Emperor's level. Having said that, I do have a few ideas... What about you, Yuki? Can you suggest anything?"

After thinking about it for a few minutes, he nodded.

"Not off the top of my head, but let's put our heads together and come up with a way for you to fight in that body."



<sup>&</sup>quot;You mind telling me your ideas first?"

"Not at all. At the moment, I have two. The first one is a staff. I have primarily focused on using magic during battle, so I believe it prudent to strengthen this aspect of myself."

"A staff... A staff, huh? Didn't the Spirit Emperor have one when he visited us?"

"Indeed he did. Now that I think about it, his thought process might have been similar to mine. After all, humanoid creatures may have limits to how much magic they can produce."

My husband then commented, his expression dubious.

"Uhhh, can we really consider the Spirit Emperor a humanoid creature?"

"Well, he is approximately the size of a human, no? Although he does not possess the traditional five parts of a body."

"I personally think it's a fine line, but let's put that aside for now. Back to what we were talking about. A staff, a staff... Ooh, maybe the Magical Girl Wand Mk II would—"

"I will burn it to ash."

When I summoned forth a ball of flame in the palm of my hand, Yuki made a face and reluctantly put the staff I had once laid eyes on some time ago back into the rift.

"K-Kidding. I was just kidding. Hmm... How about this one? A while back, I tried making a supreme staff by using the one I found on a mountain summit as the base. You know, the one with the crazy abilities. I mixed in your scales and a bunch of other stuff too. I had Leila appraise it once, and she said it's pretty much in the same class as a national treasure, so I think I did a good job."

"Oho. I have high expectations of it, then. You do not use it yourself?"

"Nah. I've tried, but I can't really feel the effects. Even though I can sense the flow of my magic improving a bit, that's about it. That being the case, I might as well just use En since she makes fighting easier."

"That is understandable, as we use elemental magic. It is not the type to benefit from a staff."

Staffs could act as substitutes for chants in magics that required them. They also allowed those with small amounts of magical power to activate their magic efficiently. But neither of these conditions applied to me or my husband. We possessed such overwhelming reserves of magical energy that we simply ignored the issues of chants and efficiency when using our magics. Ergo, it was difficult for us to benefit from staffs.

"But you still wanna try it out?"

"Evidently, becoming adept in the use of a staff makes it easier for one to execute magic. That does not mean *you* need to force yourself to use one, however. I believe you will be just fine using En, for she is a truly excellent weapon when we consider her abilities."

As I spoke, I took the staff from Yuki and poured my magic into it. The spell that activated at its tip created a fireball the likes of which I was quite accustomed to using. The color of the flames was blue on account of the considerable amount of energy I had used. It blazed in a small, condensed orb half the size of a fist, so it could not rightly be called a normal fireball. I aimed at an empty rock face, and instantly, the whole area burst into flames. The resulting explosion of dirt obscured our vision temporarily.

"Welp. Good to know your magic is still batshit crazy. That aside, how'd the staff feel?"

I frowned in thought as I responded to my slightly stunned husband.

"Frankly, I am not certain."

"Like, it's not for you?"

"I know I was the one who said magic becomes easier to use with a staff, but to that, I now wish to say, 'Is that truly the case?' Or perhaps I am using it wrong?"

I had done nothing different from the way I usually employed magic. In the case of fireball magic, the process involved gathering all of the magical energy in my body in the palm of my hand and then manifesting the spell. This time, I had simply moved the gathering point of the energy from my palm to the staff. That was the only change. All else had remained the same, including the force

of the spell and the amount of time required to activate it.

Theoretically, a staff should have made using magic much more efficient. And yet, the difference was too slight to understand.

"The old man uses his spirit magic in conjunction with elemental magic, so I do not think it is necessarily meaningless to use a staff given how much he favors his own. However, I cannot puzzle this out on my own, which leaves me no choice but to ask for his counsel when he next visits."

"You know what? That's fair. Not like I can even comment since I know next to nothing about this topic... What's your other idea, then?"

"To cover my current form in scales from head to toe. If I do that, it should be better than fighting without any protection whatsoever."

After returning the borrowed staff to Yuki, I began modifying my body. I had transformed parts of it countless times thus far, but this was my first attempt at changing the entirety of my form into something draconic, so I needed to focus more than usual. A few minutes later, most of my body was covered in scales, and my fingers had become a dragon's sharp claws. Without noticing it, my wings had appeared too. They protruded from my back of their own volition even though my intention had been to alter only the surface of my body.

"Hmm. I wonder how well I did."

As I inspected myself closely, I realized that my husband was staring at me, wearing a rather impressed expression.

"Whoooa... You look super cool."

"Truly?"

"Heck yeah. You look like... Well, the little-girl gang might disagree with me, but you look like one of those transforming heroes. Sorry, one of those transforming heroines. Super-duper cool. If they saw you now, I'm pretty sure they'd beg you to play their Justice Allies game."

I chuckled ruefully because his words made the picture easy to imagine.

"But this form is a trifle dangerous, so I cannot play with them like this. It would not do to injure them. Although I am quite willing to play our *own* 

version of Justice Allies, just you and me."

"I... When we do, all I ask is that you go easy on me."

"Fear not. I shall properly heal you afterward."

"Can you not phrase it like hurting me is a given?!"

We grinned at each other, and then my husband continued speaking.

"You think you'll be able to activate your magic faster in this new form? Since it's so close to your original and all."

"Hmm... That is a good question. Allow me to try."

I created another fireball, except this time, I did so on the edge of my palm.

"Dwah?!"

"Hot! Too hot!"

It turned out to be leagues more powerful than I had expected, and the intense heat assaulted us. I always coated it with my magical energy to prevent me from burning myself, but due to the unexpected might of the fireball, its heat was escaping the protective layer.

"E-Either put it out or fire it! And do it fast!"

"R-Right!"

Unleashing a fireball of this magnitude would cause a tremendous catastrophe, so I quickly cut off the supply of magic and squeezed my hand closed, extinguishing the flames. When the heat dissipated and the air returned to its cool state, I sighed in relief.

I looked down to see scorch marks here and there on my clothes. Physically, I was fine because of the scales covering my skin, but I doubted I could wear this dress again. As for my husband, he was busy quashing the fire on the hem of his shirt. He, too, sighed in relief once he had put out the flames.

"M-My apologies. I produced much more firepower than I had anticipated. Are you burned anywhere?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Just shocked. Ya know, this reminds me of the first time you taught me how to use magic. But my oh my. The tables sure have turned, eh?"

"Kah ha! Yes, indeed. I remember that as well. Did you not scorch your fringe then?"

What a nostalgic memory that was. It felt as though it had occurred decades ago, but I found it amusing to know that not even two years had passed.

"Yup. I sure did. Good times, huh? Anyway, I think that went pretty well just now, don't you? The fact that you failed in fine-tuning the force of your magic means your output is higher than you predicted, right?"

"Correct. It is clear that the presence of my scales has a direct effect. Because of them, my magical energy does not escape at all through my skin, allowing me to manipulate and compress it without any waste. The flow of the magic inside me moved so overwhelmingly smoothly—much more so than usual—that I did not realize how much I was using until it was nigh too late."

"Makes sense. In the end, I wasn't much help, but at least we have an idea of how to make things work for you now. Moving forward, I think it'd be good for you to hone your fighting skills in that form."

"I agree. I believe I shall call this 'Dragonization.' Based on what I accomplished just now, I should be able to produce results similar to my original dragon form. In fact, I might even be able to surpass it. I find myself feeling optimistic."



I knew which direction to head in now. All that remained was for me to train.

"Even though your dragon form was incredibly cool, I gotta be honest and say I think I dig this one more. You were always cool and strong, but now, you're unstoppable."

My husband's genuine compliment made me a bit bashful, so I responded teasingly.

"Well, this is what happens when I do not hold back. You have my permission to boast about having such a fantastic wife."

"Heh heh. My wife is the strongest, cutest, and coolest in the whole world! No one can beat you!"

"Is it simply my imagination, or do you mock me?"

"Whatever are you on about, my dear?! Here I am complimenting you from the bottom of my heart, and you won't believe me... You wound me! It hurts! Waaah! Waaah!"

"Hmm, what does this wailing remind me of? Ah yes, the repulsive sort that rubs one's nerves the wrong way."

"Same, girl. Same."

As my husband and I bantered, we heard the sound of footsteps rushing toward us.

"My looord! Oh, Lady Lefi, you're here t— Whoa! Wh-What the heck happened?! You're both covered in black stuff!"

It was Lew. Yuki answered her.

"Oh, hey, Lew. Lefi and I were just doing some magical research. What's up?"

"Nell called us not too long ago! 'I need your help,' she said!"

## **Chapter 1: Alliance Summit**

One color stained everything. Red. The red of the burning forest. The red of the burning village. And the red of his burning brethren.

The strength in his legs failed abruptly, and he collapsed to the ground. He didn't notice the terrible heat from the all-consuming flames assaulting his skin nor the leaping embers burning him. He simply stared at the sight before him in a daze.

He could think of nothing. His mind refused to work, making his thoughts unclear. His vision blurred and shook.

His home, the place where he'd been born, was peaceful and beautiful, existing in harmony with nature. So why...was it on fire?

"Shaima..."

A body rested in his arms. A person who was—who would never again move. A single glance at the stab wound in her chest told him that it had been fatal.

The first thing he felt was a deep sadness so profound that it almost destroyed both his mind and his soul. The next thing he felt was a violent rage so fierce that it threatened to rip him apart from the inside out and drown everything before his eyes in a torrent of blood. And the last thing he felt was enlightenment.

So this is how the world works.

The strong preyed on the weak. And they, in turn, were eaten by those even stronger. If one wished not to be consumed by the absurdity of the world, then one needed to become strong. He had lived this life under this tenet that had been taught to him, and it had proved to be true.

This absurdity makes the world what it is.

At long last, what surged forth from within his chest was the will to rebel. Rebel against the hopeless unfairness of the world. For the sake of peace. He knew a great deal of blood would be shed under the banner of those words. A great many lives would be lost. If he followed through with this defiance, he knew that he himself might create numerous misfortunes as well. Even so, he would do it. He *had* to do it.

For the sake of his dead brethren and dead kin. For the sake of his dead wife. As the sole survivor, it was his fate to see this through for them, hatred toward the world's absurdity festering in his heart.

"You... You were the one who told me to have great hopes. And it seems...! have a new one now."

A single tear spilled from the red-haired warrior's eye as he stood up, still cradling his beloved wife's corpse in his arms.



The Elvish Enclave. Situated between the demon and human worlds, the entire area was covered by a deep forest. There, representatives from three races gathered.

The first, the elves inhabiting these woods.

The second, demons under Demon King Fynar's standard who were working steadily to build relations with other races.

The third, humans from the Kingdom of Alisia, led by the king himself.

At the moment, the leaders of each group were conducting a meeting in a council room located in the elvish settlement.

"Ahhh, how wonderful to meet you at long last, King of Alisia. I couldn't be more delighted to talk to you face-to-face like this."

"I am very much in agreement. When I think of this fruitless strife finally coming to an end, I can feel the weight lifting from my shoulders."

As they exchanged greetings, the two kings—Fynar, king of the demon world, and Reyd, king of Alisia—shook hands firmly. The Demon King's ever-present sunny grin concealed the inner workings of his mind, while Reyd, too, wore a diplomatic smile. But a current of strength ran through both of their words. They weren't mere flattery.

Next to them stood the queen of the elves, Naforazey Faraye, the woman who held the real power among her race. She spoke next.

"Well, then. I'll be acting as mediator today. Both of you, please sit."

The two men obediently took their seats at the round table.

"Hmm... It might be rude of me to say this, but I truly did not expect you to look so youthful. The other races truly are the envy of this world, eh? Despite your appearance, in truth, you are almost one hundred and fifty years older than me, yes?"

"Ha ha ha. If you think that's outrageous, let me tell you that darling Naforazey has been around since before even I was bor—"

"Say any more, Demon King, and I will rip out your tongue."

"Oh, dear, how imprudent of me. I believe that's my cue to keep the unnecessary chatter to myself."

Thus, the conference began amid this genial atmosphere.

Standing sentry against a wall on one end of the spacious council room, Nell breathed a quiet sigh of relief as she watched the exchange. She had been allowed to attend as a bodyguard for the human contingent.

"All things considered, I think things will turn out well. What do you think, Mr. Lemiro?"

"Indeed. Maneuvering in the demon world for so long was worth it. You simply cannot comprehend how dearly I wished to see this sight."

So replied Lemiro Gilbert, the elderly butler and previous hero, to Nell's question. These talks owed a great deal to the efforts he had expended as a gobetween for demons and humans since meeting Demon Lord Yuki in the demon world. The sight of different races conversing so rationally made emotion swell in his chest because he had played a key role in making this scene a reality.

Eyes narrowed, he watched the proceedings intently for some time. Then, he spoke to Nell like he had suddenly remembered something.

"Allow me to change the subject. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you're married now, are you not, *Mrs.* Nell? Congratulations on your nuptials."

"Huh? Oh, um, th-thank you very much. Was Ronia the one who told you?"

He chuckled and nodded at the mention of her royal conjurer friend's name. With a mischievous expression, he continued.

"Your husband is the man I, too, had the fortune of meeting in the demon world, isn't he? While your friend is overjoyed to see you bask in happiness every day, she is also somewhat, shall we say, *perturbed* by your endless gushing tales of your husband."

"Wh-What? I-I really don't think I've been gushing about him all that much. At least, it doesn't *feel* like I have. But maybe I have..."

The young hero trailed off halfway through and was mumbling by the last word. Charmed, the elderly butler smiled warmly at her.

"Heh. What matters is that you're happy. I'm not sure if that's the reason for your newfound mental fortitude, but I've heard much and more of it. One's circumstances truly have a profound effect on them, don't they?"

"Well, as long as the things you've heard are *good* things, then I won't take offense."

Nell couldn't think of anything else to say in response as she scratched her cheek self-consciously.

Nearby, the conference took a serious turn during their pleasant chat.

"Now, let us get to the heart of the matter. 'Tis my earnest wish to form cordial relations with you all. I know well that ill will exists on both sides, but I wholeheartedly believe that we can end the vicious cycle in our generation."

"I very much agree. We no longer live in an era where our lives begin and end in the same place. The future means more and more contact between all races. Those who insist on sticking to their narrow-minded perspectives will find themselves a dying breed soon enough."

The Demon King nodded firmly while responding to the Alisian king's words.

"Our values differ markedly, but that doesn't mean we need to kill each other. So the question is how we go about this. I propose we start with truce and trade agreements. Surprisingly enough, all of us members of mankind are easily

swayed by coin, so if there's *profit* to be made, I'm *sure* we won't mind overlooking some of the *differences* in said values."

"Hmm, a sound argument. Greater contact between our peoples means a deeper understanding of each other's cultures. An obvious fact. Before long, we'll be able to view each other as individuals instead of races, and any ill feelings will fade as well."

"We elves request inclusion in the trade negotiations. If we don't interact with the outside world, we risk incurring a tremendous imbalance in our way of life."

"Yes, I can *understand* your concerns, since your people have *always* been hunters. I have *no* objections. In fact, I say the *bigger* the scale of our goals, the *better*."

Then, after spending a fair amount of time discussing trade relations, the Alisian king spoke.

"I would like you to listen to one of my fears. Compared to you, we humans have short lives. Take me for example. Though I may yet be king five years from now, I am not confident that will be true in a decade. To the best of my ability, I intend to bequeath the throne after first laying the groundwork. However, I cannot say for certain if things will come to pass the way I wish them to. Therefore, while I am king, I would like to create a situation where it would be far more advantageous to adhere to the truce than to break it."

"I see. Understood. Then I suggest the following. We'll make an official proclamation of trade relations between our peoples, while behind the scenes, we'll conduct joint military exercises. It may be a bit premature, but I think it's best to start from the military to strengthen relations. Not to mention that getting an early start wouldn't hurt considering the current tense state of affairs. Both the demon and human worlds are in a state of flux, so it would be in everyone's interests to have more allies."

Elf Queen Naforazey shook her head in exasperation at the two men's dialogue.

"Good grief. The problem is that you lot fight too bloody much. Makes me think you'd all be leagues happier if you led stable lives like us elves." "It *pains* me to admit how *true* your words are, *especially* because my lack of *strength* is why the demon world is in *such* disarray."

"Hmm... Truth be told, 'tis the same for me. Stability is not an easy thing to achieve, is it? It ever remains just out of my reach. So I would very much like to learn your methods, Lady Naforazey."

"Oho! I have high hopes for you yet, human! Very well. I shall gladly teach you how to unify your subjects."

"Ah, you've gone and *done* it now, Reyd, my boy. Once you get her *started* on a topic near and *dear* to her heart, it is *very* difficult to get her to *stop*."

After that, the intense meeting continued until it grew dark outside.



The forest surrounding the Elvish Enclave stretched far and deep. The elves had set up various types of barriers in different locations all across its expanse. This defense system allowed them to immediately detect intruders and smoothly intercept them if they turned out to be hostile. Other races called this strong defense system the "Secret Art of the Forest." As a long-lived species, the elves had an extensive history, and within that history, there were only a handful of cases where they allowed intruders to reach their settlement.

Despite being a minority compared to humans and demons, the elves wielded great influence. A major factor for this lay in their powerful military force that resisted conquest by other races. They were naturally proud of their defenses, which were strong enough to compete for first or second place in the world of humans. For that reason, the many elvish soldiers currently on guard near the border between the forest and the village bore stern, alert expressions.

The conference taking place today in their Enclave had drawn a gathering of different races, including demons and humans, who had been at war for a very long time. Elves had dealings with both races, so their home had been chosen as the venue on this occasion. Of course, they were proud to have been chosen, but that was precisely why they needed to ensure that the meeting ended without any issues. This awareness was the cause of the tension running through these sentinels.

"Hmm?"

"What is it?"

The elvish soldiers were on patrol outside the barriers in two-man cells. One half of a pair questioned his partner, who had made the puzzled sound.

"Well, my familiar discovered a monster. It hasn't crossed a detection barrier yet, but it seems to be an Undead."

He answered while receiving the thoughts sent to him by the small animal that was his familiar.

"An Undead? That's strange. Did it wander here from somewhere, or do you think it was lured by the delegations that arrived earlier in the afternoon?"

"I think the latter is likely. With so many people coming at once, the signs of life would have been very strong, attracting it here."

Elves often relied on the magic of familiars. As hunters, they used animals and monsters as familiars to hunt efficiently. These familiars would be sent to investigate their surroundings, making it possible for the elves to search a wider area for enemies than they could on their own. Depending on an individual's abilities, they could release multiple familiars, allowing for quick detection of enemies. But nothing was ever perfect, so this magic also had a drawback. In this case, the reports that familiars could send to their masters only contained information their brains were capable of comprehending.

This particular soldier used a small animal as his familiar because it was difficult for an enemy to spot. So all he could understand from the information it sent was that the monster was an Undead.

"Hold on. There's movement. The Undead is moving toward us."

"From which direction?"

"Northeast. It's still far away, but it's heading straight toward us. This creature was definitely drawn in by the presence of life. The two of us should be enough to eliminate it. Actually, best we approach this cautiously considering that a monster we rarely see has appeared today of all days. Send a message to headquarters about this first, please."

"Will do. Hello, this is the Seventh Security Squadron. Undead sighted. We're moving in to eliminate."

After his partner used a Whisper spell to report to headquarters, the two men took arrows from the quivers on their backs and nocked them in their bows. They didn't draw their bowstrings, but they were prepared to loose at any moment, as they were now more alert than ever.

They stared intently into the deeper reaches of the forest. It didn't take long for them to spot a wriggling shadow off in the distance between trees. Right away, they realized that the creature was much, much larger than they had imagined. Then, the entire area around them exploded.



It happened suddenly. *Boom.* A low explosive sound reverberated in the distance. Seconds later, tree fragments, rocks, dirt, and such landed on the ground nearby. Smoke started rising as well.

Everyone in the council room immediately turned in the direction from which the noise had come. Each race's guards reflexively went on high alert, taking up their weapons. They were ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"I want a status report, now!"

Naforazey, the Elf Queen, raised her voice sharply. One of the elf soldiers standing at attention by a wall approached her, then spoke into her ear, one hand cupped around it.

"We received a Whisper, Your Majesty! The Seventh Security Squadron reported the discovery of an Undead, but the communication line abruptly ended, and there hasn't been any contact from them sin— Wait, we've just received a follow-up report! S-Several mutant-type Undead confirmed! They've infiltrated the Enclave and fighting has commenced!"

"No! What about the protection barrier?! The strongest one should have been in place!"

The protection barrier was one kind of barrier the elves had installed in the forest. A magical marvel, it was powerful enough to withstand two hits of a Dragon Roar, the secret weapon of the world's strongest race, the dragons.

Elves used these protection barriers as the foundation of their defense. However...

"I-I don't know, my lady! But the fact that they're inside the village means the barrier has been broken!"

"Ngh! Pull the security units back inside the Enclave's borders, reestablish the line of defense, and send out the rapid response force at once! What of the magical beast squadrons?!"

"The first through fourth have already joined the battle, while the fifth is in charge of guarding other areas!"

"Good! Keep working together closely to deal with this! Should any member of the other races be injured in our domain, it would dishonor us elves!"

His gaze on Naforazey, who barked out orders in quick succession, Demon King Fynar murmured with a grim expression.

"Mutant-type Undead, you say? Did they tunnel through again like last time, or are they using some new method now? Forgive me, but it seems my enemies have followed me here."

"Hmm... Might you be referring to the fiends you mentioned before the conference, Lord Fynar?"

Reyd, the king of Alisia, questioned him.

"I believe so, yes. The fiends use Undead as weapons. They pursued me here deliberately—or rather, they saw this conference as an opportunity to purge themselves of more potential enemies. I had them under close watch, but clearly, my opponent was a step ahead of me on this occasion."

The Demon King then turned around and gave instructions to his subordinates.

"The *hostiles* out there are ones *we* are supposed to handle. You can keep *my* protection detail to a *minimum*. The *rest* of you, go outside and *assist* Naforazey's people."

"Yes, my liege!"

The demons instantly went on the move. From next to Fynar, Reyd addressed

his own subordinates—Nell and her comrades.

"We, too, shall lend our aid. Ser Nell, Ser Lemiro, can I rely on you to coordinate with Ser Carlotta, who's leading our forces outside?"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"Understood, Sire. The rest of you, please protect everyone in here."

"Yes. sir!"

The rest of the human soldiers answered in unison to Lemiro's request as they saluted him. Nell and Lemiro then exited the council room, which was carved out of the middle of a massive tree. Upon stepping outside, they saw the normally graceful elves running about, shouting angrily and doing their utmost to fight off the intruders. On their race to join them in battle, Lemiro spoke to Nell.

"Mrs. Nell, listen to me. I'm well aware you have experience fighting Undead, but on this particular occasion, we are facing the mutant variety. Each individual specimen is remarkably strong. If the situation becomes too dangerous, I want you to flee. Is that understood?"

Before she could protest, the elderly butler raised a hand and stopped her, then continued speaking.

"You're married, so no one would have objected had you made the decision to retire from the battlefield. Yet here you are regardless, much to our convenience. There's no need for you to put yourself in harm's way. Should you find that you're endangered, abandon us and save yourself."

Upon hearing those words, Nell understood that the man in front of her was only concerned for her safety. She let out a puff of laughter and responded to him.

"Mr. Lemiro... Thank you very much. But you don't have to worry about me. After all, I'm the one who selfishly wanted to get married. Besides, I made a promise to myself."

"Indeed? And what might that be?"

"That I'm going to survive and go home, even if I die. Which is precisely why

I'll be giving it everything I have as a hero. I get quite stubborn once I decide to stop holding back, so I won't be done in that easily! Also! I have a way out if the situation becomes truly dire!"

Her cheerful grin conveyed her unyielding mettle. Lemiro's eyes widened in surprise, and then he smiled ruefully.

"You... I see you have truly grown strong. Understood. Then I shan't say any more. Now, we fight to survive."

"Yes, sir!"

"It's been some time since I last saw these."

The grotesque Undead were finally within Nell's line of sight. She had seen them twice before. The first time had been during the attack on the royal castle in the Kingdom of Alisia's capital, Arsil, and the second, the coincidental encounter she and her husband had had with them in the demon world. Despite her past experiences, these creatures were as disgusting as ever. Her husband, who loathed grotesque things, would have stared at the ones before her in revulsion.

First of all, each was massive. She estimated they were at least two meters tall. The arms, legs, and trunks were all as thick as enormous trees. Connected as they were by muscle tissue, their necks bulged unnaturally from their torsos, giving them an awfully eerie appearance. The sizes of their hands and feet weren't uniform either, with some being oddly larger than others.

The creatures used the thickness of their muscles to continue their relentless assault. They gouged out the ground with every strike. Based on what she could see of the elvish buildings the monsters had destroyed, taking a direct hit meant a messy death. But the most dangerous thing wasn't the intensity of their attack power—it was their ability to regenerate. Within seconds, the wounds inflicted on their limbs and bodies would stitch themselves back together, no matter how deep.

The strong regenerative ability displayed itself most powerfully in an Undead she had just decapitated. Even as it lost its balance and tumbled to the ground, the open wounds squirmed revoltingly closed while it simultaneously groped

around for its fallen head. Once reattached, it stood up again like nothing had happened.

The monsters' regenerative speed was too high. Perhaps even higher than that of the ones she'd seen before.

"Shii has the Regeneration ability too, but... No, on second thought, I certainly don't want to compare these things to a cutie like her!"

Nell walked back her slip of the tongue as her holy sword sliced deeply through an Undead attacking the elves. No blood, guts, or other bodily fluids gushed out, most likely because it was already dead. The mutant-type Undead merely staggered a few steps. She knew this strike wouldn't kill it, though, so she activated one of her abilities at the same time: Gear Creation.

It was a special ability she had acquired through an Ability Scroll Yuki had given to her. By expending an appropriate amount of magical energy, she could create any kind of weapon or gear she imagined for a fixed duration. Alas, she was well aware that the plains of her imagination weren't nearly as fertile as her husband's, who produced new weapons one after another in the blink of an eye.

That was why Nell always pictured weapons that already existed—ones from Yuki's vast collection of creations that she had seen with her own eyes. This time was no different. She instantly made replicas of several of them. Though he had been half joking when he'd made them, they nevertheless possessed ludicrous amounts of power. She rammed them in rapid succession into the mutant Undead's gash that was just beginning to close.

The nuisance of a monster tried to smash her to pieces with a swing of its heavy arm, but she avoided the hit by kicking its body and jumping away.

"I see..."

Unfortunately, the wound closed up, but the weapons she'd plunged into it remained there, swallowed up by its flesh. She could see no signs of the creature's body attempting to expel the foreign substances within it.

Mr. Lemiro's advice was on the mark. Instead of trying to kill it outright, incapacitating it like this is easier.

The most effective attack against the Undead was holy magic, and it had helped them achieve victory the previous two times. But regrettably, there were just too many of the creatures this time. Mutant-types were much more resistant to holy magic than regular Undead as well, so in order to defeat them, one needed to chant long, powerful spells. Spending too much time on a single monster meant incurring more casualties on their side. However, as long as one used their head, there was a way to fight them.

Apparently, Mr. Lemiro had fought against this variety of Undead countless times in the demon world, which was how he had developed his specific fighting style against them. Now that Nell also understood it, she produced two rapier-like thrusting weapons using Gear Creation and held one in each hand. She closed the distance between herself and her opponent again, dodging a sideswiping lariat by dropping low to the ground. Then, she smoothly stabbed it in its thick knees, slipped between its legs, ran up its back, and chopped its head off. After producing two more rapiers and thrusting them into the gaping hole where its head used to be, she finally moved away.

The mutant Undead...was having trouble regenerating. The rapiers she had stuck into its knees obstructed its movement, while the vertical rapiers jutting out of its neck hindered its regeneration. It flailed and jerked like a broken magical device. Due to their low intelligence, Undead could only behave as instructed, meaning they simply weren't capable of the act of removing any weapons piercing their bodies.

"Oho, I see you can now use creation magic! When in the world did that happen?"

"Tee hee hee. I'll have you know that I've been training in my own way while — Wait. More importantly, Mr. Lemiro, isn't it supposed to be difficult to kill them outright?"

Even as she swung her sword, Nell sounded shocked as she looked over at the elderly butler. She had no idea how he'd done it, but at his feet lay the body of a mutant-type Undead, lacerated from head to toe, unable to regenerate.

"Indeed it is. However, if you can slice them into pieces faster than they can regenerate, then it's possible. Although doing so requires a fairly large amount

of magical energy, making the task somewhat challenging against this many of them."

"You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Lemiro... Oh, here. Please drink this."

Nell smiled a little at her predecessor, who'd extremely casually said something so absurd, then removed a bottle of Super Mana Potion from the pouch hanging from her waist. Yuki had given her this pouch, which was infused with his storage magic.

"A Super Potion! Are you certain I can have this?"

"Mr. Yu—I mean, my husband made me take quite a few, so it's absolutely fine! Miss Carlotta, please finish this thing off!"

"Leave it to me!"

Having fully immobilized the mutant creature by impaling its joints with rapiers, Nell entrusted its disposal to the lady knight who commanded the human forces before heading toward the next enemy.

They had a fifty-fifty chance of winning the battle. The first line of defense, the boundary between the forest and the Enclave, had been breached. Nevertheless, the elves reacted quickly, with the demons and humans joining them soon after. At the moment, they were successfully holding their own against the intruders.

Phrased another way, however, it meant they were unable to push back. Because there's simply too many Undead? Despite their sluggish movements, their regenerative ability made them extremely tough. That combined with their high attack power gave the anthropoid races no choice but to fight them one-on-many instead of one-on-one. On the whole, the members of the impromptu elf, human, and demon alliance were holding on by the skin of their teeth.

"Look out!"

When she sensed a sudden increase in magical energy, Nell immediately activated a type of barrier magic called a Gaol Ward and imprisoned the mutant-type Undead inside it. In the next moment, an explosion occurred within the barrier. The resulting cloud of dust obscured the inside.

"My thanks, human!"

"Well done!"

Demon and elf soldiers rescued by her quick action gave her their thanks. After raising a hand lightly in acknowledgment, she shouted to her comrades.

"Mr. Lemiro, Miss Carlotta, I'm going to prioritize containing the explosions! Can you please cover me?!"

She decided that was the best use of her skills in this situation.

"Yes! Ser Lemiro, might you handle her left while we support Nell from the right?!"

"Understood!"

Then, they charged right into the enemy horde.



"Darling Naforazey, I think it best we evacuate. Perhaps you've already considered the idea, but I believe the enemy has individuals who can use spatial magic. Otherwise, I find it difficult to comprehend how they could have infiltrated the forest, where you elves are most at home, in such tremendous numbers without having been discovered by your people."

Her expression grim, Elf Queen Naforazey replied to Demon King Fynar.

"It seems you and I are of the same mind. That must certainly be how such a great host so suddenly appeared. They must have been sent in directly."

A short time after the start of the Undead attack, the situation had been reported to the convened leaders, albeit only a general outline. The first explosion had been a diversion. With the alliance distracted, more Undead had appeared from another direction and commenced their attack, which had made them realize this was a well-coordinated attack.

"However, even using spatial magic, it should be difficult to deploy them on this large a scale. Do you think they achieved this through ritual magic?"

"There is a *distinct* possibility, yes. I have *information* that they've made *allies* of races *excelling* in magic, so they *may* have such individuals on *hand* currently.

Moreover, I don't think this is their only offensive. Throwing their enemy into chaos with an initial attack and then raiding the inner citadel with a second one is standard protocol for the fiends. If we are hit, it's all over."

"Hmm... Very well, then. Have you anything to note, King of Alisia?"

"No, not in particular. It shames me to admit that I have left a majority of military affairs in my subordinates' hands, so I myself am not very knowledgeable on this topic. Thus do I defer to you both and pledge to follow your lead."

Naforazey nodded, acknowledging both men's words, then spoke again.

"Under this giant tree lies a refuge surrounded by a protection barrier. Considering the enemy broke through the external barrier, in truth, I can't guarantee its safety. Even so, it's our only option for escape."

Then, led by the elvish soldiers, the leaders and their personal guards started descending the staircase outside the council room. Moments later, the walls of the gigantic tree they were in suddenly exploded. A thunderous boom echoed. Everyone's vision went white. The shock wave from the blast sent them flying. Various things could be heard breaking, scattering, and thumping.

"Is everyone all right?!"

The first one to call out was an elf soldier who, despite the scorch marks dotting their body, had managed to defend against the shock wave to some extent by immediately setting up a magical barrier.

Clouds of smoke billowed upward. Unable to see much of his surroundings, the king of Alisia responded first, coughing the whole time.

"Hrngh, ghah... I'm fine! Lord Fynar, Lady Naforazey?!"

Their responses came quickly to his shout.

"I'm fine too!"

"I am well!"

"Hmm... Frankly, I shouldn't be surprised. I thought taking you all by surprise would work in our favor, but no casualties, eh?"

That voice came from the other side of the massive hole now in the enormous tree. The smoke hid a shadowy figure, and when it cleared, the person who was revealed was a giant of a redhead—Gozim, the leader of the fiends. This was the man who fought for supremacy against the Demon King Fynar in the demon world, and who was bound irrevocably by fate to Demon Lord Yuki.

"Oh my. If it isn't Gozim in the flesh. To think you would come all the way here, you rascal, you."

"Been a while, Fynar. Life has proved boring as of late, so sometimes a man wants to go outside like this and entertain himself, you see."

Gozim spoke quietly, never once raising his voice.

The red-haired warrior had a strange appearance. A dark red pattern reminiscent of blood vessels ran down the blade of his greatsword, which was the size of a person. The design pulsated as it extended all the way into his arm, encroaching upon his very flesh. And for some reason, blood dripped down that eroded limb, seemingly flowing into the weapon.

"This is only my *second* time seeing that sword, but I'm as *certain* as ever of its *true* nature..."

"I see your ears are as good as they've always been. Ever a man to be reckoned with. But today is the day you die!"

Upon realizing that the Demon King's bodyguards were going to charge him, Gozim raised his greatsword high overhead as he spoke and swung it down ferociously. It made a tremendous whistling noise as it cut through the air.

One strike. But that single strike was enough to slice through the barrier the elves had put up just a moment ago to defend against the huge explosion, as well as blow away everyone nearby with the wind pressure it generated.

The impact of the greatsword's strike created fissures in the floor. That combined with the damage from the earlier explosion made it start to crumble. Before long, everyone began to plunge down to the first floor.

"This is but a trifle!"

Halfway through the descent, Naforazey activated her magic in the blink of an

eye. She used wind magic to slow the momentum of their freefall while simultaneously surrounding Gozim in a gale. She tried to blast him away, but he swung his greatsword again with a *whoosh* and split her storm into two, rendering it powerless. Everyone then landed safely on the first floor.

"Elvish magic, eh? A long time has passed since my last encounter with it. Don't tell me you can't do any better than that?"

"Witless child. You know very well that was merely my way of greeting you."

Even as she replied to Gozim, Naforazey glanced surreptitiously at the others to make sure they were fine. The king of Alisia and the Demon King seemed no worse for wear, as their guards had protected them with their lives. Except that their valiant efforts had resulted in wounds to themselves. Although there were no fatalities, almost all of them had sustained some degree of injury due to the impact of the fall and the debris. She estimated that only sixty percent of them could even move.

This much damage without a proper clash of swords? Outrageous.

In a little while, those who had noticed the unusual situation—actually, their subordinates were likely already on their way here. But since almost all those who could fight had been sent to defend the area around the Enclave, it would take at least a few minutes for backup to arrive. Unfortunately, in the short amount of time it would take until help finally arrived, she needed to resist to her utmost or else there was a chance this man would annihilate them all.

The Demon King had informed her of their enemy's wellspring of power. Even as she confronted him now, she felt keenly the suffocating aura of his strength. Naforazey was the most powerful among the elves. But even if she fought him with all her might, she suspected she couldn't stop this man. The Elf Queen no longer had the wherewithal to worry about the two kings. All she could do was entrust their safety to the guards.

Once she had finished her rapid analysis of the situation, she smiled intrepidly despite how tense the circumstances were.

"I really can't forgive you for making such a mess of my home. I shall take your insolence to mean you're prepared to face my wrath, child."

"Don't make me laugh. Clearly, you need to learn that this is how war works!"

The head of the fiends suddenly rushed at her. The terrifying speed of his sharp, seemingly weightless thrust surprised Naforazey so much that she failed to react in time and it pierced through her. A moment later, her body swayed and vanished.

"Gah!"

"Where are you looking?"

The voice came from his flank. Simultaneously, blood sprayed from Gozim's shoulder. What he glimpsed was the Elf Queen slashing into him with a dagger pulled out of thin air. He moved in a flash, changing the trajectory of his greatsword from a thrust to a sideswipe, but she disappeared again with a whoosh. In the next instant, out of the corner of his eye, he saw an ice spear aimed at his head. Just as he barely succeeded in dodging the attack by twisting his upper body, Naforazey materialized in front of him without warning, and this time, she cut into his thighs. The Elf Queen, illusion or the real thing, wasn't finished, though, because she went straight for his throat with the dagger.

"What a cunning woman you are!"

"Ngh!"

Gozim slammed the ground with his greatsword. The floor collapsed under the overwhelming force he unleashed, a feat that was unheard of for a humanoid individual. She staggered, which meant she temporarily lost control of her magic. Her body reappeared a short distance away.

"Illusion magic? Interesting, considering any magic should have been nullified."

"Hmph. What do you take me for? That cursed magic blade of yours absorbs magical energy from its surroundings, yes? As long as I know that, there are countless ways I can deal with you."

"Correct. But your accuracy is off, isn't it? Based on my knowledge, the Elf Queen is one who uses an infinite variety of magics to send her opponents into the afterlife without them ever understanding what actually happened. It's clear my sword is having an effect on you."

"Fret not. As you say, I shall deliver you, too, to the realm of the dead."

Her expression cool, Naforazey insulted him without a single qualm. Yet bitterness flooded her mind. Just as Gozim had said, her magic wasn't working well. Normally, she would have created a dozen illusions and manipulated several varieties of magic at the same time. But moments ago, she had only managed one illusion of herself and two magics—invisibility and ice.

She couldn't call up her energy smoothly like always, nor could she channel it effectively into her spells. Instead, it felt like she had to wrench it through a powerful resistance weighing her down. Her magic would only work right now if she forced it to with pure, brute strength.

The fact that it makes magic so difficult to operate simply by existing in the vicinity...means that magic blade is frighteningly powerful.

Naforazey cast a covert glance at the odd greatsword Gozim held. Merely looking at it made her deeply uncomfortable. It emanated a repulsive, negative energy, raising the fine hairs all over her body. A quintessential cursed evil. Because of it, though she was the highest authority on magic in the Enclave, she struggled tremendously to deploy hers. Additionally, she assumed that the others couldn't use theirs at all. But that didn't mean she couldn't fight.

"Loose!"

Her soldiers had been waiting for the right time to act, and following her signal, they all loosed their bows. Despite the dozens of arrows flying at him, the leader of the fiends remained utterly calm.

"Devour, Ruin!"

When Gozim shouted that command, the blade of his greatsword suddenly yawned open like a gaping maw and moved as if it were alive, swallowing every single flying arrow.

"Wha—"

"Are you surprised that I've figured out how to wield this thing?! Feast your eyes on what it can do now!"

And then, in the next instant, the blade lengthened an unbelievable amount,

growing to more than double its original size. Frozen from shock, Naforazey was too late in evading the weapon, and it savagely bit off one of her arms. Blood gushed profusely from the wound.

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"My lady?!"

"Die, Elf Queen!"

"Ngggh!!!"
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Squirming like a living creature, the greatsword's blade attacked her with its jaws wide open even as she tried to counter it with her remaining arm, and —*klang*. Another sword came between them to repel the magic blade. It belonged to Nell, who had run here from the front lines the second she saw the explosion in the center of the Enclave.

"Oho! If it isn't the human hero I heard about some time ago. How fares that masked man, girl? Well, I hope."

"Why, thank you for asking. He's quite well, yes. And he's eager to cut you down once and for all!"

So saying, she rushed to close the gap between them and used the momentum to stab at him relentlessly, refusing to give him the space or opportunity to strike. Gozim hadn't planned for the storm of lightning-fast slashes. That didn't mean he was outmaneuvered, though. He deflected her attacks with his sword while dodging, using even the smallest openings to counter.





The shrill sound of steel grinding against steel echoed. An intense bout of offense and defense took place over the course of seconds. A single slip meant death, which made the fight incredibly tense. Nevertheless, Gozim coolly observed his surroundings and grasped that the tide had turned against him. From the edge of his vision, he noted that the soldiers who should have been defending the perimeter of the Elvish Enclave were returning one after another. They held their weapons at the ready, prepared to assist at any moment.

I might have wasted too much time.

The soldiers had presumably eliminated most of the Undead that had been released as decoys, affording his opponents some breathing room. That being the case, staying here any longer was meaningless since it would only needlessly add to the danger he was in. He intentionally swung his sword broadly at chest height, forcing the hero girl to take a step back. When she did, he retreated as well.

"Hmph. I guess that's all for today. I enjoyed myself, human girl."

With that, the leader of the fiends extracted some sort of magical instrument from within his clothes. It strongly resembled the ornament Yuki would use to teleport to the dungeon.

"I won't let you escape!"

Nell immediately poured most of her magical energy into her holy sword and demonstrated her improved magical control by swiftly activating Magic Edge. But much to her confusion, her magic didn't converge as well as she had expected it to. The attack she'd been planning to unleash by concentrating it in one point to avoid causing unnecessary damage was on the verge of exploding in her hands, so she hurriedly directed it at Gozim.

His magic blade, Totund Ruin, had disrupted her magical control. A moment later, there was an intense flash of light and an incredibly loud sound of something being crushed. Looking amazed, Gozim was swallowed up by her release of magic, and even as it blasted him away, his magical device activated and he disappeared. When the blinding light faded, only a huge gouge running through the ground remained.

"Whoa... J-Just like I planned! Yes, indeed!"

So proclaimed the young hero, who looked a bit shaken. Everyone present knew that was a lie.



Gozim was flying through the air when he teleported, and his momentum carried over when he arrived at his destination. He crashed through the wall of the building, destroying several magical devices before finally coming to a halt.

"That girl is too damn much."

An unwitting chuckle escaped his lips as he levered up his aching body, blood dripping down his forehead.

"M-My lord! Are you all right?!"

His subordinates, who had been waiting for him, rushed over. Worry clouded their expressions. Gozim stored his greatsword away in the rift in space and answered in a quiet tone.

"I'm fine. Is Derwes here?"

"Yes, my lord, I am."

A demon man appeared immediately.

"The operation succeeded on my end. Give me a status report on your progress."

"Thanks to your showy performance, they haven't detected our current movements. Everything is proceeding smoothly."

"Heh. We finally managed to deceive Fynar, eh? Continue as planned. Keep the operation going, and don't delay. If anyone can make sense of our incomprehensible patterns swiftly, it's him. He'll devise a countermeasure when he does. Speed is the key to all this."

"Understood. Consider it done."

Derwes's reply came after a slight pause.

As second-in-command of the fiends, his relationship with their leader, Gozim, extended a long way back. That was why he understood the subtleties

of the other man's emotions—the man whom their subordinates called "difficult" and "hard to please." Thus, he could clearly hear the hint of affection in their leader's voice whenever he said the name of the man who should have been his enemy: Demon King Fynar. He knew Gozim deliberately insulted Fynar within earshot of their subordinates. Yet even knowing his leader's quirks, Derwes said nothing to him.

"More importantly, my lord, you're obviously not completely fine, so allow us to heal you at once. From the looks of things, you have broken bones, and if we don't treat your right arm immediately as well, Totund Ruin's erosion of it will lead to the limb falling off."

"I know."

Gozim's nostrils flared in displeasure as he walked toward the medical unit.



As soon as Lew told me about Nell's message, Lefi and I called it a wrap on her training, and I went back to the real throne room we used as our everyday living area. I walked straight to the workbench for my exclusive use and activated the Comm Orb: Revamped.

"Well, hello there, Yuki. It has been much too long. I hope you've been well in the interim?"

"Question. Why did you answer the call?"

It wasn't Nell who was on the other end. If memory served, the voice and speech style belonged to none other than the Demon King, Fynar.

"Your lovely wife, the darling hero, mentioned that she was in possession of a tool that allowed her to communicate with you, so I took the liberty of borrowing it for a bit. I simply had to talk to you, you see."

Right after his last word came said wife's familiar voice.

"Mr. Yuki, I'm sorry this is all so out of the blue. Please, we need your help. His Majesty the Demon King will explain everything to you in detail, so will you listen to him?"

"Well, if you insist, then I guess I can at least listen."

"It's clear you two have a strong bond. I was intrigued when I heard that you, a demon lord, married the darling hero, but I think it's absolutely marvelous to see you both so very much in love."

"Yo, I'm gonna hang up."

"Ha ha ha! Forgive me, forgive me. I jest."

The Demon King chuckled in his usual amused way before continuing.

"Right, then. I'll keep it brief. During a conference in the Elvish Enclave between myself, the human king, and the Elf Queen, members of the fiends, to whom you, too, are connected by fate, attacked. Thanks to everyone's efforts, we managed to repel the attack itself, but it seems we have been deceived. Ergo, the situation has turned a bit complicated."

The Elf Queen had to be the woman I'd met a while back in the demon world. As for the human king, taking into account Nell's presence, the only candidate was the king of Alisia. So *this* was what Nell had meant when she'd mentioned a "large-scale expedition," was it? *Inch. Resting*.

Last but not least, there were the fiends.

"What do you mean by 'complicated'?"

"Well, about that. A terribly powerful monster unleashed by the fiends is prowling around the Enclave... An Undead Dragon."

"Did I hear him correctly?"

Lefi frowned as she listened to the conversation from next to me. We'd come back together.

"Uhhh... Can I assume that's exactly what it sounds like?"

"Yes. They must have unearthed a dragon's corpse somewhere and used Necromancy to resurrect it. The creature should be weaker in its Undead state than when it was alive, but... Our attempt to confront it led to a, shall we say, change in the terrain itself."

Cadavers as soldiers, huh? A military unit that could fight even in death was a politician's wet dream. That said, it would be a monstrous sacrilege against the dead to meddle in that realm. It wasn't like I was particularly devout or held any

unshakable religious beliefs, but the idea alone straight up disgusted me.

"We must eliminate it somehow, but if we try with only our current numbers, I can almost guarantee we'll suffer heavy losses. But you defeated a mature dragon once upon a time, didn't you? Which is why I'd like you to lend us your aid. It goes without saying that you'll be well compensated for saving our lives."

"Hmm... All I'll say for now is that I get the gist. Put Nell on the line, please."

"Understood. Nell, your turn."

The Demon King's super mellow, unhurried tone was followed up immediately by Nell's voice.

"I'm here, Mr. Yuki."

"Nell, are you hurt? It was a surprise attack, right?"

"I'm fine! I'm a demon lord's wife, after all! A little attack like that certainly won't hurt me!"

She sounded genuinely energetic as her words came through the Comm Orb. Even if she was doing it not to worry me, at the very least, her attitude told me she was probably fine.

"All right, got it. I'll head over there as soon as possible, then."

"I really am sorry to drag you into this, Mr. Yuki..."

"Nah, don't worry about it. You're my beloved wife, so of course I'm coming."

My wife was in trouble. Me going to her rescue regardless of the circumstances was just a matter of fact.

"I know your general location thanks to the Comm Orb: Revamped, but how long do you think it'll take me to fly there?"

"Ummm... The Elvish Enclave is located a bit below the demon world. Via flight, I'd estimate two or three days!"

"Okay, two days it is. Wait for me. And promise me you'll be careful and not do anything crazy or that'll lead to more damage."

"I promise! Thank you, Mr. Yuki. I love you!"

That was the last thing I heard through the Comm Orb: Revamped before her voice cut out.

"All righty, folks. You heard it here first. I gotta get ready and jet as fast as I can."

"I shall accompany you. Though our opponent is a corpse, it is yet of dragonkind. Using every means at your disposal to assure victory means allowing me to help."

"Okay. I appreciate it. Lew, Leila, sorry for always leaving you to hold down the fort, but thanks for always doing it."

"We've got this, my lord! Family helps each other out during times of crisis! Right, Leila?!"

"Yes, leave it to us. Should something happen, we'll contact you right away, so please don't worry about things here."

Lew clenched her fists determinedly, and Leila smiled reassuringly at us.

I nodded once, then used Remote Communication to summon my pets to the meadow area before I started prepping for our excursion.



"Well, then... Our prospects aren't nearly so grim now that we have a way to break the deadlock."

"Did... Did you just call him a demon lord?"

"Oh, don't *tell* me you didn't *know*? Dear lady knight, *how* is that possible? You're *acquainted* with him, yes?"

Carlotta, the knight commander, nodded in response to the Demon King's puzzled question.

"Yes, I am. However, it was clear to me and my people that he didn't want his true identity exposed, so we did our best not to pry. He's an extremely capable ally, and it wouldn't be in our best interest to stir up trouble for ourselves by poking at something we shouldn't be..."

"Ha ha ha! I see, I see. Because you wouldn't have faced the wrath of any

regular bear, but of a Catastrophe-level one, hm?"

"Um... M-Miss Carlotta, I..."

Carlotta sighed when she saw the anxious look on Nell's face, then replied.

"It's fine. You don't need to explain. I understand why you kept silent, as well as why Mask hid his face in the beginning. He most likely realized that having his true identity revealed would only hinder both him and us. Even so, he helped us in many ways. So I won't rebuke you. I trust His Majesty already knows?"

"Yes, I do. Forgive me for not saying anything. If our citizens learned that the savior of our country isn't human, it would result in a cascade of issues."

Reyd, the king of Alisia, answered her directly.

"I understand what you wish to say, Sire. A resurgence of political strife after the earlier bout receded would be very unwelcome at this stage. Therefore, I'll pretend I never heard any of this."

"Much obliged."

"Miss Carlotta... Thank you so much!"

"Good grief... Don't think I wasn't shocked, Nell, because I most definitely was. Though I suppose when I think back on his unusual strength, it makes a strange kind of sense."

Carlotta wore a wry smile as she said that.

"Hmm... This demon lord you all speak of, could he be the same one I know as well?"

The person who asked that question was Naforazey, the Elf Queen.

"Indeed, darling Naforazey, it's Demon Lord Yuki. This human hero, the charming Nell, is evidently his wife."

"But I thought his spouse was the Supreme Dragon. Are you telling me she's the second wife, then?"

"Yes indeed. That's it exactly, my dear."

"Tee... Tee hee hee..."

Nell's bashful attitude seemed to amuse Naforazey.

"Hmm, hmm. Taking a human—and a hero, no less—to wife? That man certainly doesn't lack for gumption... Ah, I almost forgot to thank you, Hero. Missing an arm drastically reduces the strength of the elvish defense. I will repay this debt to you. Mark my words."

Gozim's magic blade had bitten off Naforazey's arm. But thanks to Yuki's insistence that Nell carry a few vials of Super Potion, also known as "elixir," at all times, the Elf Queen's arm was fully restored.

Though the woman's nod was slight, it nevertheless conveyed her gratitude, to which Nell answered with a smile.

"Oh, no. No thanks necessary. But if you insist, I'd appreciate friendly relations between us humans and the elves."

"Gah ha! Is that so? Looks like I just gave you a strong card for your hand, eh, King of Alisia?"

"I'm not so sure about that. You see, I myself have been racking my brain on how to reward her suitably after all this ends, as that potion is her private property."

"A thorny problem indeed. Shall I gift her something in your stead?"

"Hmm... Correct me if I'm wrong, Lady Naforazey, but would that not indirectly balance the scales between us? In which case, I must decline your generous offer."

"Oho, you found me out so quickly."

The Elf Queen cackled at the human king's awkward smile before directing her next words to the Demon King.

"Back to the matter at hand. Fynar. Tell me, what in the world was that demon's sword? Surely you have some information on it, no?"

"Some, but not everything, unfortunately. That greatsword is called Totund Ruin. It's a cursed magic blade classified as Calamity-level. Records confirm its appearance during the reign of the Demon King four generations ago."

"Four generations means...close to seventeen hundred years ago, eh?"

Long before even Lefi was born.

Despite that thought flashing through Nell's mind, she continued to pay close attention to the Demon King's explanation.

"Yes, right around then. It *drinks* the blood of those it cuts, as *well* as their hatred and resentment, *using* all of that as *nourishment* for its growth. Such is the *nature*, more or less, of cursed magic blades. *But*. That greatsword is *different*."

The Demon King went on to explain that the *way* it grew was abnormal. It was unthinkably gluttonous, capable of hoarding an infinite supply of negative magical energy, thereby allowing it to improve its abilities at an exponential rate. And in order to feed its growth, it always, without fail, brought war to its owners. Like a parasite controlling its host, it robbed them of reason, drowned them in blood and battle, and forced them to massacre endlessly. Moreover, the strength of the victim transformed the development of its stats, ultimately leading to a power so great that it had been crowned a Calamity-level weapon.

"Naturally, those who wield it pay a price. By and large, Gozim still retains his sanity, meaning the sword has yet to steal his mind. He possesses a tenacious force of will. Even so, I suspect his days are numbered."

The Demon King had realized this from the cursed sword's condition. Unlike its state during the tournament in the demon world when he had last seen it, the blade now writhed, almost like it was a living thing. It had also encroached upon the arm Gozim used to hold it. Blood had dripped steadily down the limb.

Gozim was being devoured by the magic blade, both magically and physically.

"Working to achieve his goal even at the cost of his own life? A dangerous man indeed."

"I very much concur. Soldiers prepared to die are strong. That much has been true since time immemorial."

The Demon King nodded in agreement to the Alisian king's murmur.

"That being the case, the goal of this surprise raid was...to obtain my flesh and blood?"

"Circumstances *permitting*, they *likely* intended to kill *us* as well. But yes, the chances are *high* that you are correct. *Darling* Naforazey, he *must* have heard that your powers are by *far* the strongest even among the *storied* generations of *past* elvish kings and queens. Your flesh and blood *must* make for fine *resources* to *fuel* his weapon's growth."

"Hmph. I shall have to thank him personally for underestimating me. The gall to treat me as a resource. Then adding insult to injury by having his subordinates release that...that *thing* to stop us while he risks his own life."

Everyone's gazes shifted to what she'd mentioned: a mature dragon, which anyone could tell with a single glance wasn't alive, relentlessly circling the Elvish Enclave's perimeter from the air. With its flesh mostly sloughed off, the creature appeared largely like a skeleton. But its eyeballs rolling in their sunken sockets as it searched for prey presented a truly horrific sight.

At the moment, they couldn't be detected because of a camouflage barrier that blended into the surrounding forest and concealed the entire settlement. They had confirmed, however, that taking one step outside of this barrier led to the monster immediately beginning its descent and going berserk. No one had been injured during their investigation as everyone had managed to retreat into the safety of the ward by the skin of their teeth, though an aftermath of the experiment was that a part of the forest had been blasted into oblivion. Thus, the question of how much force would it take to defeat that thing remained.

"Since Yuki has agreed to come, we have more grounds for relief. But the problem is what to do until he arrives. Unfortunately for us, the fiends seem to have devised a multilayered plan on this occasion. The longer we stay confined here, the greater our disadvantage becomes, making it likely they'll execute more of their schemes. Therefore, I propose that we, too, do what we can until Yuki's arrival."



"I...hope Nell's okay."

En, back in her sword form, conveyed her worry to me via telepathy, and I responded with a laugh to ease her mind.

"She totally is. We've all seen how much tougher she's gotten recently.

Mentally and physically. Ain't no way the little things are gonna get to her."

"Yes, it is as he says. After all, out of us three wives, she has been influenced by this man the most. This exceedingly brash man."

"Excuse you. Don't you know how famous I am in the neighborhood for having such a pure and sensitive heart? Won't see many folks like me around these days, and that's a fact, Jack."

"If you are truly considered sensitive, then pray tell what becomes of this world's brash individuals? They are likely to disappear, that is what. And what 'neighborhood' are you even referring to? No neighborhood exists for us."

Weeell. Gun to my head, let's go with the dragons living in the Demonic Forest. Those count as neighbors, right? Never mind that they live on the other side of the mountains.

"Okay... I'll believe in Nell."

"Yup, we're gonna believe in our home's ever-dependable hero. Oh, En, you can sleep. There's still plenty of time until we get there. Plus, we left while you were playing with the others, so you must be tired, right?"

I'd asked En to tag along as usual, but the sun had set a long time ago, and the moon was high in the sky. Up until now, our pattern had been to leave the morning after a good night's sleep. Except things didn't work out like that this time on account of the emergency situation. We'd left not long after Nell's call. Timewise, we'd all be getting ready for bed right about now.

Nell had said it would take two or three days to reach the Elvish Enclave, but we planned on flying straight through the night in order to shorten the travel time as much as possible. Though Lefi and I could go two or three days without any sleep thanks to our resilient bodies, asking the same of En would be cruel.

"I'm...fine. This is more important."

"Oh yeah? Thanks, then. Thanks a lot. But you don't have to push yourself, okay?"

"He is right. The battle is not even upon us yet. Reserve your spirit for when the time comes."

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"Okay...got it."
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When I patted her pommel, I felt her happiness coming through. So cute.

"Rir, we're counting on you too."

"Grr."

Rir was keeping pace with us, running down on the ground. He nodded like he was saying, "Leave it to me." As long as Lefi was with us, I was pretty sure we wouldn't have any problems. Juuust in case, though, I was bringing him along this time. It sure didn't hurt to have more pieces on the board, and that included me.

Based on what Fynar had told me, the fiends were hard at work maneuvering behind the scenes, so I'd decided that it would be a good idea to be able to deal with anything they threw at us. That meant thinning out the dungeon's defense drastically. To make up for that, I'd activated every single trap I'd laid out in the Demonic Forest and sealed off the door connecting my home to the cavern outside. Lew and Leila were also under strict orders to contact me right away if anything changed for the worse. In addition, I'd asked the remaining pets to stay in the meadow area instead of outside the dungeon. I'd given a measure of authority over the dungeon to the adults staying behind too, so they'd have no issues running the place.

"But jeez, an Undead Dragon, huh? Lefi, you got any ideas about who it could be based on what they told us earlier?"

She answered my question with a grim expression.

"Yuki. You know as well as I do that dragons do not die easily. There are not many of us to begin with, and it is rare for even one to die every two hundred years. You having slain that fool of a black dragon does not count. That is an exception."

"So you're saying there are hardly any corpses out there that could be found and used as models for Undead?"

"Correct. Dragons nearing the end of their lifespan often ascend to the heavens in secret, either in the land they occupied for a long time or in a majestic place unknown by others. Moreover, because of dragonkind's strong

affinity with mana, our bones return to the earth soon after our departure from this mortal plane. Therefore, it is extremely rare for a dragon's body to become an Undead. Alas, it is a different story in the present moment."

"Ohhh, I think I get it. Then it's probably one of the young dragons who left the Dragon Hamlet, huh?"

When we'd gone to the Dragon Hamlet, the elder dragons had told us that a number of young dragons besides that piece of shit black one had also left the village. Lefi seemed to think that one of them had been unfortunate enough to have been turned into the Undead Dragon.

"You must concede that the probability is high, yes? Even if it is not the case, the only other option is that one of my brethren who lived a quiet, peaceful life had their grave violated. Though I hate the race that is known as dragonkind, that does not mean I will overlook such an overt affront to one of them. Make no mistake, I am enraged by this matter."

There was true fury in Lefi's expression, and she didn't even bother hiding it, which was rare for her. Then, she exhaled sharply.

"Having said that, it is also quite conceivable that the imbecilic whelps rampaged as they pleased in the human world and had their corpses used in such a fashion after being defeated. We cannot forget the influence that accursed black dragon had upon them."

Yeaaah, that's definitely not out of the question either.

"Well, regardless of what it turns out to be, I feel kinda sorry for it, being used as a weapon even after death and all. Plus, you and I both hate Necromancy, so there's that. The sooner we return it to the earth, the better."

"Yes... Yes, I shall consider it my duty to return one of my own who is causing such trouble to their slumber."



A few hours after Yuki and the others left the Demonic Forest.

"Hmm?"

Lemiro, the elderly butler and previous hero, had stationed himself on watch

on high ground in the Elvish Enclave, ready to respond to the slightest change at any moment. He'd just spotted something that made his face twitch.

A wagon. It was still quite a fair distance away, but there was most definitely a wagon racing through the elves' forest. For a moment, he thought it might be the enemy, so he looked through the Crystal of Sight installed at his elevated location. In doing so, he discovered that a human cabman was driving it. As far as he could see, the cabman was desperately trying to escape the pursuit of a single surviving mutant-type Undead deployed by the fiends. Many of this particular variety of Undead were often slow. This one, however, clearly possessed enough leg strength to run.

I wonder, is he a peddler from a nearby town?

Though the forest in which the Elvish Enclave existed stretched over a vast distance, there was a large human town not a day's carriage ride away. Its people had been trading with the elves since ancient times. Even now, they maintained a warm and friendly relationship, so the cooperation of its lord was of great help for this conference. The man had such a strong mercantile spirit that some joked he never missed an opportunity to make a sale. Such a person being in charge had naturally led to the town being full of merchants who shared his mindset.

"Well, I suppose I should go to his rescue."

With that thought, Lemiro looked up at the sky. Though it hadn't yet noticed the wagon because its attention was rooted to the Enclave, the Undead Dragon that was flying around was going to be a problem. It was only a matter of time before the cabman was attacked by both it and the mutant-type Undead.

However, if he stepped outside the safety of the Enclave now, Lemiro had no doubt that he would be attacked first. It was impossible for him to rescue the wagon while under assault. In order to succeed, he somehow needed to draw the giant aerial creature's focus in another direction.

"I truly have no desire to put her in danger, but...there is no other choice in the matter. I must ask for her assistance."

Having swiftly made his decision, Lemiro placed his hand on the railing of the platform and leaped down to the ground in one bound. He then headed to

speak to the young hero.

"Please, please don't overdo it. If at any point you think it's too dangerous, swear to me you'll flee."

"Leave it to me, Mr. Lemiro! I'll definitely buy you the time you need! Right, then. I'm trusting you too, okay?"

"Grr!"

The hero girl had readily agreed to help him by taking on the role of decoy. She mounted a wolf-type monster called a direwolf and raced off in the opposite direction of the wagon that was being pursued.

The animal she currently rode had been personally raised by the Elf Queen as her familiar. Incredibly wary and prideful, the direwolf only carried the person it recognized as its master on its back, even if said master commanded it to let others ride. For some strange reason, however, this particular direwolf behaved obediently toward that girl.

The Elf Queen had prefaced Nell's use of the beast with an "I'll lend him to you only if you can ride him." Her attitude had made it clear she hadn't expected Nell to succeed in the task. That being the case, the sight of the regal woman standing in open-mouthed shock still lingered in Lemiro's mind. When she had leaped onto the familiar's back and given him a brief once-over, she'd gone through the motions with practiced familiarity. Perhaps she had learned how to ride a wolf-type monster at some point in the past?

"The young grow up in the blink of an eye, don't they?"

He smiled ruefully, feeling his own age.

By my reckoning, that monster should have no trouble even against an Undead Dragon.

A short time after she disappeared from view, the abomination flying in the sky suddenly turned itself around with a *whoosh*, its body moving in a decidedly unalive way. She must have exited the barrier. The creature flew in the direction the hero had left in, chasing her single-mindedly.

Lemiro knew the girl would perform splendidly as a decoy. Nevertheless, the sooner he did his part, the better. Once he'd confirmed that the Undead Dragon wouldn't be coming back, he immediately spurred his horse on and rushed after the wagon.

The group being chased appeared ahead of him a few minutes later, most likely because they had been racing toward the Enclave. There was the panicked cabman, who seemed to be a merchant, driving his wagon and two adventurers on horseback, both staying tight against the sides of the wagon as they kept the approaching mutant-type Undead in check with their attacks.

"Keep going straight! Don't stop!"

Lemiro shouted those words as he raced past them. Then, he kicked the horse's sides and jumped into the air, using his momentum to charge the Undead. This type had a high regenerative ability, making the sword a poor choice of weapon. But that didn't mean he couldn't fight. The important thing was to slice it into so many pieces that its regenerative ability couldn't keep up.

Having chosen the ultimate brawn-over-brains strategy, Lemiro swung his drawn sword at such incredible speed that the movement of his arms was no longer visible. The blade glinted with every stroke. Simultaneously, both thighs of the mutant Undead, which had been ravaging the ground with its heavy stomps as it ran, were completely severed from its body. It gouged ruts in the earth as it fell backward with a crash, as if blown away.

The former hero didn't let the opportunity slip away, cutting off both arms next, then decapitating it, and even hacking its trunk into dozens of parts. The mutant-type Undead's regenerative ability activated, each piece of flesh wiggling and squirming like it was alive. However, chopped up as it now was, the monstrosity had ceased to be his enemy.

One had become two. Two turned into four. Four, eight.

With every stroke of his sword, the elderly butler produced cuts of meat en masse. His cautious, diligent nature meant that his blade continued swinging at lightning speed.

Less than a minute later, the mutant-type Undead, transfigured into close to a hundred pieces at least, finally stopped moving altogether.

"Wh-Whoooa... Th-Thank you very much, elder! Y-You saved us!"

The cabman had evidently brought his wagon to a halt, and he approached Lemiro after disembarking. He bowed his head in gratitude countless times from his relief at being rescued. Both adventurers escorting him dismounted from their horses and thanked him as well.

"You saved our hides, old-timer. I'm ashamed to admit that our attacks didn't work at all..."

"We almost died... I'm grateful to you for saving our lives."

"Please, think nothing of it. What matters is that you're all safe. Although I must say that the timing of your visit could not be worse. Might I assume you have business in the Elvish Enclave?"

"Yes, precisely. But then that repulsive Undead thing suddenly attacked us on the journey here. Ah, before that, I'd like to make it clear that we're not suspicious characters. I have a proper operating license, and the two behind me are adventurers who work exclusively for me."

With an affable smile, the merchant removed an envelope of sorts, which bore an official seal, from his breast pocket and showed it to Lemiro.

"I see. Thank you."

"Hey, I might be wrong, but are you some kind of famous knight? Can I ask your na—"

Lemiro swung his sword and cut the adventurer down before he could finish speaking. Gushing blood, the man died instantly.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?!"

"Y-You bastard!"

The merchant and remaining adventurer cried out in confusion at the sudden act of violence.

"You two are spies, yes? The other side has human allies too, then, it seems. No matter. Now, if you would be so kind, do tell me which country you're from and the details of your conspirators' secret maneuverings."

"H-How dare you! We're—"

"You dug your own graves, you know. While that license is an authentic one given only to peddlers permitted to conduct trade with the Elvish Enclave, an official notice should have been relayed that entry into the Enclave is currently prohibited. Miscommunication is impossible. That begs the question of how you acquired it. Where did you steal it from? Or should I be asking who you killed for it? I presume you thought having it would guarantee you safe passage. You wouldn't have forced my hand if you had simply maintained the ruse of a wandering merchant."

"That's absurd! Do you really think you can get away with murder on such flimsy reasoning?!"

"Hmm. Then allow me to offer you another piece of information. The license glows faintly when its holder pours their magic into it. Therefore, to prove they aren't an intruder, an official merchant makes the envelope glow momentarily when they show it. You, sir, did no such thing."

The other two men said nothing. Instead, as soon as Lemiro finished speaking, the seemingly righteous indignation disappeared from their faces, and they took up their weapons. The atmosphere surrounding them changed in an instant, becoming ice-cold. They'd realized that keeping up the act was meaningless at this point.

"Good heavens. I put Mrs. Nell in harm's way because of you lot. If her husband gets angry with me later, I'll be sure to blame you!"

Then, Lemiro lunged at them.



We flew straight through for a full twenty-four hours. The moon had disappeared far over the horizon, and the sun had started rising in the east.

"Hmm... I see someone flying."

From our current location, Lefi had guessed we had a few hours left before we reached the elves' forest. She'd spoken from next to me as she flew, squinting far off into the distance.

"I can't see anything yet. Are they alone?"

"No. I think it likely they are a squadron from somewhere. What was the term again? Ah, yes. 'Formation flying,' I believe."

Aha. So that's how it is, huh?

"You think they're demons?"

"I can only see a vague silhouette as of now, but the chances are high, yes. Not many races with wings exist outside of the demon species."

Which means they're either the Demon King's people...or the fiends'.

"Welp. Looks like we should be on our guard, then, huh?"

I took En out of Inventory. She'd been resting in there.

"Mrgh... Are we there yet?"

"No, we've still got a while. But we spotted some folks who may or may not be enemies, so do you mind staying with us just in case?"

"Leave...it to me."

Cautious to the max, I continued flying forward with Lefi and En. Then, a little later, I was finally able to see the people too. Four of them. They were still too far away to see clearly, but based on the vague outlines of horns and tails, they were at the very least demons. Fully armed and armored, they flew in a tight formation in the same direction as us—toward the Elvish Enclave.

They noticed us approaching, so the quartet turned around abruptly. I saw each of them drawing their weapons clear as day. Just witnessing that simple act revealed their high level of skill.

"Rir, make yourself small and infiltrate the forest. If we end up fighting these guys, I want you to ambush them from there."

"Grr."

I gave instructions to Rir, who was running below us, even as we steadily closed the distance with the other group.

"Halt! You may not proceed any farther, as entry into the Elvish Enclave is currently prohibited. What is your objective in traveling here?"

Once we were close enough to see each other properly, one of the demons raised his voice and demanded to know who we were.

Their stats told me they were fairly strong, which I'd already guessed from their brisk movements earlier. All four had abilities powerful enough to mark them as the best of the best, and rightfully so. Their races showed as "Guardian Devil" and their classes as "Covert Imperial Guard." Put it all together and we get...the Demon King's subordinates, huh?

Of course, since I didn't know them, there was still a chance of them being enemies. But at the very least, a conversation wouldn't hurt.

When Lefi, who was next to me, saw me lower my guard, I felt her relax.

"The Demon King's your boss, right? Well, I know he's in the Elvish Enclave, and he summoned us too, which is why we're headed there. Some moron apparently unleashed an Undead Dragon, so our objective is to take it down."

"Why... Why should we believe you? Do you have any proof?"

Nervous sweat ran profusely down their faces. I wondered if that was because they sensed Lefi's strength. It didn't look like they had the Analysis ability, but outside of humans, all species were sensitive to this kind of thing. In fact, it would've been a serious problem if they *didn't* notice, considering they worked directly for the Demon King and all.

"I don't. We don't know each other at all, and— Wait. Hold on. You know what? I might actually have something."

I opened Inventory, rummaged around inside, and pulled out two sealed letters. One from the king of Alisia and the other from the Demon King. Each had given me identification papers to make life easier for me moving forward after I met with them.

"Ah! Those are—"

"I got these from the human king and yours. *Now* do you believe me?" My plan had worked perfectly.

"I see. So you're... Apologies for my discourtesy. I had no idea you were His Majesty's friend. Please do forgive me for my actions. They were necessary in

light of the emergency situation."

After murmuring to himself, the man who seemed to be the four-man squadron's captain took off his helmet and bowed slightly to me.

"No worries. I get it. We're both in a tight spot and—"

"Yuki!!!"

At that moment, I heard Lefi's short warning. Simultaneously, my Danger Detection ability reacted. But it wasn't pinging me about the folks in front of me. No, it was responding to an attack coming from much, *much* farther away.

"Fall back!"

I instantly grabbed the arms of two of the closest demons and flung them with all my might. Lefi did the same to the remaining duo, the momentum of her movements creating a tremendous *whoosh* as she tossed them to safety.

"Wh-What-"

Even as the demons' baffled voices became distant, I rushed away from the spot I was in along with Lefi. I pulled her close and covered her body with my own. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something flash and race toward us. Since my face was turned away, all I could detect was an explosive roar and a blinding light. But it caught up to us quickly, practically rushing at the speed of light, and passed us by. Right after, the two of us were blasted away by the swell it created in the air.

I couldn't hear anything except the high-pitched ringing in my ears. For a moment, I had no idea which way was up and which was down. But thanks to Lefi, who was still in my arms, and her aerial control, I managed to regain my sense of equilibrium.

A few seconds later, I turned around to check what'd happened. The first thing that jumped out at me was the massive, deep furrow carved into the earth. It definitely hadn't been there earlier. The once lush forest was now a rugged rock face, and it didn't take long for the rising cloud of dust to hide the entire area from view. Lots of trees and soil had been blasted up into the sky and were falling steadily back down to the ground after reaching the peak of their respective parabolic arcs.

While maintaining a gale barrier around us to protect us from the flying debris, I shouted down at the ground.

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"Rir, you okay?!"

"Grr!"
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I couldn't see him, but I could tell from his "No issues on my side!" cry that he'd managed to dodge the attack. Exhaling, I rubbed my chest in relief.

"Hey, Lefi. Was that just now what I think it was?"

"Yes. The Dragon Roar. Evidently, the dragon can still use it despite being a corpse. Although it *should* be impossible to execute it successively..."

Dragon Roar. Lefi had shown me the move once before, but the destructive range of the attack we just saw might've been even greater than hers. On second thought, maybe the difference in outcome was a result of this dragon's energy output being focused on one spot?

Lefi's Dragon Roar was destruction itself. Anything and everything in her line of fire ended up getting obliterated, no exceptions. Not even a speck of dirt left behind. It caused complete and utter annihilation.

However, based on what I saw, the attack that'd almost just hit us wasn't on the level where it made objects vanish without a trace. Flashy, yes, but probably not any stronger than what Lefi could do. Having said that, it didn't change the fact that it was powerful enough that any of the humanoid species would stand no chance if they took a direct hit from it.

Since Lefi herself had yet to spot our opponent, I suspected the attack was less aimed directly at us and more like a stray bullet that'd just so happened to fly in our direction. Still, I sure didn't wanna die 'cause of some stray bullet.

As these thoughts wheeled around my brain, Lefi spoke, her voice grim.

"Yuki. What happened just now confirmed my suspicion. A young dragon was transformed into the Undead Dragon. If it had been an elder, I can guarantee you the results would have been catastrophically worse."

"Shiiit... Guess your bad feeling turned out to be right, huh?"

Definitely one of the young guys who'd left the Hamlet, then. If there was a

silver lining in all this, though, it was that our opponent wasn't one of the elder dragons.

"One more thing, Yuki. You may release me now."

"Hmm? Oh, r-right, sorry."

I let go immediately after realizing I'd still been holding her tightly.

"Honestly, Yuki. While your attempts to protect me in such circumstances please me, I demand that you prioritize your own safety instead. Seeing you sustain injuries on my behalf...is not good for my heart."

"M-My bad. It was just, uh...a spur-of-the-moment thing. Yeah, that's what we'll call it."

I replied to her while scratching my cheek idly. Her expression suddenly softened, and a mischievous smile bloomed on her face as she flicked my nose.

"As I said, it is not an unpleasant feeling to be protected by you. After all, you are the only one in this world foolish enough to try."

"Well, yeah. Of course I would. You're my wife, so you're precious to me."

"Indeed. Which is why I cannot lambast you overmuch. Though I must admit to feeling a wee bereft at the thought you will no longer protect me."

"Hmm. In that case, how about this? I'll protect you anytime we face off against a monster weak enough not to hurt either of us seriously. That shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"What an ingenious idea. I am looking forward to it."

As Lefi and I joked with each other, I suddenly heard En, who I still held in one hand, speak to us telepathically. She sounded exasperated.

"You...two are flirting again."

Her words were like a bucket of cold water being dumped on us, bringing us back to our senses. And that was when we noticed the demon squad watching us with warm, sappy eyes. When the heck did they even get back here?

I cleared my throat loudly before addressing them.

"S-Sup? Any of you hurt?"

"No, thanks to you both. We will be sure to properly express our gratitude for aiding us once we arrive at the Elvish Enclave."

They all bowed their heads together deeply at us.

"Nah, don't even worry about it. Not like I saved you because I wanted you all to owe me. More importantly, this attack by the Undead Dragon means we're pretty close to it. We don't have time to take it easy, so let's get a move on to the Enclave."

"Y-Yes, of course. You're absolutely right. Let us make haste."

Though I felt like his pointed glance was saying, "We weren't the ones 'taking it easy,' as you put it," I blithely ignored him. Then, we all started flying again.

Not even ten minutes later, we ran into Nell riding hell-for-leather through the forest on the back of a wolf-type monster. She was trying to escape from the Undead Dragon.



I followed the colossal scar left in the ground by the Dragon Roar, and when I reached the trail's end, I found *it*. A creature with scant bits of flesh rotting off its mostly bone body. All the tough scales dragons possessed had long since fallen off, and the thing was desperately flapping its skeletal wings like it was still alive. I didn't know how, but it was staying firmly in midair, flying at a low altitude.

An Undead Dragon. The most repulsive thing about it was the dull, lifeless eyes in its eye sockets. Their restless, unnatural movements marked the creature as definitely not alive.

The corpse dragon, forced to move even after its death, seemed to be in the middle of chasing its prey.

"Nell?! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Huh?! Mr. Yuki! Oh, Lefi, Rir, and En too!"

That prey just so happened to be Nell, who was riding an unfamiliar wolf-type monster. All alone. With no one else by her side.

"Well, that was fast! I thought it would surely take you at least another half a

day!"

"Yeah, we flew like the wi— Wait, now's not the time to be having this discussion!"

I had a *lot* I wanted to ask her, but this was neither the time nor the place. Instead, I flew past her and hit the Undead Dragon on the side of its face with En.

"Get away from her, you creepy-ass stalker!"

The Undead Dragon's massive body was unexpectedly light, maybe on account of it not having muscles and organs, meaning my one swing was enough to blast it away. The corpse dragon mowed down several trees as it crashed through the forest before thudding to an unceremonious stop. It spread its membraneless wings as much as possible to control its posture, then fixed its rotting eyes on us in a hostile glare.

"My pitiful brother... You died before you could know the expanse of the world, yet even after death, you are being used as a mindless killing tool."

Lefi landed behind the Undead Dragon, grabbed its neck with one hand, and forcibly restrained its movements. The thing flailed violently to try to resist, but, well, its opponent was Lefi. It couldn't get itself out of her grip at all, and with her pinning it down by the scruff of its neck, it couldn't use its limbs and tail to get rid of her either. My Demon Eyes told me that it was trying to activate some sort of magic, but my darling wife had put the kibosh on that too. She'd rendered it ineffective somehow, scattering its magical energy through the air.

"As one who came before you in life, I shall settle your affairs for you. So do not worry. Simply rest."

In the next instant, the corpse dragon's body went up in flames. The blaze was so hot that even its bones caught on fire. I could feel the heat too despite being a little ways away from them.

Even as flames licked every inch of its frame, the Undead Dragon continued to rampage. Gradually, though, its movements weakened. Its rotting eyes, burning with hostility, began gazing at some empty space as it continued burning ever so slowly.

The huge pile of ash generated by Lefi's impromptu inferno rained softly on the forest below or blew away to lands unknown. Then, finally, nothing remained. Lefi watched until the very last moment.

The job we'd been asked to do had ended surprisingly easily, with a whimper instead of a bang. To my further disappointment, Rir and I hadn't even gotten parts in this play.

"Good job, Lefi."

"Thank you."

I patted her head, which she then dropped on my shoulder with a thump.

"Wooow... I'm not really sure what to say except that you never cease to amaze. We could do nothing at all because of that Undead Dragon, yet you defeated it so effortlessly."

Nell drew close to us at a leisurely pace, still mounted on the wolf-type monster. Rir did the same. He'd been on standby not far from us, ready to spring into action at any moment if we needed him.

"As far as I can tell, you're not hurt, right, Nell?"

"I'm just fine! Completely unscathed!"

"I see, I see... Then riddle me this, my dear. Why in the *hell* was it chasing you?"

She got down from the wolf and started explaining the circumstances to us.

"The truth is, we had a sudden rescue mission fall into our laps, but in order for it to succeed, someone needed to lure the Undead Dragon far away. I volunteered. However, it pursued me quite relentlessly everywhere I went, which meant I couldn't return to the Enclave."

"Did I or did I not tell you not to overdo it? I guess it's fine since you're okay, but still."

Honestly, my blood had run cold at the sight of her being chased by the thing, so my words came out a little angry. She awkwardly scratched the back of her head as she continued.

"I just thought my chances of success were good. At the very least, I would have been fine as long as I managed to escape. That Undead Dragon's movements were lifeless, likely because it was forcing its body to move with magical energy. I think it would have been impossible on my own, but I felt like I could get through it with this wolf by my side. If the situation had truly wound up being hopeless, though, I planned on using this necklace you gave me to return to the dungeon."

While patting the wolf sitting obediently next to her, Nell pulled the dungeon return device hanging around her neck out from under her light armor and showed it to me. *Okay, so she* did *work out a proper escape plan.* 

Lefi questioned the hero girl next.

"Oho, is that wolf your new pet? A direwolf, eh? You have quite a fine eye for things."

Based on what Analysis told me, the wolf's race was "direwolf." It seemed to be a relatively powerful race with stats strong enough to allow it to live comfortably even in the Demonic Forest.

"Ha ha ha! I wish! No, he belongs to the Elf Queen, who lent him to me. I really must thank you, Rir. Evidently, direwolves are quite prideful beings, but he sensed your scent on me, which is probably why he's been so wonderfully docile."

Oh, that's right. Though our family basically treats the poor guy like a lowly grunt, I shouldn't forget that Rir's actually at the top of the wolf-type monster hierarchy, huh? Powerful creatures like these generally tended to be highly intelligent, so this direwolf must've thought it'd be a bad idea to disobey Nell on account of her connection with Rir.

Even watching them now, Rir seemed completely unconcerned, while the other wolf looked like it was sort of huddling in on itself as it obliquely observed my pet. *Hell yeah, Rir. You're one surprisingly awesome monster, arentcha?* 

"I-I cannot believe this... Despite being an Undead, the creature was still a dragon, and dragons are highly resistant to magic. Yet you burned it to ash with magic..."

Muttering, the captain of the demon squadron that had been flying with us walked over to us.

"Hmm? And they are...?"

"The Demon King's subordinates, apparently. We ran into them unexpectedly on the way here, so we decided to go the rest of the way to the Elvish Enclave together."

"Ah, I see... In that case, would I be correct in assuming you're the ones dispatched to check the vicinity?"

The captain nodded in response to Nell's question. Clearly, she knew something about this.

"Correct. We met them during our return journey. I must say, though, I would expect nothing less of the people you esteem as reliable, Ser Nell. Their actions left us stupefied."

"Tee hee hee. Amazing, aren't they? They're really dear to me."

A little embarrassed by Nell's smiling face and praise, Lefi and I glanced awkwardly at each other. I felt especially undeserving since I hadn't done much this go-round.

"Indeed they are. Truly, one surprise after another. My apologies, but we must report to our king posthaste, so we'll be going on ahead. I'll be certain to inform him as well that the threat has been eliminated. Now, if you'll excuse us, I'm sure we'll see each other again shortly."

With that, the four of them flew off toward the Elvish Enclave.

"Oh, I just remembered. Mr. Yuki, there's something I think you should know."

"Hmm? What's up?"

Nell's expression turned serious as she answered my question.

"Mr. Yuki. I think it's likely that...that the enemy has a demon lord on their side."



"I *appreciate* your efforts. I hate to *rush* you, but might you make your *report* now?"

The captain of the demon squadron knelt in front of Demon King Fynar, who was sitting in a chair.

"Yes, my liege. First, I shall start with vital information outside the scope of our mission. On the way back, we encountered Demon Lord Yuki and his companion, a young girl possessing seemingly overwhelming power. We confirm that they defeated the Undead Dragon."

"What? Yuki's already here? Not even a day and a half has passed since I asked for his aid. Wait, did you just say 'defeated'?"

"Yes. Ser Nell verified his identity, so there is no doubt of his personage. And we saw them eliminate the creature with our own eyes."

"Hmm... I see. I'm not quite sure what to say, except that as usual, he so easily exceeds my expectations."

The Demon King chortled in delight, then continued.

"Understood. Do continue."

"As for the situation concerning the area at large, it is as you suspected, my liege. The fiends have been active in various locations all over. Additionally, we have yet to make contact with the southeastern outpost. There are two likely options: either our people are either in the midst of combat, or they've been annihilated."

"I think the latter is more likely if there has been no communication from them. It hasn't even been three days since they effectively incapacitated me, yet they're not wasting a single moment in making their move... In any case, the southeastern outpost, hm?"

The previous hero's capture of the enemy's human allies makes it clear that the fiends have joined forces with another human country, Fynar thought.

The southeastern outpost was situated in a key defensive location—close to the border between the human and demon worlds. The region the fiends were using as their headquarters was far from this area, which had the role of

stopping any human invasion. Therefore, it was difficult for Fynar and his people to ascertain the enemy's intentions without any information. However, now that they knew the fiends were in league with humans, it was a different story entirely.

It wasn't clear whether the humans or the fiends were responsible for the current attack, but based on the timing, it was more than obvious that they were collaborators. So if the southeastern outpost *had* been destroyed, the humans would have the opportunity to invade. That meant he needed to move swiftly in response.

The problem was that he, the demon world's highest official, was presently in the Elvish Enclave. The longer he was grounded here, the more unfavorable the situation became for him and his allies. The fiends had presumably anticipated things at least to this point. They had released the Undead Dragon, then, to prolong his forced confinement.

Well, Yuki and his companions certainly smashed that scheme to smithereens.

"All right. With the *corpse* dragon eliminated, our *options* are now *limitless*. I want you all to *rest* today, but I'm *sorry* to say that I'll need to send you *back* out tomorrow to *deliver* a message. Take the *letter* I'll write to the southeastern *headquarters*. After *that*, organize a *squadron* to monitor the *humans'* movements, *especially* any *military* movements. I leave the *choice* of personnel to *your* discretion. I will *personally* take preventive measures for the *other* areas."

"Yes, my liege."

The squadron leader gave that short reply, then quickly left—but not before the Elf Queen Naforazey appeared, rushing past him into the room. She seemed agitated.

"Fynar! The guards on duty confirmed the Undead Dragon was defeated! Think you our reinforcements have arrived?!"

"Indeed. I myself was just informed of the same."

"Hmm? You already knew? Ah, I wager the ones you dispatched to gather information told you?"

The Demon King responded to Naforazey's question with an enigmatic smile.

"Thanks to *them*, I have a *relatively* good idea of the enemy's movements. Though *too* many points have remained *obscured* until now, I *finally* have a *clear* picture."

He stood up from his chair and continued speaking.

"Now, then, my darling Naforazey. The wonderful children who eliminated our greatest threat will be arriving soon. I would very much love to welcome them, but I would rather not overstep my bounds in your domain, so would you be a doll and act as the charming host I know you are?"

"As if I need to be told. I'll handle everything. Including a sumptuous banquet of foods you can't experience in the demon world."

"Oho. Well, that puts me in my place. Now I myself am interested in seeing the offerings."

After bantering lightly with each other, the Demon King and the Elf Queen returned to their respective duties.



Along the road heading to the Elvish Enclave, Nell spoke from atop the direwolf's back.

"Mr. Yuki, I heard you fought him once. You know, the fiends' redheaded leader."

"I, uh... Yeah."

"But he ultimately escaped during the battle by using some sort of spatial transfer magic, right? Apparently, he used something similar to your necklace."

"So what you're saying is that the enemy has some sort of ornament or item like my dungeon return device?"

She nodded in reply.

"Yup. Well, that's the only *concrete* evidence for the theory, but a few other things make sense if you consider that the enemy has a demon lord on their side. At least, that's what His Majesty the Demon King said, and he even

factored in that the rate at which the fiends replenish their forces is strange."

Nell continued her explanation after that.

Apparently, Demon King Fynar had almost driven the fiends to a state of semiannihilation through several operations. Though his tactics hadn't been quite enough to destroy the enemy's inner citadel, he'd made his moves based on the expectation that reducing the enemy's strength by a considerable margin would hamper their movements for a while. Unfortunately, they'd ended up getting ambushed by an army the same size as the one they'd already fought seemingly appearing out of nowhere, and they'd been forced to retreat on multiple occasions.

In short, the discrepancy between his prediction of the enemy's numbers versus their actual numbers had been abnormally large. Considering we were talking about *that* Demon King, there was no way he would've made such a huge miscalculation. In other words, there had to be a specific reason for the difference instead of a simple misjudgment.

"Interesting. Veeery interesting. And that's how you came up with the idea that maybe they're using a dungeon to replenish their forces?"

"Exactly. It seemed reasonable, you know? But there's still quite a lot we don't know. Actually, let's leave the annoying discussions for later. We're here, Mr. Yuki, Lefi, En! And of course, Rir!"

Nell made that announcement excitedly, but...

"You say we're here, but, uh... You know we're still inside the forest, right?"

"Is...this the Elvish Enclave?"

"Hmm... A barrier, eh?"

In contrast to En's and my puzzled tones, Lefi sounded like she'd figured something out. By the way, En was in her human form and currently looking at everything with curious eyes.

"Ha ha ha! I knew you couldn't be fooled, Lefi."

Laughing, Nell went ahead, and we followed behind her. When we did, the scenery instantly transformed.

The first thing I saw was several humongous trees growing in a row. They were set with bridges and stairs, and hollows carved into the trunks were being used as living spaces. The setting was nature itself, raw and untouched, with flowers blooming everywhere and sunlight filtering in through the cool canopy of trees. It was the kind of view that soothed your soul—a mystical aura very much suited to an elvish settlement.

I saw other things too. Trees with scorch marks, trees with half their trunks gouged out, and trees on the verge of collapsing. Elves using their magic and golems to rebuild. It hurt to look at all the battle scars. If not for all the damage, the view surely would've been even more beautiful.

I wonder, do they use some kind of magic to hide the entire Enclave?

Just then, I noticed something I couldn't have until now: elvish, demon, and human soldiers all standing closer than I'd expected, each of them saluting according to their own race's customs. It seemed they'd been waiting for us.

From among them emerged an elvish beauty clad in an opulent traditional outfit, her bearing majestic as she walked toward us. I knew her. She was the Elf Queen, Naforazey Faraye, whom I'd met in the demon world.

"Well glad I am for your visit, Lord Yuki, Zaien. It pleases me to see you both hale and hearty."

"Been a while, Lady Queen. You and everyone else here obviously went through a whole heckuva lot, but I'm glad you're not hurt."

"Nice...to see you again too."

"Except I was, in fact, injured. Although the elixir in your hero wife's possession healed me. She said you insisted she carry it, and for your foresight, you have my thanks as well."

Oh, so she used what I gave her, huh? As long as it came in handy, that's what matters.

After greeting me and En, the Elf Queen turned to face Lefi. Her expression looked strangely strained, almost like there was a hint of fear in her face.

"Well met...Supreme Dragon Lefisios. I-It has been quite a long time since our

last encounter. While I'd been told you were Lord Yuki's wife, never could I have imagined you would accompany him as our reinforcements. I-I am deeply grateful to you."

"Hmm? You are... Could you be the elf who challenged me some time ago?"

"Huh? Wait, you two know each other?"

Lefi answered my question with a shrug.

"Well, I suppose that is one way to put it. I do not believe the incident occurred around here, but once upon a time, I just so happened to be passing by an elvish settlement, and those living in it attacked me, mistakenly thinking I had come to attack. She was among the attackers."

"I-I-I apologize sincerely f-for the trouble we caused..."

The elves' head honcho bowed her head, a cold sweat beading on her skin.

"It is in the past. I have no intention of dragging it into the present. You should forget as well."

"F-From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your magnanimous words."

Even after she raised her head, the Elf Queen's expression remained stiff and her attitude nervous. The soldiers standing behind her looked kinda awkward too, unsure of how to behave in the face of the Elf Queen's obvious terror. The elvish soldiers in particular seemed to be at a serious loss.

Picking up on the uncomfortable atmosphere, Nell stepped in and lent a helping hand.

"Um, wh-why don't we head inside, Queen Naforazey? I'm sure everyone here is absolutely famished. Right, Mr. Yuki?"

"Yeah. Actually, we haven't slept a wink since we left home, so we're suuuper sleepy."

"Indeed, even I am feeling a wee bit tired."

"Oh, right, of course, because you all rushed here for us."

"Are you paying attention?! Prepare a guest room at once!"

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty! Right away!"

Initially taken aback by their queen's flustered order, a few of the elvish soldiers left in a rush to do her bidding.

"Lefi? What exactly did you do back then?"

"I was a tad irritated, you see. So I menaced them accordingly. Ah, but let me make one thing clear: I merely menaced them. I did not kill anyone. I generously allowed their attacks without countering. To be frank, they should be grateful that is all I did."

Didn't take much reading between the lines to figure out that I should be feeling sorry for the elves.



They'd given us a strangely fancy room that looked like it'd been prepared in a rush. We'd slept there for a few hours and were awake again now.

"Dinner is ready. Please follow me."

An elvish maid who'd been waiting for me, Lefi, and En in her human form to wake up guided us down a corridor made from a large tree. Evening had already fallen outside, and the rays of the setting sun shone through the windows.

Though I knew it'd been unavoidable, we'd still wound up waking up at a weird time, which meant we probably wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. Our work here was already done, so we could've just gone straight home without staying here. Except Nell couldn't go back yet, and since we wanted to be with her a bit longer, we decided to spend the night. Personally, though, I felt like tomorrow was gonna be rough because I couldn't relax here like I could at home in the dungeon.

Well, Lefi and I could power through any drowsiness until tomorrow evening. I just felt bad for En. Wouldn't be fair to ask the same of her. Though she'd napped on the journey here, it wasn't good to keep a kid awake late into the night. I think I'll have her nap somewhere tomorrow for an hour. I knew well enough that when she was anthropomorphized, her physical activity was on par with that of a normal child.

"En, I'm sorry the schedule's gonna be a bit tough."

"I'm...fine. We'll stay up late together."

"Kah ha! Yes, we shall do just that. We all know Yuki has brought a variety of his board games with him, so let us all while away the wee hours together."

"I...want to play shogi. Shogi!"

"Oho, what a fine idea. Then I shall be your oppon—"

"Lady...Lefifi, you're bad, so I'll play Master."

"Pfft. Yeah, Lefi's definitely bad. You can totally play me instead."

"…"

I managed to squeeze those words out while trying desperately not to laugh out loud. For my efforts, Lefi lightly kicked my leg. *Dang, kids really are honest little things, huh?* 

Our walk down the corridor continued along those same lines until we encountered a non-elvish figure standing at the end of it.

"Oh! Morning, everyone! Did you sleep well?"

Nell appeared, wearing a refreshing smile on her face.

"Good morning, Nell. The bed was shockingly soft and fluffy, so we had a most pleasant time indeed. And what did *you* get up to today?"

"I helped with repairs around the Enclave. I believe you saw the state of the settlement when you arrived, but there are still quite a few battle scars remaining."

Yeaaah, definitely can't fix all that in a single day. Since Nell's helping out on that front, I think I'll do the same tomorrow.

"Good...job, Nell."

"Tee hee hee. Thank you, En!"

En stretched as far up onto her tiptoes as she could go and rubbed Nell's head. In turn, Nell crouched a bit to make it easier for her, grinning happily the whole time. *Too cute*.



"So does this mean the three of you are on your way to dinner as well?"

"Yup. The maid here was nice enough to lead the way. It's cool for you to...come with us, right?"

Halfway through, I ended up redirecting my question to the maid instead. She answered with a smile.

"Yes, of course. We elves regard Ser Nell as a champion of our people, and as such, her presence will not be denied."

"A champion?"

"She saved the Enclave *and* healed our queen's arm. I was also informed that you, her family, were responsible for defeating the Undead Dragon. As one who lives in this village, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The maid bowed her head deeply at us.

"R-Right, you're very welcome... Nell, you did your best too, huh?"

"I only wanted to do what was within my power, but so many others helped. Not to mention all the useful items I received from you, Mr. Yuki, so I definitely can't say I was alone in this. In any case! Let's chat about the details later! My main concern at the moment is filling my empty stomach!"

After that, we went back to following the maid and eventually arrived not in a canteen-type space but one that looked like a conference room. It was tastefully decorated with beautiful furnishings. Actually, it wasn't *like* a conference room. It probably was a conference room, considering the round table in the center of it.

"Hello, Yuki. It has been much too long since we last met. I'm glad to see you're looking well."

Sitting in one of the chairs at said round table was a slender man with a pretty face and a shady smile—the Demon King, Fynar.

"Yeah, right back at ya, Demon King. Same as usual, I see."

By that, I meant his enigmatic expression that gave no clues as to what really went on in his mind. Next, I spoke to Reyd, the ruler of the Kingdom of Alisia,

the country Nell had sworn fealty to. He was also sitting at the table.

"Yo, King. Been a while for us too. Never in a million years would I have expected to meet *you* here."

"Heh heh. I concur, Lord Yuki. Zaien, a pleasure to see you again as well after so long."

"Yes...nice to see you too, Uncle King."

When En gave him a wave with her tiny hand, the king beamed like an old man looking fondly upon his grandchild. *Oh snap. I* just *realized that my kid has got some* serious *connections*. Then, he turned his attention to Lefi and spoke.

"And...might the lady with the silver locks be Lady Lefisios?"

"I am indeed Lefisios."

"Ilyr, my daughter, has told me much about you. Particularly about how you cared for her during her stay in your home. Thank you very much for your hospitality."

"Ah, so you are the human king I have heard much of. Yes, your daughter is a sweet child. I am grateful for her friendship with our wee lasses."

A strange look passed over the Demon King's face as he watched Lefi and the king chat like neighbors meeting on the street.

"Pardon, but I don't believe we've met. Yuki, be a good boy and introduce me, won't you?"

"Yeah, sure, why not. This individual with the horns is my wife, Lefisios. And did I introduce you to *this* super-duper cutie back in the demon world? Eh, even if I did, let's go again. This is my daughter, Zaien. Don't think I need to introduce you to Nell, right? She's also my wife."

"Yuki. There must be a better way for you to introduce me. 'Individual with the horns'? Truly?"

"Tee...hee hee."

Lefi glared at me in annoyance while En giggled happily.

"Yes, indeed, I am the hero who wed the demon lord!"

Then there was Nell, who cheerfully proclaimed herself. *Damn, woman.* You've been gettin' bold as brass lately, haven't you? I mean, yeah, I mean that in a good way, but like...

"Darling Naforazey *told* me as much, but...Madam Lefisios, you *are* the Supreme Dragon, are you *not*?"

In an unusual move for him, the Demon King didn't add little cutesy words like "darling" before her name. Instead, his question held the respect one would show to another who outranked them. In response, Lefi nodded gravely, cloaking herself in an aura of majesty.

"It is as you say. I am the Supreme Dragon, Lefisios."

"Well, to *think* it was true... In *any* case, I am *profoundly* grateful to have *your* assistance on this occasion."

"Think nothing of it. After all, Nell is an extremely dear member of my family. It is only natural that I would wish to protect one of my own. So while the outcome might have been that I helped you lot, frankly speaking, it was entirely incidental. Therefore, if you are to convey your gratitude to anyone, I suggest it be her."

"Tee hee hee. Thank you, Lefi!"

"Gah! Cease and desist, won't you? Good grief..."

Smiling bashfully, Nell hugged Lefi tightly from behind. As for Lefi herself, though she *sounded* annoyed, she didn't seem entirely displeased. Watching the two of them get along like this sure did wonders to lighten my heart.

"Hmm... Yuki, you are as outrageous as ever."

"What? Me? Not Lefi?"

"No, no. She is as well, but you are the one who always amazes me. Although you yourself are so blasé about it, even I, who's less perceptive than most when it comes to strength, can tell that she's an extraordinary anomaly."

Well, yeah, duh. I mean, she is the Supreme Dragon and all. No shit she's an anomaly.

"Allow me to use a metaphor. Let's say we're a prairie, simple and unadorned.

Yuki, you are a famous mountain whose peak is visible. And she is a mighty mountain range that stretches as far as the eye can see. Her peaks rise so high, they pierce the very heavens, and we can't see them. We don't even know how far the range extends. Even now, I feel as if I'm about to be overpowered by her might."

A mighty mountain range, huh? Not a bad analogy actually. If I were a famous mountain, then she'd be a sacred mountain. A majestic, terrifying, graceful, and grand mountain range from which no one who challenged it could return alive.

"Ya know, you say all that, but all I'm seeing is you sitting there looking super chill."

"Because I'm *very* good at keeping up *appearances*. Take a *look* at the guards behind me. Go on."

I did as he instructed and saw somewhat strained expressions on the faces of the elvish and demon soldiers around us. Though they tried their best not to make it obvious, I could tell they were super nervous. Conversely, not many humans in the room looked that stressed, on account of humans in general not being as sensitive to magic as other species. It made me realize that the reason the king could talk to Lefi so normally was probably because he couldn't intuitively understand her strength.

Fascinating. I'd long since grown used to it, but apparently, the pressure she unconsciously emanated was just proof of her overwhelming power.

"Right, then. So *this* humanoid...well, I'm not precisely *certain* if I can call her that, but Madam Lefisios is your *wife*. Moreover, so is the *hero*. And I *hear* you have *another*? Forgive my *rudeness* in saying this, but I would *not* be at *all* surprised to learn that your *third* wife is some *frightening* creature herself."

Hey, Lew, you're being treated like a monster somewhere you've never even been.

"Man, you're good at this. The wifey I left behind to hold down the fort is, in fact, something else. I'd say she's a match for Lefi."

"Well, he is not incorrect. I suppose you could say we are birds of a feather." For example, they were both super clumsy.

"Oh? So I was right? Blast. Two emotions war within me. One wishes to meet her, while the other quakes in fear at the thought."

So said the Demon King to me and Lefi, who didn't tell him *how* she and Lew were alike. Next to us, Nell smiled ruefully.

"Anyway, Lefi, just take it down a notch, will ya? Looks like everyone's having a pretty hard time."

"Mm, yes, so it seems."

It felt like her tremendous aura halved in tandem with her murmur. I'd say it was now about the same as it was whenever the two of us went hunting together in the Demonic Forest. At this level, monsters didn't run away from her. However, because she needed to consciously control her sense of presence, this low-power state probably felt unnatural for her.

"I thank you for your consideration, Madam Lefisios."

Reyd, the human king, exhaled when he saw the Demon King incline his head respectfully.

"Hmm. Moments like these are when I truly feel the difference between species. Only a select few among us humans can sense the pressure of the strong."

"Yes, that's *simply* the way of things. Demons *possess* what humans *lack*, and *humans* possess what *demons* lack. So it *goes*. I know my phrasing is *awful*, but if *not* for this, one species would have *already* dominated another."

Especially when you consider the fact that humans and demons have apparently been ripping each other apart for a very long time now. If one side was inferior in every way, then just like the Demon King had said, the war would've been over by now.

While we were busy talking, the door to the conference room opened and the Elf Queen, Naforazey, entered along with a wagon bearing food. I'd been wondering why she wasn't here, and now I knew the answer. She'd been helping prepare dinner.

"Apologies for the wait! As your host, I've prepared as much food as I possibly

could. Please do enjoy to your hearts' content!"

After her short speech, we all started filling our plates while chatting with each other. And I really had to say, the elvish food was *delicious*. It was what people would call "ethnic cuisine."

There were a ton of unique dishes not found anywhere else, and En, who loved to eat, was chowing them all down in satisfaction. Smiling at the adorable sight of her stuffing her face, the elvish maids were diligent in making sure her plate was never empty. Their reaction didn't surprise me, because En, like all my other little girls, was as cute as a button. Just watching her—or any of them—was enough to make a guy break out into a smile.

"Ah, Yuki, I was told you saved my subordinates on the way here. You have my thanks. I'd entrusted them with a vital mission, so your aid is truly a boon. Please do let me know if I can repay you in any way."

Demon King Fynar spoke while eating, his elegant table manners fit for royalty.

"Then just accommodate Nell as much as you can during her stay here. I'd be extremely happy and grateful if you could do that."

"Understood. If you *didn't* already know, she has done a *great* deal for *all* of us, so your request is an *easy* one to fulfill."

"Huh? Oh, n-no, you really don't have to go to any trouble for me, Your Majesty..."

Nell sounded apologetic and embarrassed.

"No, no. I insist. As far as I'm concerned, your actions here have been more than enough to earn you a place in the historical record. So please don't be so reserved."

"I agree with him. You were superb. Yes, I shall carve your name into the elves' annals."

"Whoooa! That's amazing, Nell! Does this mean your name is gonna show up in future history textbooks?"

"Ugh... Will you stop teasing me, Mr. Yuki?"

Blushing a little, she smacked me lightly on the shoulder. Adorbs.

"If I might be so bold as to ask, why choose such a form, Lady Supreme Dragon? Considering your wealth of power, I understand that taking on a human guise is child's play to you, but..."

"Oh, yeah, about that. Ya see, she loves sweet thi—"

When I tried to answer Naforazey's question, Lefi cleared her throat loudly next to me to drown me out.

"Ahem. Yuki, I am fully capable of speaking for myself, so you will remain silent. There is no grand reason for this transformation other than for a bargain I made with him. I deemed a human form more convenient than my dragon one to satisfy the terms of our agreement. That is all."

"She...did it for the swee—"

"Ah, En. Here, you may have my meat. Tell me, how does it taste? Scrumptious?"

"Yes... Very yummy."

En gobbled down the meat Lefi held up to silence her and chewed happily.

Well, I could take a hint. Looked like she didn't want us saying anything to mar her dignity as the Supreme Dragon. When Nell and I grinned pointedly at each other over her attitude, the Elf Queen commented, her tone a bit surprised.

"My goodness. You truly have changed remarkably, Lady Supreme Dragon."

"Well, it was inevitable after becoming this imbecile's mate and acquiring a family of my own through him. What of you? Have you no husband of your own?"

"I... I am the queen. As it will be necessary for my spouse to rule by my side, finding a suitable partner isn't easy."

"Hmm? My darling Naforazey, I feel as if I heard those exact words from your lips a hundred years ago as well."

"Y-You talk too much, Demon King. Be silent!"

Based on what I saw, the other elves in the room also looked like they had a

lot they wanted to say as they watched their queen. *Yeah, easy enough to figure out the situation from their expressions.* There was no doubt she was a prize beauty, which, coupled with her authority as the most powerful person among elfkind, meant she had her pick of men. But marriage came with a whole lotta conditions, so it wasn't something to do quickly or lightly.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. I believe I have an idea. What if we host a matchmaking contest among the three races? Socializing with other races can be difficult in many ways, so we will need to provide assistance, but there's nothing better than this to improve relations with each other. Oh, and of course, darling Naforazey, should you find someone who piques your interest, you're more than welcome to take them home."

Reyd, the human king, spoke after listening to the Demon King's proposal.

"A matchmaking contest, you say? I quite like that. Although I expect life span to be a considerable obstacle in an interracial relationship... Nevertheless, I'm in agreement. Why don't we attempt a rehearsal with our soldiers as the first candidates?"

"Ooh. How brilliant. It seems many of them have already become close due to all this recent turmoil, so they would make a fantastic starting point."

"Yes... I think it's a fine idea as well. *However*, Demon King, *you* do not have a spouse of your own either, which puts us in the same predicament! Instead of casting stones, shouldn't *you* be searching for a wife as well?"

"Ha ha ha! When you're *right*, you're right. Then perhaps I, *too*, shall look for a wife. I *won't* go so far as to have *three* like Yuki does, but I *must* at least wed *one*."

The folks around us, soldiers and servers alike, erupted into excited chatter upon hearing the royals' conversation.

"Oh my! Her Majesty is finally going to seek a groom!"

"I can't believe the day has come when King Fynar is willing to marry!"

"Matchmaking... Has spring finally arrived for me too?!"

In the midst of this genial atmosphere, I suddenly looked at the members of

my family. The problem of life span, huh? Based on what Lefi'd told me a while back, I'd probably live a very long time. A millennium or two for sure. As a dragon who'd become so overly powerful that her body had basically become immortal, Lefi was in the same boat.

Problem was, everyone else would die before us. I wasn't sure about Shii, En, and the wraith sisters since they were special races, but Nell was a perfect example. She was human. And Lew. Though werewolves lived longer than humans, their life spans capped out at two hundred years. Iluna and Leila too. Despite being demons who lived longer than other races, they couldn't live for a thousand years.

When all those ladies died before me, when everyone I'd ever known passed away and the passage of time transformed the world itself, leaving behind only me and Lefi, what would I think? How would I feel? Could I really survive in a world without any of them?

If Lefi was with me, I didn't think it would be *completely* unbearable. But if there was no other way, then I couldn't help thinking that I'd rather just age normally alongside all of them or even die before them. It wasn't like I *hadn't* thought about this until now. I'd just purged the thoughts from my mind to avoid thinking about them.

Even so, it was a future that would surely come someday.

"Yuki? Whatever is the matter?"

Lefi noticed that I was on the verge of tears and checked in on me, her tone worried but soft so no one else would hear us.

"It's nothing."

That was all I said in response.



After dinner had ended and everyone had sat around chatting for a while, I swung En onto my shoulders and took her for a stroll around the Elvish Enclave. Even though it was pretty late at night, they were still technically in a state of high alert, so we saw a lot of soldiers still patrolling the area. Having said that, it wasn't a tense atmosphere. Everyone was pretty relaxed, judging from their

casual conversations as they remained on duty. They all seemed to understand that this alliance between the three races was for the sake of maintaining friendly relations for a long time to come, which explained why they were all so proactive about interacting with each other.

"It's...so pretty here."

"Yeah. Nice village, huh?"

The Elvish Enclave at night felt even more fantastical. Firefly-like insects flitted around us, their faint light softly illuminating the beautifully paved paths, which didn't really have an artificial vibe to them. Not only were these paths easy to traverse, but on top of that, they blended naturally into the trees and foliage, like they were part of them. Though the Demonic Forest was a magnificent sight to behold with its awe-inspiring, untouched wonders, a carefully cultivated natural environment like this was nice too.

"Master...I want that bug at home too."

"Ha ha! Would be cool, for sure. They *are* really pretty, so how about I use Dungeon Points to buy them when we get back?"

En and I continued our stroll while chatting. Then, a few moments later, we noticed a familiar pair ahead of us. They just so happened to be...

"The old master swordsman! And Carlotta!"

They were talking to each other as they stared down at some kind of map in a tent set up as a temporary command center. The previous hero, Lemiro, whom I'd fought once in the tournament in the demon world, and the knight commander, Carlotta, who was Nell's boss.

"Ah! Master Yuki, Miss Zaien. It has been too long."

"Oh, it's you, Mask. Been a— Actually, it hasn't been a while for me. That child... Is she your sister, perhaps?"

"Ah, right, you've never talked to En before, Carlotta. This is Zaien, my daughter. Actually, you two have met a few times, you know?"

"Hmm? Are you certain?"

Carlotta tilted her head thoughtfully.

Yeah, but she was a sword, so there's that!

"More importantly, sorry if we're bugging you in the middle of something."

"Oh, no, not at all. Considering the late hour, we were just about to call an end to our session. Although I did hear you would be visiting, I must apologize for not greeting you sooner."

"Nah, you've got a job to do here, so don't even worry about it. Besides, we fell asleep almost as soon as we got here."

"You and yours defeated that dragon on your way here, yes? And now I'm remembering what I learned... Good grief, Mask, you have no notion of my utter shock when I learned you're a demon lord. But in light of your talents, it made sense."

Carlotta stared at me reproachfully, and I replied with a laugh.

"Well, shoot, guess you found out my true identity, huh? I'm sorry for hiding it, but c'mon, we both know that if you'd known from the start, you would've treated me like an enemy, right?"

"You're not wrong. I would have cut you down without hesitation, even at the cost of my own life. However, now that I know what sort of man you are, I shan't. So long as you take care of Nell, I don't care a whit who or what you are."

"Then we're all good. My kiddos are the number one most important thing to me, followed by my wives in second place, so as long as I'm alive, I think you and I will get along just fine."

"Hmm. I see. In that case, I've said my piece, since I wager we have many long years ahead of us, eh?"

With that, Carlotta suddenly stretched her hand out toward En, whom I'd lifted off my shoulders and placed on the ground, and gently ruffled her head. Surprisingly, her movements looked practiced. I knew this was rude to her, but for whatever reason, I'd had this vague image in my mind of her being a straitlaced, kid-hating type. I was happy to be wrong, though.

Wait a minute. I just remembered her leading us to the orphanage to use as

our lodgings the first time I'd met her. Maybe her relationships with the kids there explained why she seemed so used to dealing with them now.

"Hmm... I suppose the color of her hair and her features *do* resemble yours, Mask. I know you have wives other than Nell, so was she born of one of them?"

"Eh, I guess you could say that. Here, look at this."

"Hmm? I know this weapon. It's the one you use, right?"

Carlotta looked puzzled when I showed her En's true sword form, which I held in one hand.

"This is En. I had her anthropomorphize using my mysterious demon lord power."

"Do you mean to say...that a sword became human?"

"I sure do."

"Through...your mysterious demon lord power?"

"She sure did."

Carlotta looked silently at Lemiro next to her. The elderly man, who already knew this blade was En, smiled wryly at her and nodded.

"You know, it's only now that I realize what an extraordinary man you truly are. I suppose it's pointless to have any more doubts about you, eh?"

"Hey, as long as you get it, that's all that matters to me."

"Heh heh. Even in my old age, you are the first such unique individual I've had the good fortune to meet. As I suspected, you are indeed the reason for Ser Nell's rapid transformation over this past year."

"I see you and I are of the same mind, Ser Lemiro. She's made great strides in the right direction. But clearly, this man's impudence has also had an outsized influence on her."

So the two of them said to each other.

"So...Nell has changed?"

"Correct. I've been with her for a long time as her superior, so I can tell easily.

She's become quite strong. There is no doubt in my mind."

Carlotta nodded affirmatively while answering my question.

Nell's gotten bolder...because of me, huh? Hearing her say it out loud makes me ridiculously happy. I had no doubt that some part of me had been affected by her too.

And then Lemiro, who'd been smiling like a typical good-natured old man until now, spoke, his expression turning a bit serious.

"Right, then, Master Yuki. I apologize for the sudden change in topic, but it has to do with our promise. Though I'm a bit late, should you still wish it, I would be more than glad to teach you several of my sword techniques. What say you?"

Our promise... The promise we made in the demon world?!

"Yes, please! I definitely wanna be able to use her a lot better."

I agreed right away, with no hesitation whatsoever.



The day after we'd arrived in the Elvish Enclave. Since I'd slept for a long time during the day yesterday, I hadn't been able to fall asleep last night, so I'd spent it helping repair the settlement instead.

"Hmm... Yuki, how long has it been since you took up the blade?"

The previous hero-slash-elderly butler was currently working me hard in the village's training grounds.

"Haah, haah... Less than two years."

Panting heavily, I answered him.

This ain't right. He's been moving just as intensely as me, but this old man's so casual about it. What the hell? Is there really such a huge difference in the way we use our bodies?

"Oho, so you've attained this level of proficiency in such a short time. Well done."

"No, it's all thanks to my kid. I'm learning that real freakin' painfully right now,

believe it or not."

Instead of En, I was currently using the wooden greatsword I'd made a while back for training. But this mock battle was seriously driving home just how much she'd been saving my ass in real battles. As a sword with a will of her own, En had been assisting me in combat ever since she'd first self-actualized, and I was currently learning that my swordsmanship relied on her presence. Although I was managing to move my body by remembering the movements I made when using her, crossing swords with this old butler, whose sword skills far outdid mine, had made me realize just how much En compensated for my lack of sword fighting sense.

Lemiro nodded and continued.

"Indeed. You rely overmuch on your weapon, Yuki. Still, are you not better at magic?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. In the past, swords were my main weapon, but now I use magic instead, with En dealing the finishing blow."

"Based on what you've shown me thus far, you are undoubtedly a first-rate magic user. I will also acknowledge that your combat abilities are ample. However, you still wish to improve your swordsmanship, don't you?"

"Yeah. Like I said, I wanna be able to use her better, not let her talents go to waste."

"Heh. Understood. Then first allow me to discuss your idiosyncrasies I've noticed in our bouts thus far. It seems to me, Yuki, that you base your swordsmanship on fighting monsters. You also seem to understand the importance of weaving truth and lies into your attacks, but perhaps you employ magic or something similar to do so."

Bingo. My fighting style was based entirely on my fighting experiences in the Demonic Forest. There, I would set up traps for monsters to fall into, use magic to create a commotion as cover to attack, have my pets take them by surprise so I could deal the finishing blow, and things along those lines. All that had become the foundation of my fighting style. I hardly ever used true sword skills to feint.

I bulldozed weaklings through sheer physical strength, but having learned how to fight in the Demonic Forest, where most creatures outranked me, I still basically didn't engage in one-on-one combat. And this definitely didn't bode well for me, since the number of fights I'd been getting into outside the dungeon without my pets had been increasing.

"Above all, because your attacks are easy to understand, they're vulnerable to counteroffensives, which makes your defense even weaker. *That* is your biggest problem."

"Yeaaah, I can see that. I did just get my ass handed to me, after all."

By the way, elf, demon, and human soldiers were also currently at the training grounds, observing us from nearby. They were all apparently really excited by the super rare opportunity to watch a master swordsman show off his skills. And here I was getting shown the hell up in full view of the peanut gallery. It sucked. Hard.

I sighed despondently, which made the former hero grin as he continued his explanation.

"But none of your weaknesses are necessarily a bad thing. Simply put, your strengths lie elsewhere. So I suggest we train now by increasing the weight of each blow without upending your existing style of combat. What do you say, Yuki?"

"What? I thought for sure after everything you just said, you'd tell me to focus on defense."

"While growth for the sake of compensating for weakness leads one to become a jack-of-all-trades, ultimately, they remain a master of none. Of course, this method *is* effective to an extent, but if you're going to take that route anyway, I say that you may as well just increase your strengths even more. As far as I know, most who are called strong tend to possess some kind of outstanding talent."

Well, not like I don't know what you mean. Even in the Demonic Forest, between an enemy with paper-thin armor who could use a deadly one-shot attack and one with high stats but only basically harmless attacks, you'd be more nervous and afraid of the former in battle.

"Your strength is your sheer physical power, which has reached a level that no mere humanoid's ever could. Thanks to your tough demon lord body, you'll be able to channel your power into En without any waste and cut through everything in your path in a single blow, even against a superior opponent. And at that point, defense is no longer necessary. This is the path you should aim for."

So the path I should aim for is Jigen-ryu, huh? Since I'm partial to my very own beloved odachi, En, I guess increasing the power of my blows suits my style of swordsmanship better than learning tricks.

"I knew it was a good idea for someone to give me a once-over. My sword skills are totally self-taught, so you're really doing me a huge favor by helping me out like this."

This particular master swordsman definitely didn't disappoint. Not to mention how easy to understand his explanations were. Must've been the wisdom of age. I remembered Nell telling me how often he'd taught her the way of the sword, but now...now I understood exactly why she was so good at it herself.

"Heh. I am delighted to be of service. Now, then. Let us continue. We are, after all, short on time, hm?"

After that, he kept winning, right up until the sun reached its highest point in the sky.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

Lefi cackled her pretty little head off as she strode to the training grounds. She was holding one of En's hands, and Nell was holding the other.

"Dang, you guys are here too. You taking a field trip or something?"

I questioned them while sprawled on the ground. Lefi replied with a smirk.

"Precisely. I felt the need to laugh at the state of you, worn out like a dirty, old rag."

"N-No, don't get the wrong idea, Mr. Yuki. It's almost lunchtime, so we came to ask you to join us. I figured you must be hungry too by now."

"Let's...eat lunch together, Master."

Oh, it's that time already, huh? It felt like I'd just put En down for a nap, which I'd done when dawn had first broken because she'd started nodding off, but apparently, a lot of time had passed while I'd been engrossed in my sword practice. Then, Lefi called out to the elderly butler as she smacked me repeatedly even though I was still lying on the ground.

"I see you gave him a sound thrashing. Despite his considerable power values, he is quite inept, so I ask only that you treat him accordingly."

"Heh. Leave it to me. Begging your pardon, but might you be one of Yuki's wives? The Supreme Dragon, Lefisios, yes?"

"Correct. I am Lefisios. And you are..."

"He's my sword master, Mr. Lemiro. He's done so much for me in so many ways."

Nell stepped in and introduced the old master swordsman when Lefi pointedly trailed off.

"I see. So Nell has been in your care. You have my thanks."

"Oh, no, think nothing of it. On the contrary, *she* has done much and more for us. I should be the one extending my gratitude instead."

The elderly butler spoke with a smile, then a serious expression suddenly came over his face.

"Madam Lefisios. I realize this is rude of me, but I have a boon to ask of you."

"Hmm? What is it?"

In response to Lefi's puzzled look, he bowed his head and answered.

"Would you...consent to a bout with me?"

"What? Are you off your rocker, old man?"

He would legitimately die if he fought Lefi. Hell, even I had never gone up against her. Although to be honest, in my particular case, I just didn't want to fight her.

When I blurted out those words without even thinking, he continued

explaining, well aware of his reckless request.

"That being said, even sparring with someone of your caliber would lead to my death. So may I ask you to only use a spirit strike?"

"Since you are training my husband, I shall grant you this boon. But I suggest you tell the others here to step back. Far back. Else I might kill them."

"I am deeply grateful, Madam Lefisios. Everyone! We'll be conducting a dangerous exercise shortly, so if you insist on observing, please do so from a fair distance!"

The soldiers watching us obediently did as Lemiro asked and moved away. After making sure they were at a safe distance, the old man spread his legs shoulder-width apart, let both of his arms hang down, and took up a natural stance.

"If you would."

"Very well. Here I go."

Instantly, an immensely menacing aura radiated from Lefi. Simultaneously, the soldiers watching us from afar started dropping like flies. Even the ones who didn't just pass the hell out hit the ground hard when their knees buckled.

Bloodlust actually existed in this world. Magic manifested images through magical energy, and in the same vein, bloodlust transmitted killing intent into the surrounding area through magical energy. I was sure that if she really wanted to, Lefi could kill every single person here without laying a single finger on them.

"Haah, haah!"

The elderly butler, who was bearing the brunt of the power emanating from her, never faltered despite the sweat pouring down him and his harsh panting. He didn't collapse, and he never lost his fighting spirit. He stood there undaunted in the face of the pressure that had even the monsters of the Demonic Forest literally tucking their tails between their legs and running when they felt it.

"Hmm. This should be good enough."

A minute after she'd started, Lefi erased the menacing aura in a second.

"That is quite a feat, for a human to endure *my* spirit strike for so long. Take pride in yourself."

"No. I still have quite a ways to go, in light of Yuki and the others remaining unperturbed."

The old man smiled ruefully when he saw us there, totally unfazed.

"Well, that's 'cause we're her family. We're exceptions, so we don't count."

For example, if someone in your family pissed off someone else, I bet you'd think things like, "Daaang, they're mad, huh? I wonder why." But it wasn't like you'd actually be scared, right? Especially when you knew they were doing it on purpose, like Lefi had just been. Wasn't it normal to not feel anything in that kind of situation? Heck, Nell and En, who were next to me, were super chill too.

"But damn, old man. You're crazy. You totally could've died from that. You do know that, don't you?"

I could hear the hint of amazement in my own voice. He lightly wiped the sweat off his brow and replied.

"Lately, I haven't had many opportunities to fight against the strong, so my body has grown weaker and my senses duller. It is difficult for humans to reach their full potential unless they sense the danger of death, so I wanted to take this chance to make the necessary adjustments in myself. A splendid experience indeed."

I guess he's not wrong. The danger of death does heighten survival instincts.

There was no greater threat than Lefi in this world, so in terms of training, that might've actually been the highest level. That said, I had no doubt it was an absolutely insane thing to do.

"Now, then. Food takes precedence. Lemiro, was it? I bid you join us."

"While I'm grateful for your invitation, I must tend to the soldiers first. I'll be there shortly, so please don't mind me. Yuki, let us reconvene at another time."

"Sounds good. Thanks."

He'd taken time out of his busy schedule today for my sake, so I decided that I'd eat as fast as possible so I could get back to training with him.



"Haah... I thought I'd prepared myself, but fear has still chilled my bones. I truly did not expect *her* to come as well. Reyd, that hero of yours has certainly wed into an awe-inspiring family."

Though Naforazey had only said "her," everyone in the room knew exactly who she'd been referring to. The king of Alisia chuckled merrily in response to her slightly stunned words.

"Heh heh. Our champion is very dependable. And she improves by the day, I'm told. Especially lately. The young grow quickly, eh?"

"They do indeed... I must admit, darling Naforazey, I find myself extremely curious about your acquaintance with the Supreme Dragon. Clearly, your onetime interaction was a hostile one, but what isn't clear is how exactly that happened. Won't you tell me?"

"Well... A long time ago, we encountered her on an expedition in the outside world. I thought we would find ourselves under attack, so we struck first. You won't be surprised to learn that we didn't inflict much damage, if any at all... If we had, I certainly wouldn't be here now to tell the tale."

"Ahhh... Hmm, I suppose the *best* word to describe that would be...disaster. Yes, what a *disaster* for you."

With a faraway look in her eyes, Naforazey related the incident to them like it was simply an unfortunate accident. The Demon King smiled ruefully, his expression conflicted.

As the leaders of their respective peoples chatted in the council room, a knock sounded on the door. After receiving permission to enter, a lone figure stepped inside—the lady knight commander, Carlotta.

"Pardon the intrusion. We've just finished analyzing the information."

"Oho, you're here. Please, do tell me what you think."

"Yes, sir. Allow me to summarize the information our country's previous hero,

Lemiro, obtained from interrogating the captured suspects. It appears the human nation cooperating with the fiends is the Reauxgard Empire."

That was Carlotta's response to the Demon King's urging.

"The *Reauxgard* Empire... Isn't that the human *supremacist* state in the south?"

Reyd answered Fynar's question.

"Correct. They, too, have been at odds with demons for a very long time, although those demons do not live in the demon world. But ever since the current emperor came to power, they have also started waging war on the surrounding human nations, annexing them one by one. 'Tis likely his mindset differs greatly from his predecessor's."

"A country touting the principles of ethnocentrism that is at war with demons is currently collaborating with them. Mind-boggling. Reyd, my boy, are they your people's enemy too?"

"We have yet to confront each other directly because of the distance separating our lands, but there *has* been indirect antagonism. We provide aid to the countries that lie between us."

"Mm... You're using them as buffers, are you? Seems you do, in fact, know how to be a king."

"Phrasing, my darling Naforazey."

Reyd chuckled wryly at the other two's exchange.

"No, she's absolutely right. If we wind up sharing a border with the current Reauxgard Empire, an all-out war is inevitable."

"I think your *judgment* is sound. For *better* or for worse, a war between *major* powers is *sure* to create *chaos* on the continent. And, *well*, that might *actually* be our enemy's *goal*."

"Hmm? They wish to sow chaos?"

The Demon King nodded in response to Reyd's words.

"Based on what I've heard, I get the distinct impression that the leaders of

that country are *trying* to destroy its *existing* framework. It would be *easy* to say it's simply *ambition* at play, but considering the *deliberateness*, it seems as if they're *attempting* to accomplish something *else*."

"Deliberateness, hm? Well, I suppose the hope I harbored of our enemy being a confederacy of dunces was doomed from the start. Since the situation has progressed to this point, we no longer have the luxury of time either. Let us ready ourselves to send reinforcements posthaste. After all, some areas in the demon world have already been attacked, have they not?"

"Upon my return to Alisia, I shall make sure our army is prepared as well."

"Thank you both. We may have misjudged the speed of the enemy's movements. The fact that human spies appeared directly on the heels of the fiends' attack means they're already helping each other in a military capacity. So we, too, must hurry and make this alliance a reality."



After I finished lunch, I decided I needed some postfood exercise and headed out for a walk in the forest surrounding the Elvish Enclave. Nell tagged along, saying she wanted to go with me. The previous hero and I would resume our training a little later. If I went for it right after eating, I'd definitely throw up from all the intense movement.

"Tee hee hee."

"Sounds like someone's in a good mood."

"Of course I am! Because we're all alone, Mr. Yuki! Just the two of us!"

She twined her fingers even tighter between mine and rested her head on my shoulder with a cheerful giggle.

Ya know, it makes me super happy as a man when a woman lets herself be spoiled like this. But if I may ask a teeny tiny question of you, Mrs. Nell, aren't you technically here on official business?

All the other soldiers were doing their jobs like normal. Though I was obviously super stoked about us being together, so I personally had no problem with her behavior. Heck, maybe it was fine since it was still lunch break.

By the way, Lefi and En weren't with us because they'd wanted to see more of the elves' village. It was also possible that they'd decided to give Nell some private time with me.

"What are you all planning on doing after this, Mr. Yuki?"

"Good question. We finished the job we were asked to do and we got the chance to see you too, so...I guess we'll head back to the dungeon after the old man teaches me everything he can? Plus, we'll just get in the elves' way if we stay here too long. How about you? Got any ideas when you can come back?"

"Not yet, but I think it'll be a while longer. If it were just me, I could make quick work of any business required of me in Alisia once this is over. But sadly, it isn't just me, so I suspect things will be busy once we get back. On a related note, Miss Carlotta told me they're on the brink of forming an allied force."

"Which means...war, huh?"

You could say the enemy had basically opened hostilities already by launching an attack on a location where three countries had gathered to meet.

"Yes, unfortunately. If only everyone were like you, Mr. Yuki. Then there wouldn't be any wars."

"Mm, I dunno about that. I'm a big ball of selfishness, a man who only does what he wants to do, so taking out an entire nation isn't off the table for me. And neither is starting a *series* of wars. Na mean?"

"Oh, stop it. You would never. You're too kind for that, Mr. Yuki."

"Only to you guys, though. Besides, who *isn't* nice to the people they fall in love with?"

"Tee hee. I see, I see. I suppose we'll just leave it at that, then."

"Wait, am I missing something here?"

"Nope. Not a thing."

She beamed cheerfully. Damn. She's too cute.

Nell and I continued our leisurely stroll through the forest before finally arriving at my destination, where Rir was waiting on standby.

"Whoooa. Look at your groupies, Rir. They sure are nuts for you, huh?"
"Wow, Rir! You're like a king!"
"Grr..."

Rir made a rumbling sound in his throat like he was chuckling sheepishly at our comments.

Right now, my pet was surrounded by other monsters—judging from the collars around their necks, they were almost certainly the elves' pets—waiting to serve him. A pecking order had already been established, it seemed. Even though he already had followers aplenty in the Demonic Forest, the fact that he'd gained more in a new location only served as further proof of his excellence.

"Still, though, that's a lotta pets. Is this just what elvish culture is like?"

This space was obviously one reserved for familiars. All kinds of monsters relaxed here, from tiny squirrel-like ones to massive wyvern-looking creatures. They all coexisted peacefully too. The elves must've had some kind of method for handling them.

"Yes, I believe so. They make monsters their familiars, turning them into combat assets. They have magical beast squadrons too. I saw them fighting, and goodness, they were *so* cool."

"Ooh. Wish I could've seen that too."

I petted Rir while we talked, then a voice suddenly called out to me.

"Ah, there you are. Hellooo, Yuki!"

"Hmm? Oh, it's you, Demon King. Sup?"

The Demon King appeared from the direction of the Enclave.

"Well, I wanted to *discuss* your remuneration for your *rescue* efforts, and I also have *another* job for you. I thought it *prudent* to approach you *before* your training with the previous *hero*, so here I am. Am I *intruding*, perhaps?"

"Sure are, pal. Shoo. Get outta here."

"Mr. Yuki, you shouldn't say things like that. After all, His Majesty the Demon

King himself ventured all the way out here specifically to talk to you. Please, Your Majesty, don't mind me."

"Ha ha! My apologies and my thanks. Yuki, the elves have already prepared your reward, so make sure to check that everything is in order later. Should you have any detailed negotiations to conduct, you may speak to my darling Naforazey. She's agreed to take charge in my stead."

"Cool. Will do."

"Now, as for the job I'd like you to perform, will you let me hire you again? As a mercenary."

Homie wore his usual shady smile. But his eyes were sharp and earnest as they stared at me. This guy was basically always shady and blackhearted, but he was still trusted and credible. Probably because of his face.

"Before we get into all that, let me make one thing clear: if you're asking me because you're counting on Lefi's power, I'm gonna ask you to stop right there. You try gunning for that, and not only will I say no, but my relationship with all of you will end on the spot too. I swore to myself that I would never let her power be used for things like that."

I knew damn well how rude I was being right now, but I had to make my position clear on this no matter what. The Demon King looked intrigued by my words.



"Oh, really? Might I ask why you feel that way?"

"Huh? Should be obvious, right? No one wants to make their loved ones kill people."

Lefi's power was enormous. If she ever felt like it, she could annihilate a country populated by any humanoid race in less than a day, transforming hundreds of kilometers into a barren wasteland scorched by her fire. I didn't want her forced into doing that. She already detested her power for being too much, which was yet another reason I didn't want her to use it.

I would do everything in *my* power to make sure Lefi and the rest of my family could just relax and enjoy their days. That was something I'd decided on a long time ago.

"While I'm at it, stop using Nell too. She's always been a soldier, so I know it's impossible for her to avoid combat, but anyone who tries to use her in some strange way as a tool of war will automatically be considered an enemy. That includes all of you."

"Mr. Yuki-"

"I'm sorry, Nell, but stay out of this. This is a line in the sand for me. Period. End of story."

When I cut her off with a harsher tone than usual, it seemed to get through to her because she closed her mouth, swallowing whatever it was she wanted to say. It didn't matter how much she cared for her homeland or how much she wanted to save it. I was even willing to play dirty and ask her what was more important, me or her country. I didn't care that the question was stupid and unfair. I'd protect her even if it made her hate me. Because I had my priorities straight.

Everything else was whatever, but I wouldn't change my mind on this even if the world turned upside down. This was my red line.

After I said all that, an expression of yearning transformed the Demon King's face, as if he was dazzled by something bright.

"You truly are a remarkable man. Be at ease. We don't have such intentions.

First, as far as Madam *Lefisios* is concerned, I *realize* what I'm about to say is *rude*, but she is *more* than *we* can handle. While I *am* in awe of her, that is *precisely* why even the *thought* of obtaining a mere *pittance* of her power *terrifies* me."

So, reading between the lines...the best course of action for him is to not get involved with an anomaly, huh? Makes sense. I mean, she's like a giant mountain range whose peaks aren't even visible.

"As for Nell, I'd be *happy* to speak to you in more *detail*, but I *promise* you she *won't* be treated poorly. I *genuinely* want to be *friends* with you for a long time, and *moreover*, since I'm well *aware* that Madam Lefisios is a part of your *inner* circle, I know for a *fact* that she would turn this continent into a *sea* of fire if I were to *blunder*. Don't you know *me* well enough by now to *know* I wouldn't be so *rash*?"

As the Demon *King*, Fynar was always careful about keeping his real feelings hidden. He needed to be, and I got that. But this? This was him speaking his truth.

"That so? All right, then. I guess I jumped to conclusions, so that's my bad."

"Not at *all*. I'd be *inclined* to think the *same* in your shoes. But *my*, you really *are* amazing, Yuki. If it were *us*, we would find it *presumptuous* to ever worry about Madam Lefisios. It's *obvious* how much you *love* your wives, hm?"

"Yeah, of course I do. But I guess if I didn't have a demon lord's power, I'd probably be relying on Lefi's."

It made me feel kinda embarrassed to hear him say all that in a heartfelt, admiring tone, so all I could do was respond awkwardly while rubbing the back of my neck.

"No, I'm sure you would say the same thing even if you weren't a demon lord. I have a strong feeling your wives already know that better than I do, hm?"

"We certainly do. I, for one, think he would try to protect us even if he were weaker than me."

The Demon King grinned at Nell like a Cheshire cat, and she responded with a smile of her own.

"Anyway, let's get back to the topic at hand. You said you want me to work for you again?"

"Yes. I'd like you to *help* us whenever we're *understaffed*. And Nell, I'd like you to be our *intermediary*."

"Me?"

The Demon King nodded in response to Nell's question.

"Correct. Whenever I have a job for Yuki, I'll first inform Reyd, who will then contact you. From that point onward, you will be in charge of delivering the message to him. This way, you'll occasionally be able to return home even when you're on assignment. Ingenious, yes?"

"Yes! Thank you so much for your consideration, Your Majesty!"

"Ha ha! *No*, no. If you *must* thank someone, it should be *Reyd*. This was *his* idea."

Well, dang. Thanks from me too, then. In other words, it would be me instead of Nell charging into battle. As long as her safety was guaranteed, I was down for whatever. Mm-hmm.

"Okay, understood. I'm in. You know I would've said yes if you'd just been honest from the get-go about not planning to take advantage of my wives. I'm trusting you on that front, by the way. Don't let me down."

"You're a *lifesaver*. With an *ally* as powerful as *you* on our side, we have the strength of a *hundred* men."

The Demon King sighed quietly in relief when he heard my answer.

I just had a brilliant idea. I'd expand my dungeon's territory as far as Arsil, the Kingdom of Alisia's royal capital, and install a door there as soon as possible. Once I did, Nell could stay as long as she wanted at home, and I could help her in a flash too. My domain already stretched pretty far into the outside world from the southern area of the Demonic Forest, so by my estimate, I'd be able to connect it there after another two months of work.

Yo, you bastard fiends. I have no idea what the hell you're thinking or what your goal is. I'm sure you all have some deep-rooted beliefs. But since you're my

enemies, you will perish. Sorry, but it's time for you to make your exit.



The Reauxgard Empire, situated on the southern end of the continent. At a fort near the border, two military camps faced off against each other. One consisted of the fiends, led by Gozim, enemy of the Demon King. And the other, imperial soldiers under the command of the Reauxgard Empire's twenty-second emperor, Shendra Gandr Reauxgard.

Behind each leader stood his troops, the atmosphere among them so grim that it seemed as if they were on the brink of war. The Demon King and his allies suspected the two sides of being in league with each other, but anyone unaware of this would think battle was about to commence at any moment based on the heavy tension simmering in the air.

Gozim, his gaze sharp like he was already fighting, questioned the other man.

"That wasn't the plan we agreed to. I thought we were supposed to be working together, but it seems I was wrong."

Emperor Shendra, a young man in his midthirties, replied to Gozim with an expression conveying his displeasure.

"Kindly refrain from placing the blame on us. The Undead Dragon *you* unleashed with such confidence was easily defeated. Now that the conditions have changed, so too must our tactics. It's only natural."

"You and your bloody blathering! You know there was still time. *You* were supposed to attack from the flank. But you never arrived. Do you have any idea how many of my men died because of your inaction?!"

One of the bases that existed in the territory ruled by Demon King Fynar—in other words, the demon world. The southeastern outpost. The base, which had been given such a plain, practical name, was located near the border with humans' lands.

It had fallen under the fiends' surprise ambush, and they had continued to push their frontline advantage toward the fortress farther ahead, the southeastern headquarters of the demon army. However, the quick defeat of the Undead Dragon had meant that Fynar could act freely again, and thanks to

his precise orders, his people had regained their morale and momentum, and had pushed back the fiends.

At that time, the imperial soldiers meant to be deployed as reinforcements hadn't arrived, and the fiends had retreated, suffering many more casualties than expected. Currently, a lull existed between the fort where the southeastern headquarters was located and the site of the southeastern outpost.

"I fail to see how that's my problem. Your men were just weak. Besides, it's not *our* fault, since *we* sent a messenger beforehand."

One of Gozim's eyebrows rose in response to Shendra's derisive tone before he grabbed the other man by the collar and raised him high in the air with one arm.

"Don't get too big for your britches, whelp."

Instantly, the imperial soldiers on standby behind the emperor brandished their weapons, and the fiends did the same at almost the same time. Both sides pointed their weapons at each other. The tense atmosphere became explosive.

Shendra merely snorted contemptuously and focused his piercing gaze on Gozim.

"If you want to kill me, do it. Though be prepared to die here yourself as well."

Gozim said nothing. He didn't bother concealing his disgust as he casually tossed Shendra away, releasing his grip on him. After staggering a few steps, an unfazed Shendra straightened his clothing before speaking.

"Lest we forget, you and yours act for your sake, and me and mine do so for ours. We are *not* allies, therefore we do *not* help one another. It just so happens that our enemy is the same. We *both* agreed to these conditions."

"Bah. So we did. But you will keep in close contact. At this rate, we won't be able to tell the enemy apart, and we'll end up killing other humans needlessly."

"Fine. We have no desire to lose the war either. So long as you do your job, we'll do ours."

The talks ended with a conversation that left neither side feeling any sense of trust for the other.

Things are going as planned.

So thought Gozim.

For now, the situation is proceeding as anticipated.

So thought Shendra.

Their thoughts aligned, but by no means in the same direction.

## **Side Story 1: The Dungeon Around That Time**

While Yuki and the others were in the Elvish Enclave, Lew and Leila chatted as they did chores like usual in the real throne room.

"My lord always gets wrapped up in dangerous situations, huh? I hope they're all safe..."

"If the danger remains even with Lady Lefi present, then this world will have fallen into hell itself. With that said, I completely understand what you're saying."

"Gosh, the world outside really is too dangerous."

Ever since they'd started living in this dungeon, they had never needed to worry about being in danger. The Demonic Forest was one of the few unexplored areas in the world. It was an extremely dangerous place with hundreds of powerful monsters roaming about. Yet they always laughed at the thought that it was the least dangerous place either of them had ever lived.

Unfortunately, the world outside came with many perils. Monsters were, of course, one such hazard, along with disasters and famine. Then, there were the humanoid races, just like their own.

Clan Groll, which Lew had belonged to all her life before moving here, had its fair share of enemies in other villages and races. The ovine settlement where Leila had grown up was relatively stable, but that didn't mean its people didn't have conflicts with other races too. And the maids had even heard about Iluna's reason for living here: her encounter with human slavers. The humans hunting other races for slaves was just another problem of the racial conflicts.

This dungeon was an exception to the fact that the mere existence of a diversity of races resulted in major conflicts. Yuki and the others had gone to Nell's aid, but they both understood that they were all now embroiled in a conflict caused by fundamental differences in race.

And so, the two young women worried for the others. They both knew very

well that no matter how powerful someone was, conflict with others often had a negative effect on one's mind. They also knew that though Iluna and the rest of the little-girl gang pretended to be fine on the outside, they were, in fact, a little anxious on the inside. Finally, despite not knowing the particulars, they knew that something bad was happening.

Both of their expressions darkened slightly at the loathsome topic.

"You know what? Just because we're stuck waiting at home doesn't mean we should *just* worry. That's not good for us either. When the four of them get back, we need to be our usual energetic selves, ready to greet them with warm hearts!"

"Lew... You're absolutely right. Tee hee. I truly do adore that part of you."

"J-Jeez, Leila, give a girl a little warning. But also stop it, because you're embarrassing me."

Leila chuckled even as her blushing, bashful best friend's mere presence comforted her. Then, she continued speaking.

"I have an idea, then. Why don't we practice a delicious new recipe until they return? Since Master Demon Lord created the pantry equipped with the magical storage before his departure, the ingredients won't spoil for roughly a week. So if we make it in advance, we can serve it whenever they return."

"Fantastic idea! The tastier the food, the better the mood. We'll be ready to welcome them with open arms!"

Two young voices then joined their conversation.

"We heard you guys!"

"Heard you!"

When they turned to look, they found Iluna and Shii standing there with their arms folded imposingly. The wraith sisters mimicked their stances as they floated in the air, daring smiles on their faces.

"So we'll help too! We want Yukiki and the others to take it easy when they come back!"

"We gonna calm they hearts!"

The wraith triplets nodded enthusiastically, as if saying they agreed with the others' remarks. Lew and Leila's eyes widened for an instant before delighted smiles spread unconsciously across their faces. They were pleased by the little girls' thoughtfulness.

"Tee hee, understood. Then let's all do our very best, hm?"

"With Iluna and the rest of the little-girl gang by our side, we're invincible! Especially since those four, especially the adults, go crazy over how darn cute you all are!"

Whenever a crisis occurred, these ladies always stayed behind in the dungeon, waiting for the others to return safely. Sometimes, it was harder to just believe and wait than to actually be in the thick of things. But their optimism never diminished. As young as they were, even Iluna and the rest of the little-girl gang understood that it wasn't good to just be anxious when they had family members out there going through a much more difficult time than them.

"Miss Leila, what are you thinking of making?"

"I thought I'd try a few tweaks to improve the flavor of the food—mainly their favorites. Lady Lefi enjoys meat dishes at large, while Nell likes refreshing salads with just a smidgen of meat. Perhaps a bacon salad, then? I'm sure En will be fine with meat as well, and as for Master Demon Lord...he eats anything with gusto, but I wonder what his favorite food actually is."

"Oh, I know! A little while ago, Yukiki said he was in the mood for fresh sushi, so how about that for him? He also said preparing raw fish is hard, but I bet you know just how to do it right, Miss Leila!"

"You're spot on, Iluna. My lord isn't much of a picky eater, but he definitely loves his seafood, huh? I agree with this plan of attack."

"Oh, oh! I has idea too! I think Hamburg steak good for meat dish! Lady Lefifi and EnEn both like!"

Their chat continued for quite some time after thanks to their powerful collective desire to feed their loved ones delicious food.

## **Chapter 2: The Circle of Life and Death**

The news sent a shock wave throughout the entire continent.

The Reauxgard Empire had joined hands with the fiends, calling themselves the Human-Demon Axis. Their first order of business had been to declare war on the Kingdom of Alisia as well as the demon world governed by the Demon King Fynar.

In response, Reyd, the king of Alisia, and Demon King Fynar had embraced their new allies, the elves led by Queen Naforazey, and announced the formation of the Raceless Allies. They had asserted their firm resolve to resist the Human-Demon Axis, preached the dangers of the Coalition Forces, and asked all people, regardless of race, to side with them.

The peoples of the surrounding nations, city-states, and other political units had initially been perplexed by the fact that this was not a battle between races, but rather one in which both sides comprised a mix of them. However, they'd come to understand that the scale of the conflict meant they couldn't simply ignore it, and so they'd started to ally themselves with one faction or the other, directly and indirectly.

Thus began a great war between major powers, embroiling the entire continent.



"Hmm... As I expected, the countries that were directly threatened sided with us."

Back in the Kingdom of Alisia, King Reyd pored over information in his study. Calling the process "smooth" would have been an overstatement, but the original objective of forming an alliance with the demons and elves had been completed without incident.

Although a full-fledged front against the Reauxgard Empire and the fiends,

who had together dubbed themselves the Human-Demon Axis, didn't yet exist, both sides were clearly at war. As a result, he had received letters of intent requesting to join forces from countries long threatened with invasion by them. Furthermore, the demons led by the Demon King and the elves had already formed a separate pact with the dwarves and therianthropes through the Four Races Alliance, so as allies, their participation in the coming war was already a given. This was the general composition of the Raceless Allies.

They would likely have enough forces to deal with the enemy. However, at the same time, skirmishes continued with several potential enemy nations. The harassment itself had actually been ongoing since the civil unrest breakout in Alisia, but the frequency had increased recently.

"What a thorn in my side..."

The most troubling aspect of this situation was that these countries didn't outwardly display any hostile intentions. They were careful about containing their aggressions to harassment only, ostensibly refusing to take sides, and only issuing insincere statements such as "We are deeply concerned about the loss of human life." Given all this, the nations couldn't be definitively regarded as enemies, so they had been largely left alone. That was where the current situation stood.

With the war against the Human-Demon Axis fast approaching, he simply could not afford to waste resources on unnecessary fronts. And yet, there was every chance of them colluding with the Coalition Forces at some stage while Alisia fought, after which they would likely declare war and ambush Alisia from the flanks. This scenario would cause even more problems, so Reyd knew he needed to deal with them once and for all someday. But now was not the time, as his preparations remained incomplete. He intended to consult with the astute Demon King Fynar to determine the appropriate timing.

The alliance with the elves hadn't raised much opposition inside his country on account of their long-standing relations with humans. However, a few voices had strenuously dissented against an alliance with the demons, who had been their enemies for many years. Reyd had forced every last one of them to yield, though. While it wasn't an edict he'd been keen on issuing, he had done so anyway. The transition to a wartime regime was completed without delay, and

with the cooperation of the church, the unrest among the people was contained. This was a benefit of circumstances becoming more open after both the civil war and the hero uproar had been resolved with the help of Demon Lord Yuki.

If he had one concern, it would be the commensurate increase in the Church's authority. But Carlotta Demeyere, the knight commander of The Holy Order of Faldienne, whose power was rapidly growing within the organization, had fully aligned herself with him. Thanks to that, as long as she held the true power, problems were unlikely to arise.

Alisia's prospects for the war efforts were promising. The members of their alliance were also working together smoothly.

"With all this, conditions should be in our favor even if war breaks out, but...something still feels wrong."

War was diplomacy. One side demanded that the other accept something, and if it couldn't be achieved through dialogue, force was used. In other words, since their enemy had launched this war, it must have meant that they had a goal they wanted to achieve. The reason, however, was unclear.

They had received a completely empty declaration of war, like one heard somewhere before, but Reyd and his allies didn't know what the other side wanted of them. If their ambition was simply to expand their territory, then the answer was easy. But the Kingdom of Alisia didn't even share a border with the Reauxgard Empire.

Factually speaking, the only nation in the region capable of confronting the empire head-on was Alisia. Yet several other countries separated the two major powers. And even before the oncoming war, these nations had allied themselves with the kingdom because of the constant threat of invasion from the empire.

To completely bypass those states and declare war on his country by name was doing things out of order. Added to this was their sudden cooperation with the fiends. There was something eerie about not knowing what his enemies were thinking.

Whatever the case, 'tis not worth ruminating on now.

Reyd sighed heavily and pushed the obsessive thoughts to the back of his mind. Though he would continue to collaborate with his allies and gather information, right now, it was more important to clear the huge amount of paperwork in front of him than to ponder questions with no answers.

To reduce the damage to his allies, if only marginally.

To end this war as soon as possible and create peace without barriers between races.

"In that sense, then, this war may prove beneficial."

This war would see alliances across races form on a scale never before witnessed in history. By standing shoulder to shoulder and risking their lives together, they would forge a sense of fellowship as comrades in arms. This would do far more to deepen relations between races than if the state itself were to push the same agenda through policy.

Even though people's lives are at stake, I can still think along such lines. Is this the mind of an unscrupulous politician?

Alone in the room, he let out a bitter, self-deprecating chuckle at the thought.



After finishing my job at the Elvish Enclave, I went back to the dungeon and started making preparations for another trip. The Demon King was trying to come up with a way to end the coming war quickly and decisively because he had no desire to prolong it, so he'd told me to be ready to ship out the minute Nell contacted me. And knowing him, if he said he planned on ending it quickly and decisively, that was exactly what would happen. It was why I'd decided to use every means at my disposal, including taking my pets with me.

As long as we managed to kill that redheaded son of a bitch who led the fiends, then assuming Nell was kept out of it, the Reauxgard Empire or whatever the hell they called themselves could keep fighting the war for all I cared—was what I wished I could say. I'd gotten way too tangled up in this world's goings-on to just dismiss the situation so easily and bury my head in the sand. Nothing had changed about my top priority being my family, but now, I had a lot of other folks whose deaths would also leave me with a guilty

conscience.

Plus, I had one more thing on my mind.

"Well, I do what I want, and I'll just keep doing exactly that."

If I didn't want them to die, I just had to make sure they didn't. So if it meant keeping my family out of danger, I was more than willing to help out. I'd destroy the enemy. Nothing more, nothing less.

While I was busy prepping everything, Lefi suddenly called out to me.

"Yuki."

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"Wh-What? Where the heck did that come from?"

Her unexpected words threw me for a loop, and my confusion was obvious in my tone when I asked her that. Even then, though, her expression remained serious as she continued.

"In light of Nell's involvement in the situation, I understand all too well that we cannot turn a blind eye to the coming war being waged by the various peoples. However, know that just as you act for our sakes, we, too, are always thinking of what we can do for you."

I stayed silent, just listening attentively to her.

"I said it once before, did I not? For you and everyone else here, I would be willing to destroy the world. Should you wish it, I will burn any nation to ash. If it is for you, I do not mind wielding my power. So I want you to know there is no reason for you to put yourself in jeopardy deliberately."

All I could do was smile ruefully in response to her very unsettling but also very thoughtful words.

"No doubt having you help us would end this war in an instant. But even knowing that, I still want you to wait here for me. If shit *really* hits the fan and we don't have any other choice, I might end up relying on you anyway. But I wanna do what I can on my own while it's still possible. Because I love you too."

"How unfair of you to phrase your argument thus."

"Hello, pot. I'm kettle. How do you do?"

Grinning, I shrugged at her.

"Okay, how 'bout this: why don't I tell you what I'm thinking? Here goes, Lefi, so listen good. I'm helping the Demon King and his allies not just for Nell, but for Iluna and the others too."

"Hmm? What do you mean by 'Iluna and the others'?" Lefi looked puzzled.

"Well, Shii and the wraith triplets are dungeon summons, and En is originally an inorganic substance, so I honestly have no idea how they're going to grow up. But as far as Iluna specifically goes, as a child of one of the races of mankind, she'll have to leave the dungeon someday to learn about all kinds of things. We'll have to let her go so she can do that."

"Hmm... I suppose. Living things cannot grow without experience. And so it should be for the young."

She was a hundred percent right. Living things couldn't grow without experience, and just staying in the dungeon wouldn't allow them to learn much. Of course, I'd do everything in my power to make sure she was protected when she left, but I just couldn't let her spend her entire life here.

"Yup. The Demon King and his faction wanna end the racial hostilities and deepen relations to the point that no one cares about anyone else's race anymore. If they can make that happen, the world will expand, and it should become a little safer too. So when it comes time for Iluna and the others to leave, we can let them go with less worry, right?"

Protect the children. Protect their futures. In the past, I'd thought those words were lies. As a kid, whenever I'd heard grown-ups say stuff like "We're doing it to protect the children's bright futures," it'd always made me suspicious of them, and I remembered having thought all kinds of nasty things in response. Like "Yeah right. I call bullshit." Or "We're all on our own, so stop saying such condescending crap. It's gross."

With the passage of time, though, I found myself in the role of a guardian, which was precisely why I could say this now. We *had* been protected. We *had* become adults thanks to the huge amounts of effort that adults had put in behind the scenes and the help we'd received from them every day.

So I had to protect the little-girl gang's futures. That went double for Iluna, the lone member of mankind among them. And I had the power to do so. Not just the power of force, but the power of fate too. If I were still the me from my previous life when I'd been a normal human, it might not've been possible, but as I was now, I could at least use that power to change the world. The current me should have enough power to make an arrogant thought like that a reality.

Long story short, what I wanted to say was that while my reason for helping the Demon King did have to do with Nell, it also had to do with the little girls' futures. And I was confident that blackhearted pretty boy would do a damn fine job.

"Now you know why I thought having the Demon King's side win this war would be a huge plus for me. Although I do despise the enemy too. I know that's petty, but I don't care. Not to mention that, um...if I can help make the world a better place now, it'd mean having a good environment for our future kid to grow up in."

For whatever reason, I felt kinda embarrassed saying that last part. Judging from the sudden blush on her face, my words had caught Lefi off guard too.

"I-I see... Haphazard as you usually are in the way you do things, Yuki, I am surprised you have mulled this over so deeply."

"Excuse you. I always plan things out carefully and thoroughly."

We both bantered on purpose to hide our mutual embarrassment.

"Uh, anyway, that's why I'm taking all the pets with me. Hence I want you to protect the dungeon. Despite everything I said, my top priority is still everyone's safety. That hasn't changed."

"Yes, leave it to me. Who or whatever comes, they will be naught but ash when I finish with them. In any case, I understand your reasoning. However, do not forget, Yuki, that we are willing to do anything for your sake. We will put

forth every effort for you. This comes not just from me, but from all of us. It is our collective will."

"Got it. Thanks."

With those words alone, I can do anything.



"Hmm... It seems the Reauxgard Empire invented technology capable of controlling monsters."

Demon King Fynar murmured to himself as he read through one report after another that had been brought by his subordinates.

At present, his highest priority was gathering every last bit of information related to the Reauxgard Empire. The country had surfaced as his newest enemy. Geographically, it was situated a fair distance from the demon world, so there had been no contact between the two until now. This meant that even the information Fynar had on it amounted to little more than general knowledge.

He'd begun collecting intel on them at a rapid pace because he'd realized that he couldn't devise a proper strategy otherwise. Frankly speaking, though, he was half impressed that the nation had been able to conceal its presence for so long. During Fynar's rule of the demon world, the fiends' influence had increased suddenly, which had led him to investigate whether they'd had help from other quarters. But at no point during his investigation had the name of the Reauxgard Empire appeared. Not even a shadow of a trace.

Although he didn't want to toot his own horn, he fully believed in the information-gathering ability of the secret spy unit he'd established. In his opinion, they were so good that they could easily contend for the number one or number two spot on the continent as far as intelligence data went. And yet, he hadn't been aware of this country's existence.

Of course, now that he'd started making an earnest effort at the task, muchneeded data was coming in. However, it was clear that the country had been very careful to block the flow of information and prevent their relationship with the fiends from coming to light. "I really thought we had the military advantage, but it's obvious they augmented their strength through the combination of monsters and artificial Undead. I wonder, then, if the Reauxgard Empire is the source of the latter."

The weapon the elves referred to as "mutant-type Undead," which Fynar and his people called "artificial Undead." His subordinate nodded in agreement with his remark.

"It's likely, my liege. Before the fiends began deploying the artificial Undead, we had confirmed sightings of similar Undead in a country near the Empire. They were too crude to be effective as true weapons, but we believe they were being tested as such."

"I see. Meaning there's a *chance* the fiends themselves managed the *improvements* to the creatures. *Necromancy*, eh? That *must* be the *key*."

Artificial Undead had been turning up everywhere. The latest example was the Undead Dragon unleashed upon the Elvish Enclave. Whether operated by the Reauxgard Empire or the fiends, Fynar had no doubt that the Human-Demon Axis possessed a technology that went far beyond typical necromancy.

An army capable of fighting even in death was a dream come true for any statesman. It would never tire or die, only work obediently until it broke down. Perhaps one could even say that an army of the dead was infinitely easier to utilize than an army of the living.

However, the magic of necromancy was a double-edged sword. Forbidden worldwide because of its cruelty in using the dead as weapons, it would, to no one's surprise, cause a country to be sanctioned by its neighbors if used in war. But it was plain to Fynar that none of this mattered to the enemy. They had likely dismissed these concerns with a laugh. After all, ethics were easily blown away in the face of national interests.

"All right, I'd *like* for you to *prioritize* gathering any and *all* information related to the Undead. I want to make *sure* we have a *variety* of countermeasures prepared. Any *updates* on the *movements* of the Human-Demon Axis?"

"Well, about that... They seem to still be in the Reauxgard Empire."

Fynar twitched an eyebrow in response to the bewilderment his subordinate

couldn't conceal.

"They haven't yet begun their march even though they've already declared war on us?"

A declaration of war signaled that the enemy's preparations were complete. But they still hadn't advanced. A baffling move, the intention of which he couldn't read.

"Correct, my liege. Imperial forces are gathered in Reauxgard's capital of Galia, but there have been no movements otherwise."

"What about their borders?"

"They seemed to have tightened their defenses. However, the additional security hasn't much changed their usual sparse formations. In short, it doesn't look like a wartime formation at all."

Fynar contemplated this information silently for some time. What he'd just heard was completely nonsensical, which made him suspect it was a deception.

"Evidently, the enemy wants to *limit* the battlefield to the *imperial* capital for some reason. They're *clearly* inviting us to them, *no*? Perhaps *that* is why they declared war in the *first* place."

There was nothing to gain from conducting a war in their own nation, and in its capital no less. It was a tactic that made him question their sanity. But no one instigated a war in order to lose. Therefore, they must have had an extremely good reason for accepting their overwhelming disadvantage.

"Then their goal was to declare war and amass troops in a specific area?"

"Frankly, I don't know why, so I'll leave it aside for now. But their slack borders are a blatant sign, taunting us with an implied, 'Hurry up and storm our country already.' The fact that you brought this information to me confirms its veracity, doesn't it?"

"We checked it repeatedly, so I would have to agree with your conclusion."

"In which case, the enemy is eager to clash with us within their own borders. I think it's likely that is why they started this war. This leads me to my next question: what are the dear fiends up to?"

"The standoff at the southeastern post continued for a while, but they deployed artificial Undead to buy themselves enough time to retreat. Additionally, we found the area they'd been using as their base completely deserted, save for a few civilians. We suspect they've already rendezvoused with their allies in the Reauxgard Empire."

Fynar lapsed once more into a deep, thoughtful silence, his vacant stare making it impossible to glean where he was looking. A few minutes passed like this before his eyes dropped to a letter lying on top of his desk. Then, as if arriving at some conclusion in his mind, he spoke quietly, his voice almost a whisper.

"Well, whether I believe it or not, it's too late now, isn't it?"



"Hmm? Forgive me, my liege, but did you say something?"

"Yes. I've made my decision. We will march on the imperial capital."

His king's words made the subordinate's mind go blank for a second. When he regained his composure, he rushed to fashion a response.

"B-But, Your Majesty! There's a high likelihood of this being a trap!"

"Likelihood'? It's more likely a *certainty*, no? Even *so*, we will be *proceeding*. I'd rather end this war *quickly* than have it *drag* on, and if that means *we* take the *initiative*, so be it. If the enemy is *prepared* for a short battle, then I see no reason *not* to accommodate them, hm? *Kindly* make the necessary *preparations* for the expedition."

"U-Understood."

"One *more* thing. Contact Nell and *tell* her we need her to summon *Yuki*. What else, what *else*... Ah, *yes*, reach out to the *ovine* race as well."



Nell'd gotten in touch with me. The war had finally started. In order to take part in it, I was currently heading to the southern border of the Kingdom of Alisia, specifically to a remote town located in the opposite direction of the Demonic Forest. Until now, I'd disguised myself as a human and slunk into this country on the sly. I didn't have to bother with that anymore, though, and was riding Rir boldly through. En and my other pets were with me on the journey. Nobody stopped us and it felt freaking great.

Well, the soldiers on the road—apparently, the king had declared martial law, so no civilians were on it—would all look at us with a mixture of alarm and fear. But there were no problems on that front. They seemed to understand that we weren't the enemy, so they never did anything in particular to us. They must've already been notified that I was coming.

It was evening by the time we arrived at our destination. Alfiro, the frontier settlement near the Demonic Forest, was more like a citadel city, but this one wasn't nearly as imposing. Actually, that wasn't totally true at the moment on account of the large number of soldiers stationed here, which made the

atmosphere feel pretty tense. But its defensive walls were pretty simple, and they weren't that thick either.

Based on what I'd been told, the neighboring country had been a friend of Alisia's for many years. So instead of fortifying the border here, the kingdom had made it easy to travel to, from, and through this town to facilitate trade between the two nations. For the time being, it was acting as the temporary headquarters for the Raceless Allies, which the Demon King had decided to name our side in response to the enemy calling itself the Human-Demon Axis. Even just a quick survey of the area around us showed me not just human soldiers, but demon and elvish ones too, all running around frantically, getting everything ready for the coming military expedition.

When I looked farther ahead, I saw dwarves and therianthropes. I knew very well of the alliance they'd formed with Fynar in the demon world a while back, so I figured they were here as reinforcements.

Amid the hustle and bustle, as well as the fascinated stares we were attracting in droves, I heard a voice I most definitely recognized.

"Ah! Mr. Yuki!"

"Nell!"

She called out to us with a wave.

"We've been awaiting your arrival! En, you're here too! Thank you for always protecting him!"

"Of...course. Where Master goes, I go."

En nodded aggressively, clearly raring to kick ass and take names. I couldn't help chuckling ruefully at her attitude. The truth was, I'd seriously debated whether or not I should take her into a war with me. But then she'd gotten mad at me for it. And hoo boy, she had *not* held back.

She'd made sure I knew what her true nature was. She might've looked like a little kid, she'd said, but in reality, she was a weapon, and weapons were designed to protect their masters by destroying enemies. That meant her top priority was to protect me, her master, as my weapon. She hadn't wanted me to misunderstand any of that. She hadn't wanted me to take away her reason

for existing.

Her eyes had bored into mine when she'd expressed her quiet but fierce intent. I'd figured out right then and there that I wasn't going to win the argument. I often had this thought at home, but jeez, the ladies in my family were very, *very* cool. Women really broke their backs carrying the world, huh?

"His Majesty and the others are waiting over there, so follow me. Oh, before that, there's someone I want to introduce you to, Mr. Yuki!"

"Yeah? Who?"

Nell nodded enthusiastically in response to my question.

"You'll never guess. It's Leila's teacher!"



After I instructed my pets to wait obediently outside the town for a little while, Nell led me to a spot the soldiers were using as a rest area. There with them was an elderly woman with sheep horns drinking what looked like tea.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. Fascinating. The young hero here told me all about you, but you really *are* a demon lord. That wee thing by your side doesn't seem to be a normal child either. I can see why she'd be intrigued by her as well."

Those were the first words out of her mouth when she saw us. The way she scrutinized us so closely almost made me feel like she was observing us cell by cell. But even though I was unnerved by the uncomfortable sensation, I still greeted her.

"Uhhh... Hello, I'm Demon Lord Yuki. This is En. I hear you're Leila's teacher?" "Hello...granny."

"Mm, yes, yes, hello. How rude of me not to introduce myself. I'm Eldgalia of the ovine race. I've heard a lot about you from this hero and Emyu. Thank you for looking after my disciple, by the way."

She gently patted En's head, which just so happened to be at the perfect height for the old woman.

Emyu, Emyu... Oh, right, the kid we met in the demon world who's like Leila's

little sister. They weren't blood relatives, but that didn't stop them from having a really close bond.

Name: Eldgalia

Race: Ovine

Level: 69

Titles: Researcher of Truth, Witch of Illusion, Illusion

Master

Based on what Analysis told me, she was your typical conjuring-type old woman. Really strong too. I recalled Lew mentioning how the ovine race was a clan of scholars, which now made a lot of sense. Apparently, all of them were basically like Leila.

According to Nell, Demon King Fynar had summoned Eldgalia as one of a few extra pinch hitters for our side.

"Nah, more like *she*'s the one taking care of *us*. Seriously, we wouldn't be able to function without her. That's how vital she is to our family."

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. That child always was very good at taking care of others, but the fact that she's stayed for so long in one place means she's taken quite a shine to you all, doesn't it? And knowing her, I very much doubt she's lost her zeal for research."

"She sure hasn't. Leila's pretty chill usually, but if something rouses her curiosity, well, she goes nuts, and everybody else better watch out. Know what I mean?"

An apologetic expression clouded her face at my words.

"Ahhh... I'm sorry about that. Our clan has more or less always been highly inquisitive, but this trait has been especially strong in Leila ever since she was a child. Everyone in our village was amused by her nature, so they taught her many things, which only intensified her idiosyncrasies particular to our race. It made her a bit of a handful even by our standards."

When Leila's teacher sighed sorrowfully, Nell and I glanced pointedly at each other, exchanging similar rueful smiles.

"It's fine. Not like having a strong sense of curiosity is a bad thing. Plus, she never does anything to bother us anyway. Right, Nell?"

"Agreed. Leila's a wonderful, reliable person, Madam Eldgalia."

"Well, as her teacher, it makes me happy to hear you say so. Despite her difficult personality and imperfections, she *is* a good girl, so please love her well, as any husband should."

"Yeah— Wait, no! H-Hold your horses, Miss Leila's Teacher. Leila and I aren't married."

"Oh? You're not? From what the hero told me, I simply assumed she was one of your many wives."

The ovine elderly woman tilted her head in confusion.

"Um, Mrs. Nell? Care to explain?"

"N-No, there's a misunderstanding. Leila is essentially family to us, yes? And that's how I explained things to her. Tee hee hee."

Nell tried to talk her way out of this sticky situation. Shiiit. How the hell am I supposed to be angry with her when she's so damn cute? Although the truth was that I basically thought of Leila as family too, so technically Nell's explanation wasn't wrong.

"Uhhh... Leila's a live-in employee, so there's nothing romantic between us. I mean, we do get along and all, but like..."

"Good grief, that girl... In any case, I think I understand. Make sure you visit our village sometime soon, hm? There's much I want to say to Leila, and we would welcome you with open arms too."

"Oh, sure. I'd love to."

As we chatted, a soldier jogged up to us.

"Lord Yuki and Lady Eldgalia, yes? The leaders are asking for you."

"Hmm, hmm, l'd have liked to converse a bit more, you know. Oh well, I

suppose there's no helping it. Yes, yes, I'll be on my way now."

"Nell, look after En, please. En, wait with Nell for a bit, okay?"

"You got it."

"l...will."

Leila's teacher and I left them behind as the soldier led us to a conspicuously extravagant tent. Inside, sitting around a simple round table, were the various races' leaders holding what looked to be a war council. Demon King Fynar, King Reyd of Alisia, and Elf Queen Naforazey were there, along with Dwarf King Dodah and Beast Lord Vardroi Gallad. Like with the Elf Queen, I knew those last two pretty well from my first visit to the demon world. From what I could see, the Demon King was leading the meeting, which tracked since everyone acknowledged his intelligence.

When we walked into the tent, they all glanced briefly at us, but none of them said anything because they were in the middle of a very important discussion. As much as I wanted to greet them, I decided it'd be best to save the hellos and how do you dos for later. Instead, Leila's teacher and I just sat down in chairs near the edge of the tent and began listening.



This man is keeping secrets from us.

Naforazey the Elf Queen had that thought as she stared at the Demon King facilitating the meeting.

"It seems the enemy has laid a trap for us in the imperial capital of Galia and is waiting to ambush us. In short, they're poised for a quick, decisive battle. I want to take advantage of this chance. That's why I had you all prepare and assemble here."

"Why don't we simply besiege them and cut off their supply lines? We can win while barely lifting a finger. After all, we have the military force to accomplish just that, do we not?"

Naforazey questioned him.

"You're not wrong. But as I just said, I think it's in our best interest to end this

as *quickly* as possible. A *long* war will *directly* whittle away national power and *ultimately* prove fruitless. What's *more*, since it was *them* who declared war on *us*, we can *assume* that they've made all their *preparations* for war already."

"Let me see if I understand you correctly, then. Even if we demonstrate our willingness to engage in a protracted war, they already have measures ready to deal with that possibility?"

The Demon King nodded in response to the king of Alisia, Reyd.

"That's how I see it. They either have enough resources to withstand a prolonged war head-on or have designed a very effective trap to lure us in. Whatever the case, at the very least, they are a major force on the continent with the power to match that status, so I don't doubt they can endure an extended conflict. If that's how things stand, then I'd like to accept their generous invitation, even if it means rushing. I have no desire to fight a war that lasts a decade or two."

"Well, I say aye ta that. B'sides, 'tis nae in a dwarf's nature ta wait for life ta 'appen ta us!"

"While I ain't too keen on havin' our strategy decided by temperament or the enemy, I guess on this score, I agree with the Dwarf King. Though we beast folk can contribute fightin' power to the cause, there's no denyin' we're the poorest in terms o' supplies. We won't be able to keep up if this war drags on too long. And even if we receive aid, ain't like supplies are endless neither, eh?"

The Dwarf King and Beast Lord each expressed his opinion in favor of Fynar's proposition. But Naforazey remained perplexed. She just could not shake the feeling that there was something wrong with the Demon King's attitude. She chose not to mention her suspicion, however, and simply continued listening to the discussion.

Despite not having any grounds for her unease, she had realized that something wasn't right because they'd known each other for so long. The Demon King almost certainly had another reason for wanting a quick, decisive battle that he wasn't disclosing. Perhaps he had some information from a source he couldn't divulge to the other leaders. Normally, concealing information during an important meeting to decide strategy would be difficult

to explain away if accused of betrayal. But even if he was a Blackheart, Fynar was still a man of integrity.

Moreover, he was an incredibly intelligent man with a mind that worked at twice, thrice the speed of the average person's. So Naforazey kept her silence. If Fynar had decided to conceal the information because it shouldn't be revealed for whatever reason, then it was best to defer to his judgment on the matter.

"Of course, we *can't* just rush into a trap and end up completely *annihilated*, so I've prepared a *countermeasure*. Madam *Eldgalia*, *Yuki*, this is where *you* two come in."

The second the Demon King said our names, everyone participating in the war council looked at us. Since I already knew the others, I also looked meaningfully at Leila's teacher. She figured out why I was doing that and what I meant, so she went first.

"I'm Eldgalia of the ovine race. Outside our village, I'm known as the Witch of Illusion."

"The Witch of Illusion?! Demon King, you certainly summoned incredible people to assist us, hm?"

"The Witch of Illusion... Though I am human, I, too, know that name."

The Elf Queen and the king of Alisia commented in surprise when Leila's teacher introduced herself.

Based on their reactions, she must be pretty famous, huh? Well, I guess it makes sense considering she's Leila's teacher. If anything, it'd be weird if they didn't know who she was.

"As I'm *sure* you're all already *aware*, the *ovine* race is the *best* at analyzing *anything* and everything. Once we *arrive* at the imperial capital, I *plan* to have Madam Eldgalia ascertain what they're *scheming*. Moreover, she's an *expert* in magic, so I believe she'll be able to *help* us in *other* ways too. As for Yuki, well, do I *really* need to spell out *his* role?"

"Been a while, Dwarf King, Beast Lord. Glad to see you guys here too. Makes me feel a lot more reassured."

"Oho! That's my line, laddie! Now that yer here, I'm feelin' damn well unstoppable meself, ye ken! I'm suddenly quite likin' our odds o' victory!"

"The mountain man speaks the truth. How's Zaien? Healthy as an ox, I hope."

"Yup, energetic as hell every day. She's with me today, so I'll bring her by later to say hi."

Once I finished my brief catch-up with the two, I turned to the Demon King.

"So. Demon King. You said you have a countermeasure, but you still haven't mentioned squat about what exactly I'm supposed to do."

"I'll be *glad* to explain the details *later*. More *importantly*, Yuki, have you perchance *noted* anything *interesting* in our discussion so far?"

I was pretty sure he didn't mean anything deep by his question, but him suddenly asking me that left me struggling for words.

"Uh, I'm not really sure how you want me to answer that. Let's see... The enemy's holed up in the imperial capital, right? Only thing I thought of was that maybe it's a trap—"

Wait. Nell had said it. That the enemy might have a demon lord on their side. And their unwavering strategy of simply waiting, which on the surface could only be considered disadvantageous to them. So if I put two and two together...

"No way. Could the empire be a dungeon?"

My mutter had definitely been quiet. Even so, all the leaders had heard and focused their gazes on me simultaneously.

"A dungeon? Yuki, won't you kindly expound on what you mean?"

"All right, I really don't wanna say this, but I am technically an ally, so I'll try my best to shed some light on the situation. A dungeon is, uhhh... Well, a dungeon acquires its life energy from others to feed itself."

Since DP was the lifeblood of the dungeon, I couldn't tell them everything, so I'd kept my explanation as vague as possible.

"'Life energy'?"

One of them repeated those words, and I nodded.

"Yeah. But it's not like the dungeon is stealing life spans. How do I put it... A dungeon absorbs the excess energy living things give off from their bodies as well as the energy generated when living things die, then converts them into its own power, allowing it to do things like summon monsters and create traps."

I honestly had no clue if my explanation was actually correct. If one of them called bullshit, I'd have no argument in response. That was how I understood the dungeon's workings, though, so it was whatever. And while this obviously wasn't enough to explain everything about a dungeon, I also didn't think I was completely off base. DP was just an easy way to express the concept of life energy.

"The bottom line is that when a creature lives and dies there, it gives power to the other side. If an entire area chosen as a battlefield turns out to be a dungeon, then the opponent gains energy equal to the number of living things killed in action."

"I see... Which reminds me, the Reauxgard Empire has some sort of method that allows them to use monsters. Is it possible those monsters are actually the demon lord's subordinates?"

"Yeah. Not just possible, but probable. Dungeon monsters will generally never defy orders. Making them follow commands as a fighting force shouldn't pose a problem at all to their lord."

Absolute obedience wasn't guaranteed, of course. Case in point, the wraiths who'd rebelled against me when I'd taken control of the phantom ship dungeon. But as long as I did things normally, the rest of them obeyed me.

Wait a minute. I've personally seen people in the Reauxgard Empire control monsters. I just remembered the airship Lefi and I had helped rescue on our way to the Dragon Hamlet. It'd been under attack by bug-type monsters that had pretty much lacked a strong will of their own. That meant they weren't very adaptable, but it did make them the perfect monsters to gather in large numbers and follow orders faithfully.

Thinking about it now, the possibility that they'd been dungeon monsters was high. I didn't bother checking their stats back then because they were just small fry to me, but maybe I should have used Analysis on them. Hindsight really is

twenty-twenty, huh? If they had been dungeon monsters, there was a good chance they would've had a title like the one my pets have: Demon Lord's Subordinate.

"Based on everything you just said, it feels like the empire's turned a huge chunk of its land into a dungeon. I don't think a siege will work. If they've turned the area where we station our army into the dungeon's territory, the Human-Demon Axis can probably be self-sufficient for the rest of their lives. Life energy can also be converted into food."

The more we expanded the range of the siege to avoid the dungeon's territory, the less effective the siege itself would become. Taking that into account, the prediction of the enemy having a demon lord on their side was very likely accurate. Hell, if *I* were the enemy's demon lord, I probably would've been using a similar strategy, because ultimately, a dungeon was better at defense instead of offense. It was a thousand times easier to deal with being attacked than it was to do the attacking. On the very off chance that my dungeon ended up in a war with some other place or something, I'd hunker down in my own territory and strategize accordingly.

"Hmm... It *does* make sense, I *suppose*... I *truly* couldn't be *happier* to have *you* as an ally, Yuki. What do the *rest* of you think? Based on his explanation, I *still* believe we should proceed with our *march* on the imperial capital. A *long* war is in the *enemy's* favor."

No one raised any objections to the Demon King's words.

"Excellent. Then we've decided on a course of action. Let our advance commence."



"Mr. Yuki... Please be careful. No matter how strong you are, you can never predict what will happen in battle. Not to mention that our enemy is most certainly scheming. Don't you dare do something reckless."

Nell held both of my hands tightly in hers as she spoke, her gaze worried. I pressed my forehead to hers and stared directly into her eyes.

"I know. This time, I'm putting En, the pets, and myself first. I'm gonna keep

that in mind the whole time and let it guide everything I do."

I would destroy the enemy. All the more so because they were the fiends, who I already had beef with. And if we won this war, it would be a huge plus for me.

It wasn't worth me risking my life, though. Why? Because in dispatching its army, the Kingdom of Alisia had put Nell in charge of the country's defense while its forces were stretched thin. In short, she wasn't joining the upcoming battle.

Obviously, national defense was important. But I hadn't wanted Nell to go into war in the first place, and Reyd and the other leaders had taken my wishes into consideration. With her safety secured, there was no reason for me to gamble my own life.

Of course, if our side, the Raceless Allies, won, that would work out in my favor. Also, I did want to fulfill my obligation to them, so I fully intended to go all out. Having said that, if I was about to die, I had no qualms about tucking tail and running the hell away. I'd sure feel guilty, but I'd still do it. And since I had an emergency escape method in the form of my dungeon return device, I could escape as long as I didn't die in one hit. Plus, not to brag or anything, but this body was tough enough to be able to perform a Real Zombie Attack. Even an attack that would normally be fatal was nothing as long as you didn't die.

"Right. Except I know how deeply your emotions run. Despite what you say, I know you'll act to save someone if they're in danger without thinking of yourself... Promise me you'll flee should the situation turn truly dangerous. I love this country and am glad to be its hero, but even so, you and the others are most important to me."

"O-Okay... Not that I'm not happy about you saying I'm important to you too, but you do know that I'm not this hero you've built me up to be, right?"

My words didn't deter her, though. She held my gaze and replied firmly.

"No, you're wrong. You just don't see it is all, Mr. Yuki. You put on this pretense of evil, but at the end of the day, you're usually the first to rush to everyone's rescue. I'm not the only one who loves that side of you. All of us do. But I also think it creates more trouble than any of us want."

Aw, jeez... I bet she had no idea how ridiculously embarrassing it was to have her say that stuff right to my face.

"She's...right. Master. You're cool, like a hero."

En, now back in her sword form, spoke to me and Nell telepathically.

"See? Even En agrees with me. You simply don't think highly of yourself, Mr. Yuki. So whatever you do, *please* be careful. No matter what happens, put yourself, En, and the pets first."

"Yeah, all right."

Both her words and her gaze carried more emotion than usual. In the face of such pressure, all I could do was nod meekly.

Humans, demons, elves, therianthropes, and dwarves. These were the races taking part in our advance on Reauxgard's imperial capital. In total, we were a massive two hundred thousand strong. And that wasn't all. To my amazement, more would be joining us on the journey there. Although I was just an amateur when it came to this war business, I got the distinct impression that the logistics involved were *nuts*.

Our army being this massive was probably one of the reasons the Demon King was so adamant about a quick, decisive battle. With a mixed military force like this, my bet was that unifying the chain of command was a real pain in the ass. But by the other leaders agreeing to give him full authority of command, they'd nipped this potential problem in the bud. He devised all the strategies and each leader executed them through their command of their respective peoples, but ultimately, he was the supreme commander of our army.

All that stuff made me realize that the dude might actually be a waaay bigger deal than I'd thought. Like, he seemed like a *serious* heavyweight. Handing the reins of a war to someone from a different country, much less a different race, meant handing over every bit of control over their life and death. Then, when you took into account the various parties' interests and other issues remaining after a war, things got even more complicated.

The fact that Demon King Fynar remained at the top of the hierarchy in spite

of it all showed just how much the people around him acknowledged his capabilities. The image I'd had of him in my mind was of a blackhearted man as clever as Leila, but clearly, the other monarchs and leaders thought of him as much more than that.

Speaking of the others, the king of Alisia had stayed behind in our temporary headquarters since he was in charge of combat service support. Besides him, everyone else was part of the advance on the Reauxgard Empire. They believed that as the leaders of their races, their place was on the front line. Personally, I felt that Reyd was in the right as far as the choice made by someone in charge of a whole country or race. But, well, the humanoid species in this world tended to be pretty hotheaded, so I'd just have to accept that this was how things worked here.

In this world, where monsters, hostile creatures that threatened mankind, existed and the struggle for survival in the natural world was still fierce, power was an important element expected of those who stood at the top. The Demon King was a hell of a surprise to me, though. He was the logistical support type through and through, and he himself probably understood that he wasn't suited for the front lines. Even so, not only had he come along on the expedition, he was *leading* it.

"Since I'm the one in charge of our operations, don't you think it would be better for me to be close to the battlefield to make it easier to adapt to any changes in our situation?" was what he'd said. However, I still firmly believed that his brains were best suited to being kept behind the scenes, working in the shadows.

He wasn't the kind of man who would assume responsibility just because he became commander in chief. Or at least, he *shouldn't* have been. Though we hadn't known each other for very long, I thought of the Demon King as a realist no matter the circumstances. Of course, if he was on the front line, he might be able to see through the enemy's plans, but something still bothered me.

Well, the other leaders and the Demon King obviously go back much further than he and I do. Since they haven't brought up any concerns in particular, maybe I'm worrying for nothing.

While we were on the topic, one more thing was bothering me: the Human-Demon Axis's movements. My guess was that they were trying to lure us to our doom, but there was more to it than that. It felt like they had another goal too. The sensation was vague and unclear. Something just smelled fishy to me. There was a sense that everything that was happening, all the events unfolding were being obscured by the ominous veil of war.

Eh, whatever. It didn't change what I was gonna do. As a dude whose brain wasn't even close to top-tier, all I could do was stay aware of the presence of death and pulverize any enemy threatening our peace with my demon lord power. I just have to do what I can.

"..."

My body swayed to the rhythm of Rir's running stride as I rode on his back. My fingers played over something I'd fastened to En's hilt—a good-luck charm. It was handmade, and Lew had given it to me when we'd left the dungeon. She'd told me shyly and timidly that it was a tradition in her family and was meant to ensure that loved ones returned home safely. Apparently, she and Leila had made it together.

Oh, hey, that reminds me. Not much longer before her clan visits us again, huh? Up until now, Lew had really only been a fiancée. Per the promise I'd made with her father, her family's upcoming visit would finally make our marriage official. That meant I needed to make sure I wrapped all this nonsense up by then, because the only priorities in my life were my little girls and my wives.

"I gotta make sure everything's ready for my wedding with Lew."

"Lew...is super funny. She always tries so hard to make sure we're having fun. She's a good wife."

"She sure is. Totally wasted on me."

"I...really love how energetic she is."

"Yeah, same."

Thus, chatting telepathically with En, I marched toward the empire alongside the soldiers. The whole time, my thoughts were on my family.



"Hmm... Quite a lot of them, aren't there?"

Runougil, a member of the Demon King's Covert Imperial Guard, sounded half amazed as he muttered to himself. The man known also as the Silent Assassin stared at a mixed army consisting of humans, demons, and monsters. He and the rest of his unit had infiltrated the Reauxgard Empire to scout Galia, its capital. However, he was forced to acknowledge that their military power was much greater than anticipated.

Based on the information gathered by the Covert Imperial Guard, their analysis had indicated the Raceless Allies would have a military advantage even if the empire recruited the soldiers of its nearby vassal states. Unfortunately, this prediction had been disproved. Almost every country conducted research into utilizing monsters as combat assets, but he had never seen any of the creatures so clearly being controlled until now.

"A great many insect types, I see. On purpose? Or is it mere coincidence?"

While he continued his reconnaissance mission, one of his subordinates appeared, looking slightly anxious. It was Haloria Leiroat, whom Yuki secretly called "Little Miss Hood."

"Captain, we're in trouble. Two units are approaching. It seems they noticed our trespass."

"Hmm? There shouldn't have been any trace of us left behind. So how did they notice? No, that is a problem to solve another time. How long before they arrive?"

"They have yet to determine our precise location, so we have some time."

At her report, Runougil fell into a thoughtful silence for a few moments before speaking.

"Right, then. First things first, I want you to retreat and inform His Majesty of everything we've learned so far. Signal the rest of the spy units to do the same."

"Yes, sir. What about you, Captain?"

"I'll withdraw after burrowing in a little deeper, so don't mind me."

"Wha— Th-That's simply too dangerous! Do you understand that the enemy is aware of our presence?!"

Though she kept her voice low, the words rushed out of Haloria's mouth in a frantic rush. Runougil replied nonchalantly.

"Let's just say we don't have enough information and leave it at that, hm? Besides, no need for all this fuss. The reconnaissance mission just changed from stealthy to forceful. And we both know I'm *much* better at the latter. Wouldn't you agree?"

He grinned wickedly, then instantly disappeared as if melting into space.

"Argh! Why is he always like this?!"

Shoving her worries to the back of her mind, Haloria immediately began her retreat, not wanting to waste any time.



Our advance on the enemy continued, and we were practically a stone's throw away from the border now. But the Human-Demon Axis was staying firmly entrenched in the imperial capital of Galia. They didn't make any moves to come meet us.

Based on the recon unit's report, the soldiers guarding the border had retreated and joined the imperial army's main host in the capital as soon as we'd gotten close. Furthermore, there were no military forces whatsoever stationed in the villages and cities of the Reauxgard Empire. As a result, all of the settlements were ready to surrender.

In short, it was crystal freaking clear how thoroughly they'd set things up to draw us into their territory. Since we'd originally been working under the assumption that the other side had hunkered down, though, we just kept on marching while never dropping our guard. Once the sun began to set, we halted our advance and went about setting up camp.

I'd already seen it happen several times by now, but it always fascinated me how quickly and efficiently they got everything ready. All the soldiers in our army were reserve members as opposed to having been conscripted, which probably explained why they were so good at this sort of thing. It barely took

them half an hour to finish the job, and when they did, they immediately went into break mode.

By the way, to avoid unnecessary squabbles, the tents were segregated by race. *Makes sense*, *I guess? Actually, yeah. Yeah, it does.* I didn't really know the histories of the other races, but at the very least, I knew that humans had started a *lot* of fights with a bunch of them.

However, as people entrusting their lives to each other, they seemed to have developed a sense of camaraderie. As far as I could see, they got along surprisingly well, socializing with each other at the outdoor food stations over some booze. That said, everyone was more on edge today than they'd been yesterday because the top brass had notified us that we'd be entering enemy territory tomorrow.

I strode through the clusters of temporary tents, feeling the tension in the air crackling on my skin. Then, I stopped when I finally arrived in front of a lone, luxurious tent. The Demon King's tent. The two demon soldiers guarding it nodded politely at me before each took a step to the side. Obviously, they'd been told in advance that I'd be coming.

"I'm here, Demon King. What did you wanna talk about?"

The Demon King looked up from the map he was studying when I stepped through the curtain hanging over the tent's entrance.

"Oh, thanks for coming, Yuki. I thought it high time I explained to you the details of the job I'd like you to perform."

Freaking finally, damn. I'd been super-duper curious ever since he'd first told me, but every time I'd tried to pin him down, he'd sidestepped me with an "All the players aren't yet gathered on the board."

"All right, tell me."

"Very well. Here I go. Ahem. We, the main host, are a decoy. You, Yuki, will launch a surprise attack. That's it!"

Ooh, a very simple strategy indeed.

"Y'know, while I appreciate you making it easy to understand, I sure wouldn't

mind a more in-depth explanation, Mr. Demon King."

"Well, to be honest, I don't actually have anything more to say on the topic. Though there are several things I'd like to attempt with the main force, ultimately, we will remain the decoy. I've prepared a few commando units—no, I suppose 'assault units' would describe their nature better—to take with you to attack the enemy's leadership."

Yeah, "assault" probably fits better in this situation than "surprise attack." If our theory about our opponents using a dungeon turned out to be right, we couldn't really expect an ambush to work since its lord would be able to see our movements clearly with the Maps function. I might've given these guys the gist of how a dungeon works, but I hadn't told them everything from A to Z.

"Gotcha... So basically, once our main host is fighting theirs, you want me and the others to raid their citadel from the air? Do I have that right?"

"Oho, indeed you do."

Wait, seriously?

Enjoying himself immensely, Fynar grinned wickedly and continued.

"On a *related* note, let me *introduce* you to our *new* allie— Ah, *perfect* timing. Please, enter."

"Excuse me."

So saying, a new person walked into the tent.

"We meet again, Master Demon. For reasons of our own, we of the Ellane Allied Federation will be joining you in the line of battle."

I knew his face.

"Wait, you're...the airship's captain!"

The one Lefi, En, and I had saved a while back on our way to the Dragon Hamlet.

"How long's it been, man? Not gonna lie, kinda surprised to see you join our side."

"Yes, well, if we don't take part in this great battle, our nation will find itself

alone and friendless. Besides, for far too long has the empire been a thorn in our side. So if given the opportunity to wallop them in the face, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to participate!"

The captain gave me a very manly smile.

From what I remembered of what he'd said back then, his country *did* have a hostile relationship with the Reauxgard Empire. *But still, color me surprised to learn that the Ellane Allied Federation is siding with us.* They also seemed to have been at odds with demons, but at this stage, you could more or less say they were past that. I suspected the Demon King had negotiated with them on that front.

"I heard about how you came to their rescue. When they discovered that you had allied with us, Yuki, our discussions proceeded smoothly. Truly, I have much to be grateful to you for."

"Glad I could help, I guess... This mean we're attacking using their airships, then?"

"Precisely. I want you to board one of them and head toward the imperial castle, which I believe is their headquarters. So long as you crush their chain of command, it doesn't matter what they're plotting. I trust you can accomplish this task, yes?"

In that case, why don't I have the pets take another route and infiltrate that way? I'll ask Rir to lead. Even if they charge through the front, I bet they'll find me no problem, and without a single scratch on them either.

They worked hard every day in the Demonic Forest, so I'd sure as hell be disappointed if they let themselves get got in a place like this.

"Well...I'll do what I can. Also, sorry to say that I won't be going overboard with the antics like I usually do. My wives have warned me over and over again to prioritize my life. If shit gets crazy, I'm gettin' the hell outta Dodge."

"Understandable. And of *course*, I'll be taking *other* measures just in *case*. But *don't* worry. I *know* you can do it."

The Demon King replied with a sunny, open smile unlike his usual enigmatic, shady one. Dang, I guess I should be grateful for his complete trust in me. But



In a room that looked like a laboratory due to the variety of apparatuses filling it, the Reauxgard Empire's twenty-second emperor, Shendra Gandr Reauxgard, pored over documents containing words and symbols. Then, he spoke.

"Status report."

"Yes, sire. As anticipated, the enemy's forces have breached our border. I estimate that we will engage them in battle in approximately forty hours. Additionally...I regret to inform you that we have not yet captured the infiltrator you informed us of, Your Majes—"

"He should be somewhere in the capital. A house northeast of the central plaza. Likely monitoring our camp."

The emperor cut off his subordinate and responded after a covert glance at the book in his hand. It was a book he always carried with him.

"However, he no longer matters. So long as he doesn't trespass in this location, I care not what he sees at this point. Tighten security only around this entrance."

"Y-Yes, sire!"

"What of the demons?"

"Taking part in the formation without complaint, which makes me believe they're scheming. For now, though, we can consider them allies during the fighting."

"Remain vigilant. They—no, their crimson-haired leader isn't the sort to do as he's told. The man is merely biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment to bare his fangs."

"Understood. I'll encourage the soldiers surveilling them to be more careful."

"Hurry. The battle is near at hand. Failure is not permitted under any circumstances."

His subordinate saluted sharply, then hurriedly exited the room.

"This world will never change, and mankind will ever be at war. In their ceaseless struggles to live, each and every one of us tramples over others. Hell is this world itself."

Muttering to himself, Shendra looked up at a certain something.

"Therefore, to achieve dominance with one's own hand, one needs overwhelming power capable of silencing the world. Wouldn't you agree, Lord of the Underworld?"

No one was there to respond to the emperor's monologue. Yet.



At last, the time had come. In Reauxgard's imperial capital of Galia, the Raceless Allies and the Human-Demon Axis would finally clash. The two sides lined up facing each other, separated by the massive defensive wall surrounding the city.

As their name suggested, the Raceless Allies were a group of disparate races who stood side by side as comrades in arms, entrusting their lives to one another. On the other hand, the Human-Demon Axis consisted not only of humans and demons, but also of countless monsters, creating a bizarre army that was impatiently waiting for the decisive battle to begin.

"The report I received really did not do this justice, hm?"

At the sight stretching out before him, the Demon King murmured, sounding almost impressed.

"I see *some* degree of *cohesion* within the smaller groups. Yet *none* among them can *rightly* be called shepherds, considering the *dangerous* creatures they have under their control."

His attention was focused on the monsters and the people with them. Every group of ten monsters had one human soldier commanding them. Instead of being positioned inside the imperial capital's defensive wall, these monster units were stationed all around outside it.

The winged monsters flying in the sky might pose a serious threat. Though the Allies had their own squadrons of winged demons, as far as aerial combat went,

the other side had the upper hand.

Then the key is who controls the skies, is it? Even as the wheels in his mind continued turning, the Demon King spoke to the woman standing next to him.

"Madam Eldgalia, what do you think?"

"It's just as that demon lord said. Traps are strewn everywhere. Twenty meters from here is a veritable minefield of traps."

Eldgalia, the elderly ovine woman, answered him while studying their surroundings with a sharp gaze. Her eyes could see many locations on the ground containing traces of magic. It was hard to tell from her expression whether she was astounded or dismayed by the sheer number of them. Though even she didn't know the exact nature of the traps, she was confident they were the type that activated when someone approached. They were ingeniously hidden, but not a single one escaped her keen eyes.

"So many that it's impossible to set foot anywhere?"

"Exactly. Well put. If we had proceeded unawares, at least twenty percent of our forces would have been erased. Oh, dear. The phantom body disappeared just now."

"Understood. Good *grief*... I *expected* as much, but how very *rude* of them to *flout* convention at a time like *this*."

In accordance with formalities, they had sent a phantom body to the other side for the purpose of negotiations. Being the practitioner who had deployed it, Eldgalia had perceived its destruction when the magical link connecting it to her was severed.

This time, Elf Queen Naforazey responded to the Demon King's comment.

"Well, they did already declare war on us, so it comes as no surprise that they wouldn't accept our ultimatum. Although I agree with you about their blatant disrespect."

"It truly *feels* like they've stopped giving a *fig* about appearances, *doesn't* it? Ah, yes, *before* I forget. Darling Naforazey, I *hope* everyone is *ready*?"

"Yes, we completed our preparations smoothly. I do believe the dwarves and

the beast folk will grow tired of waiting soon enough."

"Heard. The voice amplification magic, if you would."

At the Demon King's order, one of his subordinates activated the requested magic. After verifying it was on, he inhaled deeply and, unusually for him, cloaked himself in a forceful attitude. Then, he raised his voice and spoke.

"Hear me, my *friends*! The time for *war* is almost *upon* us. I have only *one* thing to say to you all. *Stick* to the *plan*. As long as you do *that*, victory *will* be ours!"

"Huzzaaahhh!!!"

The soldiers raised their weapons toward the heavens and stomped thunderously on the ground, their battle cries practically shaking the very air. Pleased by the display, the Demon King nodded once before continuing.

"Let us begin. The incense."

"Yes, my liege! Burn the incense!"

With that, clouds of smoke began to rise from all over their encampment.



The first among the Human-Demon Axis to notice the change were the members of the monster units who commanded the monsters, known as monster guards.

"Skreeee..."

"Grrrr..."

"Hmm? Hey, what's wrong?"

Suddenly agitated, the monsters started growling and shrieking, on the verge of running amok at any moment. At first, the monster guards thought the sight of the enemy was inciting them, but even if that were the case, their behavior was too odd. Their agitation was so powerful that it made them difficult to control. It was as if they'd returned to being wild beasts without warning.

The strangeness wasn't limited to just one unit either. It affected all the monster guards and their squadrons, throwing the Axis forces into chaos. Since

they still hadn't received the signal to commence battle, they couldn't simply act on their own, so they tried desperately to get their monsters back under control. As they did so, a sweet scent tickled their nostrils.

When they realized that scent was coming from the unnaturally rising columns of smoke from the other side, they finally understood that the enemy had made their move. This was their attack.

"Shit! They mixed something into the smoke!"

Carried toward the Axis forces via wind magic, the fumes created by the Allies burning their special incense spread. The incense was an enchantment compounded from exact amounts of many plants and designed to make monsters lose their sense of reason, turning them violent. As a race with a custom of maintaining familiars, it was the elves who possessed this secret art, among several others.

Once he saw that the incense was having its intended effect, the Demon King gave his next order.

"Shock troops, lure them out."

"Lure them out!"

"Lure them out!"

The order was passed down, and the magic squadrons responded instantly, unleashing a variety of spells toward the imperial capital. However, this volley wasn't quite powerful enough to be called a full-scale attack, and the Axis forces knew it. They were well aware that the enemy's objective with this wasn't to annihilate them.

"Goddammit! Control the bloody monsters!"

"We're trying!"

What happens when monsters that are agitated, their natures as wild beasts stimulated, are attacked by their enemies? They buck the reins of control and go on a rampage.

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"W-Wait!!!"
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"Stop them!"

The monster guards' attempts to restrain them were no longer effective, and the monsters began an uncoordinated charge toward the Allies with such momentum that the ground shook. A huge array of traps set by the Axis forces lay between the droves of beasts and their opponents. A moment later, explosions sounded everywhere, flames exploded upward, and murderous flurries of lights danced wildly.

Having rushed into the traps themselves, the monsters went down in a variety of ways—burnt to a crisp, blasted away, dismembered. But their numbers were overwhelming. Even as they were struck by explosions and bolts of lightning that rose from the ground, a fair number of the creatures raced over the earth. They were joined by their winged brethren, who were avoiding the traps by flying through the sky. Together, this horde hurtled chaotically toward the Allied camp.

"Stop burning the incense. Prepare to engage. The curtain is rising on the main event. Let me see your fire!"

"Aye!!!"

Overflowing with fighting spirit, the Allies commenced their counterattack. Thus, the war began with the Axis being drawn in by the Demon King's strategy.



"Excuuuse my intrusion, won't you, gents?"

"Wha—"

"You bastard! Where the hell did you—"

Blood gushed from the heavily armored soldiers' necks as they collapsed one after the other. Runougil had stayed in the imperial capital to continue his sleuthing alone. He moved soundlessly through the continuous shower of red.

Runougil excelled at assassination through a combination of spatial and sound magics. In recognition of his extraordinary stealth skills, his master, the Demon King, personally gave him his orders. This man was one of only a handful Fynar trusted completely.

On this particular occasion, Runougil's mission was to obtain information on

the location of the enemy's stronghold and emperor in order to guide Demon Lord Yuki on his task. Despite being an outside power, the demon lord had been asked by Runougil's master to put himself in jeopardy by participating in the surprise attack. This meant it was Runougil's responsibility to suss out where the attack would happen, hence he had continued the undercover work on his own.

However, Runougil had already discovered the enemy headquarters. Security was so tight that he couldn't get close, but he was able to confirm the presence of soldiers who looked like messengers running around in a hurry, as well as a general giving orders. Behind them was an individual clad in sumptuous clothing fit for an emperor and sitting indolently in a luxurious chair.

Except thanks to his deep immersion in the underworld because of his work, Runougil knew that it was all a pretense. The reasons for his suspicions were twofold: the emperor's unwillingness to take command and the location of the headquarters, which was a little *too* close to the front lines. The general was likely real, but the emperor was almost certainly a fake.

Like Runougil's master, Demon King Fynar, the emperor of the Reauxgard Empire specialized in scheming. He was a monarch who demonstrated an acumen as a tactician. And yet here he was, evidently exposing his and his people's positions defenselessly while delegating command of the army entirely to a subordinate, albeit a general. Curious, wasn't it? This would make sense if the man weren't well-versed in military affairs, but from prior intelligence-gathering operations, Runougil had learned that the emperor had personally and enthusiastically taken command of his troops in many a battle until now.

Which meant the thing sitting in that chair was a sham.

Even if it was crushed, this army would not stop. With that thought in mind, Runougil avoided his pursuers, killed any guards, and continued his infiltration. And then, he suddenly stopped in front of a wall.

A hidden staircase that leads underground? Well, it's the perfect place to think of terrible things to do, isn't it?

He detected something off in the architecture, so, obeying his intuition, he carefully examined the wall and discovered a set of stairs leading underneath

the building. His steps were easygoing, but his guard remained up as he descended the staircase. Two guards stood at the end, and he killed them both in a single breath. Then, he found himself in front of the door they had been guarding.

Naturally, the lock was secure, but he rendered it physically useless when he hacked off the locking mechanism using the sword he carried on his hip. His actions had created enough of a racket to draw attention. Or they would have had it not been for his simultaneous use of sound magic, which completely silenced any sound he made.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

When he opened the door, he found a massive laboratory on the other side. The vast space had to be four floors underground. The ceiling and walls were outfitted with humongous pipes everywhere, and several researchers were operating a variety of devices. Based on the many distorted corpses lying in one corner of the room, he surmised that the artificial Undead unleashed upon the Elvish Enclave had been created here.

And then there was the enormous bone-like object situated in the center of the lab. An assortment of tubes and summoning circles were connected to it, with many researchers performing some sort of procedures on it. Runougil found himself grimacing uneasily at the unsettling sight. Despite the war being conducted outside, these people were completely engrossed in the bone. Clearly, whatever they were up to wasn't anything good.

A weapon or something similar, I think?

The location where Runougil had emerged seemed to be an accessway installed near the ceiling of the underground laboratory. From his vantage point, he had a complete view of the interior below. And as he stared down, he became convinced that this was probably the heart of the enemy's stronghold.

This place was definitely part of the reason the enemy had drawn the Raceless Allies to the imperial capital. He needed to investigate further, but just then, he heard a faint whistling sound behind him, like something ripping through the air!

Because of his use of sound magic, Runougil was incredibly sensitive to any

noise around him. Normally, the sound would have been muffled by the hustle and bustle of the laboratory. But the instant he detected it, his instincts kicked in, and he obeyed them by taking evasive action.

A beat later, he saw several short arrows fly past his side from the corner of his eye as he shifted into a fighting stance. He managed to dodge the knife-wielding enemy plunging down from the ceiling by a hair's breadth, then retaliated the moment they landed by slicing at their nape. After kicking the blood-spurting opponent over the accessway's railing to clear some space, he pointed his sword at the remaining enemies—the ones loosing the short arrows at him—with the intention of eliminating them too. But he soon gave up on intercepting them.

A number of individuals covered in black from head to toe, with even their faces covered, rushed him from behind. They were probably in the same profession as him. There were about ten of them. While he certainly could have defeated them, it would take too long.

Time was his true foe. Especially here, behind enemy lines. And the enemy had plenty of spare bodies to throw at him.

Having decided it would be prudent to retreat for now, Runougil activated his spatial magic and teleported himself to coordinates he'd configured a short while ago. A moment later, the landscape surrounding him changed—and in the next second, his left arm was blasted off. A small-scale explosion. Blood sprayed everywhere, and scorch marks covered him here and there on the left side of his body. Even as his nerves hung uselessly from the hole where his arm had been torn off, he guarded himself against a second attack and moved nimbly to get far away from this place.

He didn't grimace once at the injury that was, for all intents and purposes, a fatal wound. He simply, quietly realized that he'd been set up. The enemy had read his movements. They had known that he would withdraw here temporarily using spatial magic when he determined he was at a disadvantage combat-wise.

"Hmph. So you successfully avoided a direct strike at such a close distance, eh? I expected nothing less of one who discovered our underground research center. I must say, I applaud you for how far you've come."

That was when Runougil saw the figures of the enemies who'd been lying in wait for him.

"Oh me, oh my. If it isn't His Imperial Majesty himself. Might I convey my thanks for such a warm welcome?"

The emperor, wearing attire suited for researchers and carrying a book of some kind under his arm, and a passel of his personal guard, all clad in black, stood before him. He'd been right about the emperor in the headquarters being a body double, then. Just when the man himself has decided to grace me with his presence... Unfortunately, I think killing him here might pose a bit of a challenge.

A few magicians who stood right by the emperor's side had erected a multilayered barrier around him using defensive magic. As an assassin, he simply didn't have the firepower, so to speak, to penetrate it. Fighting through the imperial guards to reach the monarch was impossible.

Frankly, Runougil had been driven into a corner.

"Intruder, I'm well aware that spatial magic isn't easy to use. You can only transfer yourself within a range you can see with the naked eye or to coordinates you have established beforehand. The greater the distance traveled, the more exponential the amount of magic consumed. This means you need to control your reserves of magic in enemy territory, leaving you unable to move overly far. And so, you thought this would be your chance to escape."

"Well done, you! Should I be embarrassed by how much you know about me? On a related note, can I take that to mean my movements were exposed?"

"I will say only that by one means or another, I have been following your every move. I've also already identified the other coordinates you likely selected. Whether you believe me is up to you, though. I don't care either way."

"Well, well. Is that right? And yet you let me flounder around for quite a while. May I ask why?"

"Simple. I was the only one who knew of your movements. I certainly couldn't risk appearing in front of a powerful man like you, so I left you to your own devices until now. However, I reflected on my actions and decided to extend a

proper welcome. I hope that'll be enough for you to forgive my grave discourtesy."

Emperor Shendra's remark came ever so casually. At the same time, his personal guards, on high alert, slowly but steadily closed in on Runougil.

"I wonder if I chose the wrong time to fall back. Eh, what's done is done. I made this mess, so I must clean it up myself. Wouldn't you agree?!"

Runougil exhaled, then immediately charged, swinging his sword with a savage smile.



Five days had passed since the battle had commenced. The Human-Demon Axis had temporarily regained control of their monsters, but they had remained at the mercy of the Demon King's ever-changing tactics, resulting in the almost complete extermination of their monster units.

In addition to the monsters, the Axis forces had lost a tenth of their soldiers in this short time. Because of the fierce fighting, the Raceless Allies had suffered casualties as well. However, it amused them to see how steadily they whittled away at the enemy's numbers, which kept their fighting spirit burning and their fervor just as strong as it was when the fighting first started.

Though the Allies had maintained their dominance over the Axis thus far, inside the tent acting as their headquarters, their supreme commander, the Demon King, stared grimly at the detailed report of the ongoing battle in his hands.

Something isn't right. From the beginning, there had been many baffling things about this war, but something was definitely odd. For whatever reason, the enemy seemed to be ignoring its losses. It could very well have been that his tactics were playing out properly, but even so, the other side was behaving concerningly meekly. For an enemy that had been exceedingly careful in concealing any hints of its existence up until they'd declared war, they were succumbing far too quickly and easily. He felt like they were being forced to dance on the enemy's palm, and the sensation repulsed him.

Thinking that the Axis was stalling for time, Fynar had sent out reconnaissance

units in the surrounding area to prevent a pincer attack by reinforcements. So far, though, nothing had been caught in the surveillance net. There were no traces whatsoever of the enemy outside the imperial capital and no signs of any detached columns on the move. Anytime this feeling of uncertainty struck him, he would wait until he had all the information before planning and acting. But his right hand, the man called "Silent Assassin" Runougil, whom he'd dispatched to gather exactly said information, had yet to return.

The Demon King considered Runougil's talents as a spy the best in the demon world. Therefore, unless he returned, there was no point in sending out other spies. As a result, his only option was to believe in his strategy and keep pushing while remaining ever vigilant.

The die had already been cast.

Fynar exhaled deeply, then stood up from his chair and exited the tent. The hour was late. Though the smell of blood and ash lay suffocatingly all around him, the veil of night hid the piles of corpses scattered across the earth.

Since many soldiers were on night watch, the bustle of activity remained. The Demon King strode through the simple encampment, acknowledging the salutes directed at him with a nod. A few minutes later, he arrived at his destination: the area near the encampment's entrance.

Waiting for him there was the king of the therianthropes, Vardroi.

"Thank you for coming, Vardroi. It's time for you and your people to take the stage."

"Leave it to us. We're gonna give those bastards a show they'll never forget."

The Beast Lord grinned ferociously and nodded firmly in response to the Demon King's words. On standby behind him was an orderly battalion of both therianthropes and demons. Each of them was fast and had powerful night vision that made a plaything of the dark. In short, this group consisted of individuals specializing in nocturnal assaults. A thick aura of fighting spirit and bloodlust enveloped them. Several coats of paint covered their faces as camouflage to reduce the reflection of light, and both the armor they wore and the swords hanging from their waists were also painted a dark, dull color.

"I hate to pester you, but are you certain you want to be on the front lines? Even though I was the one who asked you to lead them..."

"Ain't got a thing to do here if I stay behind. Don't get yer togs in a twist, though. I'll do my damnedest not to fight. But even if I die, I already got my successor all lined up for ya. Until this war ends, we beast folk ain't stoppin' for nothin'."

"All *right*, understood. I *know* you'll be careful, but let me *remind* you that despite the monsters activating *most* of the traps, some *still* remain. Make *sure* to adhere to the *safe* route Madam Eldgalia *identified* beforehand."

"Will do. We ain't dumb enough to step on traps we know the locations of—"

Their conversation was abruptly cut off when an elvish messenger rushed over, shouting over them.

"Alert! Mutant-type Undead sighted on the right side of the camp! The soldiers on night watch are currently engaged in combat!"

"As I expected. How many?"

"Approximately thirty!"

"Thank you. Send reinforcements posthaste. But we cannot have our attention focused solely there. It's likely they are a diversion, meaning they'll ambush us from elsewhere, so keep a close watch. Especially because the enemy seems to be capable of using transfer magic to dispatch their forces from specific coordinates."

"Yes, sir!"

Fynar's orders were transmitted to the farthest edge of the Allied encampment thanks to the elvish soldiers' Whisper magic, and activity suddenly picked up everywhere across their zone.

"Oy, Fynar. This ain't gonna put a damper on our operation, right?"

"No, not at *all*, so there's no need to *fret*. Our opponents are *trying* to cut off our *momentum* since we've essentially *run* away with the lead. Calling a *halt* to our strategy here only benefits the *enemy*. We'll *handle* this with *Dodah's* assistance."

"Yer damned right! The defenses are safe in our hands, Beast Lord! Gah ha ha! The Undead will give mah axe good sport, so ye can bet yer arse I'm rarin' ta go!"

The Beast Lord smiled in amusement at the Dwarf King laughing heartily.

"Heard. Sure does warm the cockles of my heart to have such a powerful comrade in arms. Ya better not disappoint, mountain man."

The Beast Lord and the Dwarf King shook each other's hands firmly, then Vardroi turned around and marched into the dead of night alongside the troops under his command.

"Dodah, I leave the *disposal* of the artificial Undead to *you*. There's *every* chance they'll keep coming, so be *prepared* for a *long* night."

"Bah. Dinna think we cannae handle a trifle like that when we spend days at a time swingin' our hammers at the forge. Compared ta our smithin', swingin' an axe is a hundred times easier, ye ken!"

The Dwarf King grinned boldly and hefted his axe onto his shoulder. Then, with a rousing "Time ta get ta work, laddies!" directed at his troops, he and the rest of the dwarves headed off to assist the right flank of their encampment with routing the surprise attack.

Once the others had sprung into action, the Demon King gave orders to his subordinate.

"All right, signal the airship squadron to commence operations."



The elvish soldier twitched in response and raised his voice.

"Captain! We just received the signal! The operation is a go!"

"Understood. You lot heard him. The time has finally come to show them what our airships are capable of. The leaders of our nation have told me to give the enemy more than they bargained for, so come! Let us teach those infuriating imperial villains a well-deserved lesson!"

"Aye, Captain!"

"All ships are released from standby! Begin the advance!"

"Begin the advance!"

"You heard the man!"

Immediately after the captain gave his signal, his crew sprung into action, and the airship we were on started moving. The rest of the fleet did too. The engines roared, the tremendous sound shaking us to the bone. But the explosive sounds couldn't be heard from the outside because of sound-dampening magic cast by the squadron of mages on board.

In addition, all the airships had been painted completely black. Between that and the conjury employed by Leila's teacher, the woman known as the Illusion Master, the whole fleet seemingly blended into the sky itself—basically, optical camouflage. It meant no one could see the vessels from the outside.

That said, if the enemy really did have a demon lord that could utilize a dungeon's Maps function, they'd realize that their intruders—us—were on the move. Luckily for us, the Demon King had figured out how to use this feature against them. How? Well, enemy positions seen on the map were displayed on a flat surface. In short, they couldn't tell if an enemy was up or down.

Fynar having given us the green light meant that the night assault units were on the move on the ground, with us flying above them in stealth mode. Even if the enemy noticed us, he calculated that they'd be on guard against our people on land. While they focused on them, the squadrons in the airships would drop down into the imperial capital to infiltrate and attack the enemy's headquarters. This approach would also leave our ground forces available as reinforcements for the paratroopers.

Jeez, though. That Demon King sure is something else. After watching the Allies' soldiers, it's clear how skillfully he's leveraging each race's characteristics to move our army. For example, the elves, one of whom had signaled the start of the operation to this ship. Compared to the other races, elvish bodies weren't as tough. However, their long lives meant they possessed highly refined magical techniques, so they came in really handy as magical shock troops and telecom units.

Conversely, though the therianthropes' and dwarves' proficiency with magic

was average, their physical toughness was a cut above the rest. That made them perfect to make up the main force, slashing and hacking their way through the enemy on the front lines. I had to admit that it was freaking exhilarating to watch them cut the monsters drawn in by the Demon King's tactics in half with a single blow.

As for the demons and the humans, they basically represented the wild cards of our alliance. Fynar had maximized the diversity in species among demonkind by assigning each group to roles that suited their strengths. Meanwhile, the humans, although physically and magically weaker than the other races, contributed to the army with their attention to detail and strong leadership ability. They were in charge of setting up camp as we moved, as well as the installation of traps and whatnot. When it came to a volley of arrows or a situation that called for strength in numbers and leadership, you could say humans were the best of the best.

By the way, all the commando paratrooper units besides me were winged demons. Being able to fly on your own definitely made you powerful, huh?

"Three minutes to the drop zone!"

As those thoughts ran through my head, a member of the airship's crew called out the warning and opened the doors.

"Master Yuki, ready yourself."

"Roger that."

I nodded in response to the demon soldier's words, then used my Remote Communication ability to relay instructions to my pets on standby.

"Our turn, peeps. Orochi, Rir, you two will make up the vanguard. Byaku, Seimi, you'll be supporting them as the back line. Yata, you'll do recon from the sky. If you think you can break through the enemy lines, meet up with me, but if it doesn't seem possible, help our allies. Basically, you'll be doing what you always do in the Demonic Forest. The enemy here is stupid weak compared to those monsters, though. Still, kill as many as you can. And you better not kick the bucket in a place like this. Got it?"

I nodded once after the pets gave me their enthusiastic replies. Then, I turned

around to talk to the airship captain, who'd come over to send us commando paratroopers off.

"Captain, I just realized that we haven't properly introduced ourselves."

"Huh. Come to think of it, I believe you are correct."

"Begin your descents! Being your descents!"

"Go, go! Let victory be ours!"

As the demon soldiers dropped down one after another, the captain gave me a manly smile and a sharp military salute.

"I am Colonel Genaus Lorraine, commander of the 1st Air Brigade of the Ellane Allied Federation. May the fortunes of war favor you."

"I'm Demon Lord Yuki, and I'm a part of this army for reasons. Here's hoping you survive this war too. Especially because I want my kids to see the airships your people have built."

"Well, color me surprised to learn you have children of your own, Master Yuki. Ha ha! Very well. Someday soon, I'll personally act as your family's tour guide on this very vessel."

We shook hands firmly. After that, it was time for me to make my debut. I gripped En in one hand before jumping through the doors into the night sky.

As I ripped through the air in my free fall, I activated my Stealth ability and controlled my descent with my two pairs of wings. Without bothering to decelerate, I drew closer and closer to the imperial capital until I could see its skyline. A few seconds before I landed on the ground, I spread my wings with all my might and hit the brakes suddenly. I made as little noise as possible when I touched down on the cobblestones, using my knees to cushion the heavy shock of the impact. Almost immediately after, I opened my rift in space, took out more than a dozen Evil Eyes from Inventory, and let them loose.

When I strained my ears, I discovered that our ground troops had already been spotted, judging by the noise coming from the ramparts enclosing the city. Seemed the fighting was well underway.

"Master Yuki! We intend to cover the other units from the inside. We're

counting on you!"

It sounded like the other paratrooper units had landed safely too, and their commanding officer called out to me as he prepared to head out with them.

"You got it! Let's go, En. First, we link up with the pets."

"Okay...!"

And that was how En and I successfully infiltrated the imperial capital.



Underneath the imperial capital, around the same time the Raceless Allies launched their night ambush.

"Well, well, if it isn't our esteemed ally. What, may I ask, brings you here so late at night?"

"Huh. I never thought a place like this existed. You carry too many secrets."

Expression sour, Gozim, the leader of the fiends, replied to Emperor Shendra, who smiled enigmatically at him.

"Tell me, how did you make it here? It shouldn't be so easy to find this place. Clearly, though, our counterintelligence strategies didn't suffice. I'll have to reflect on this at a later time."

"Hmph. The fact of the matter is, I couldn't have discovered it alone."

The head of the fiends spoke quietly. He hadn't located the underground laboratory on his own. Instead, what he'd come across were traces left by a certain man—Runougil. Those traces had been special markings made with magic, known as ciphers. Normally, only a few individuals under the direct supervision of the Demon King would have been able to read the code. However, Gozim knew a technique to decipher them.

"Forget all that. What's the meaning of this? While we shed our blood fighting the enemy, you and yours hole yourselves up in this cellar to, what, play with bones without a care in the world?"

In the center of the laboratory was a gigantic skeleton creature, pulsating like a living thing. *Ba-dump. Ba-dump.* 

The skeleton might have been complete, but the bones hadn't come from just one creature. While the ones making up the head and trunk seemed to have come from the same organism, the ones in its neck, limbs, and wings seemed to have been taken from another. The whole body was a patchwork of parts.

Numerous pipelike structures were connected to the bones, and some kind of black haze flowed through them. Perhaps that was why the thing looked like it was pulsating. A repulsive, sinister form.

Based on what Gozim could see of its shape, he suspected that it was meant to imitate a dragon. At the very least, the bones making up the core of the creature, its skull and torso, were definitely of dragonkind.

Shendra sighed in annoyance before answering him.

"No need to get so angry. This, too, is for the sake of this war. Actually, that's incorrect. This is the *purpose* of the war we wage."

"What the hell?"

Shendra's mouth twisted into a sneer at Gozim's puzzled expression.

"Your timing couldn't be more perfect. Since you're here and I'm feeling generous, I'll tell you about it. You know of the myths surrounding the underworld, don't you? Well, these are the bones of the legendary dragon destroyed in them—the Dark King Corpse Dragon."

It was the name of a dragon spoken of as a myth among the species of mankind. The Lord of the Underworld, who overwhelmed a multitude of countries with Undead and annihilated them all on his own.

"Having said that, we were only able to successfully excavate the head and torso. Everything else had either crumbled or vanished, so we needed to be judicious in selecting the bones of large monsters to recreate a complete skeleton. The result, as you can see, is a bit unsightly, but functionally, there are no issues. I must say, I couldn't help chuckling when I heard that your people had set loose an Undead Dragon elsewhere. The irony of thinking up the same idea, eh?"

A heavy silence was Gozim's only response. Yet the emperor remained unfazed as he continued speaking in the casual tone of someone boasting about

their toy.

"You see, the discovery of these bones was pure coincidence. Around fifteen years ago, record levels of torrential rain led to flood damage on a huge scale. The ground weakened and gave way all over our lands. So many landslides dramatically altered the topography, and in one such area, a landslide exposed these parts of the legendary dragon. You won't be surprised to learn that it took us quite some time to realize that it was the Dark King Corpse Dragon himself... I suppose you could say my plan started there."

Gozim covertly surveyed their surroundings. Though the question of how the emperor and his people had even verified the bones as belonging to a legendary being weighed heavily on his mind, it seemed the researchers in this laboratory didn't doubt their ruler's conclusion. He didn't think the Analysis ability would work, which likely meant these folks were hiding even more secret techniques he wasn't aware of.

"I see. So, Shendra, that was the beginning of your research into the Undead, wasn't it?"

"Precisely! A creature thought of merely as a myth turned out to exist in reality. Deemed the Lord of the Underworld, the Dark King Corpse Dragon who flooded the world with Undead was himself Undead as well. So I thought to myself, is it possible, then, to resurrect him?"

The mysterious, pulsing black haze flowing into its bones. As one who used a cursed magic blade as his weapon, Gozim was reasonably certain of its true nature: dark energy produced by the dead.

"It all makes sense now... Despite inheriting a labyrinth, that is the reason you lured your enemy all the way here and started a war."

"I had to. Simply killing the monsters we created didn't generate enough negative magical energy. It was not a choice I wanted to make, but this was all in order to survive these turbulent times and restore order to the world. As one who runs a nation, I cannot allow myself to become complacent."

Undead appeared in places awash in negative magical energy. Though the dead who harbored resentment generated this energy, it was also a well-known phenomenon that a small amount of it was produced at the moment of a

creature's transition from life to death. However, small amounts of dark energy weren't enough to mobilize the dead.

Graveyards where many people were buried, execution sites where individuals died violently or died still bearing grudges, prisons that were breeding grounds for immorality, and finally, places like what the area around them had become—battlefields. The Undead could only be given life in places cloaked strongly with the presence of death, and trying to do this artificially would require tedious preparations. Gozim knew this fact very well considering his own involvement in the research of artificial Undead.

Taking into account the tremendous size of the creature and the fact that it was constructed from the remains of the Dark King Corpse Dragon, itself a Calamity-level being, a colossal amount of negative magical energy would be necessary to resurrect it. It was no wonder Shendra had wanted the war brought here. In order to bring his weapon to life, he had created an unnatural situation that would result in a mountain of the dead. The equipment in this laboratory would take in the dark energy they gave off and pour it into that skeleton.

Those in the Reauxgard Empire hadn't chosen war as a means to an end but as an end in itself. While Gozim himself had been concerned about the sloppiness of the empire's tactics thus far, what he'd learned made him forget all that. Shendra and his people didn't care who died, enemy or ally, so long as they had the supply of corpses they desired.

His comrades, his brethren in the fiends had died without knowing any of this, without knowing that even their deaths would be used so heinously. Normally, this knowledge would have sent Gozim into a rage. But he held on to his composure and spoke quietly.

"Bah. I've heard enough. What all of this boils down to is your ambition."

"I won't deny that. After all, everything is proceeding under my orders. I would say there are approximately two days remaining until completion. As long as we have this, it will make light of this war and restore order to the continent with ease. And when that happens, I'll be able to show you my wondrous accomplishment, esteemed ally of mine."

"This will win us the war?"

"Correct. The Allies continue to attack, but they'll prove no match for us."

"Fascinating."

In the next instant, Gozim drew the greatsword strapped to his back and swung it at Shendra with blinding speed. The distance between them was too great to close in a single step, but that made no difference to Totund Ruin, a cursed weapon. The moment Gozim swung it, the blade lengthened considerably, and the sword tip gaped open like a mouth.

He unleashed the attack like a fierce beast baring its fangs ferociously at the prey it intended to consume. However, Shendra's personal guards, who always accompanied him, rushed immediately between them and raised their shields to protect him. And so, Gozim's strike came to naught.

"Tch!"

"I am well aware, Gozim! We are not comrades by any means! Which is why I also knew that when I revealed to you my plan, you would, above all else, kill me to put a stop to my plan to rule the world!"

Not once had either man thought of the other as an ally. Every time they'd met, both had been always on high alert, prepared to fight. This time had been no different. Shendra, who knew one of Totund Ruin's abilities, the special power to disrupt an opponent's magic and force it to misfire, never failed to bring his knights with their shields whenever he was forced to converse with Gozim. Their physical defense was much more effective against the cursed blade than the constant presence of his conjurers.

And since Shendra had anticipated Gozim's attack, he was able to react quickly after it had been foiled.

"Lift the protective barrier!"

As soon as he shouted the order, a low rumbling sound filled the air. Then, suddenly, the skeletal corpse began emanating an intensely oppressive aura.

The pressure was so intense and revolting that it made Gozim nauseous. He realized something had been covering the corpse until now in order to prevent

the negative magical energy from leaking into its surroundings. With it removed, his weapon, Totund Ruin, reacted.

"Ngh! Ruin, what?!"

In the blink of an eye, the sword shook itself roughly out of his grip and crawled over to the Dark King Corpse Dragon, gnawing gleefully on it like a dog sucking a bone.

"We are the ones who planted Totund Ruin in your hands. Possessed of a gluttonous nature, it is ever ravenous for magic! And we understand that! I planned on having you give it back soon as we had a need for it once more, so this timing truly couldn't be better."

It desired magic, absorbed it to grow, and then devoured even more magic. Its special property was that it continued to suck up magical power forever, to the point of disrupting others' magic. That was the cursed magic blade known as Totund Ruin.

Smiling scornfully, Shendra gave the weapon one simple order: "Kill."

The Reauxgardian emperor had read all of his movements. To add insult to injury, his own weapon had betrayed him. Gozim ground his teeth so hard his gums bled. And then, he roared in fury.

"Ruin, you bastard! Don't tell me you prefer those festering bones to my vitality! Can you, who possesses the most powerful curse, really be satisfied with such lacking magic?!"

His cursed blade twitched and stopped gnawing on the skeleton. It turned around to stare at Gozim like a living thing would. When it did, he extended his left arm toward it.

"If you're that hungry, eat me! Come! Feast on my flesh!"

Totund Ruin responded to his shout.

# "Graaar! Gyaaa! Graaar!"

It unleashed a series of shrill cackles of delight, the screeching sound grating to everyone's ears like metal grinding against metal, and returned to the owner it chose of its own will.

### "P-Preposterous!"

Shendra cried out in shock at the impossible turn of events. The magic blade had just acknowledged Gozim's magic as superior to the dark energy spilled by tens of thousands of the dead. Totund Ruin split its blade into two, opened its gaping maw wide, and bit into his outstretched left arm. Blood gushed.

## "Ngggh!"

As the sword began chewing aggressively on his arm, he grabbed its hilt tightly with his right hand and, without breaking a sweat, took up a fighting stance, even as the blade greedily tore his other limb into pieces. This time, instead of defying its owner, his magic sword continued chomping contentedly.

"Bah. Unruly cur."

#### "Graaaaar..."

"Don't go getting carried away now, you hear me? Well, no matter. You can consider the arm advanced payment. If you want to eat more, you better work for it!"

With a *whoosh*, Gozim swung his weapon sideways. Simultaneously, Totund Ruin lengthened its blade. The one slash destroyed a number of apparatuses, cut through part of the network of pipes stretching around the laboratory, and blasted away Shendra's personal knights.

His second swing accidentally sliced a researcher in half vertically as it made to smash the steel girder supporting the weight of the Dark King Corpse Dragon's skeleton. The massive bones separated and shattered as they hit the floor. On account of this attack coming into contact with something explosive, the equipment he'd destroyed began burning and smoking, causing the remaining researchers to flee in panic.

On a rampage now, Gozim wasn't concerned with just killing Shendra, whose defenses were extremely strong. Pretending to aim for the emperor put the guards on the offensive, which in turn forced him into self-defense that led to him recklessly killing any researchers still in the room and destroying more devices. In turn, the guards would draw near him to stop his rampage, thereby thinning Shendra's defense and allowing Gozim to target the man with his

greatsword.

The damage was increasing exponentially, but the imperial guards refused to go down without a fight. Amid the gale of his violent swings, first one, then another, and a third lost his life. The fourth managed to wound Gozim with a counterattack, but he ultimately still lost his head. Yet the fifth and sixth closed the gap between them and cut him. The emperor's guards were tenacious, taking full advantage of their numbers to make a last stand.

Though Gozim was a mighty, fearless warrior, he wasn't the agile type. The space was narrow, and he had to endure an increasing onslaught of their relentless attacks. He was stabbed through the gut in a counterattack for destroying a part of the unit, got his back slashed open in retaliation for destroying as much equipment as he could see, and had several arrows pierce through his body in reparation for killing the researchers who'd tried to escape. No matter how many wounds he sustained, though, Gozim didn't stop.

#### "Gaaaaahhhhh!!!"

Unleashing a monstrous, enraged bellow, he continued rampaging as the embodiment of a fierce god of destruction. The remaining people in the laboratory recoiled, overpowered by his aura.

"Damn it! What are you doing?! Kill him already! Don't let him destroy anything more! We only stand here now because of our dead comrades!"

At Shendra's angry shout, his imperial knights suppressed the terror in their hearts and charged the redheaded demon one after another, their expressions conveying their readiness to fight to the death. Gozim killed each of them systematically. No matter how many injuries he suffered, he showed no fear and continued causing havoc like a man possessed. But as a mortal with a finite life, he, too, eventually reached his limit.

#### "Guh..."

Perhaps he had lost too much blood, because his movements dulled for a moment, and three thick spears pierced him from behind. He reflexively whirled around, swinging Totund Ruin at the same time, separating the three knights' upper and lower halves. However, the enemy saw their opportunity and refused to stop their attacks.

One of the guards took the opening their comrades had created to charge toward Gozim and stab him in the thigh with a sword. Another one slashed at his skull, right behind his left ear. Even with a part of his head missing, he continued wielding Totund Ruin, his grip firm. But then, the greatsword's trajectory wavered as he seemingly lost his sense of balance, and it swung in the wrong direction.

That was when the remaining soldiers rushed in. Their blades gored through his lungs, throat, and heart. The strength fled from his body, and he fell to his knees with a thud.

Despite this, Gozim still tried desperately to hold on to Totund Ruin, his movements sluggish.

"Kill him!"

In an instant, the magicians' squadron blew Gozim's huge body away with their explosive spell. But the cursed magic blade had weakened their magical control, and their allies had inadvertently been caught in the blast as well. The explosion swallowed up Gozim's right arm, tearing it into pieces, flinging the remains of that limb and his greatsword somewhere else. Then, finally, the redheaded giant himself slid slowly down the wall he'd been slammed into and collapsed onto the floor.

"Damage report, now!"

"Fifty percent of the equipment has stopped functioning! Damage is still spreading due to the fires!"

"Thirty percent of the researchers are dead, and we can't maintain the remaining magical power lines!"

"What about the replenishment?!"

"Dark energy has stopped flowing into the Dark King Corpse Dragon! It charged to sixty percent, but the amount that didn't stick is already starting to escape into the air! At this rate, it won't be long before it's all gone, putting our efforts to waste!"

"The scum really did a number on our facility... Pour the negative magical

energy into a pool for now! The first thing we need to do is put the fires out! I won't allow any more damage to occur!"

Fires and explosions continued to break out all over the laboratory, and everyone ran around frantically trying to contain the damage.

Dazed, Gozim stared at the pandemonium around him.

Huh. So this is how I die.

It felt like everything was growing more and more distant. Color was rapidly leeched from the world.

No one checked to see if he was dead. They had already forgotten about him. And so, he slipped moment by moment toward death.

I wonder if I succeeded. I think I planted the seeds. I think some of them have even sprouted. I believe Fynar will be able to tend to them until they grow up big and strong... But I regret that I can't see them grow up.

He also worried about leaving this world without having completely destroyed that monster. As one who had also used the Undead as weapons, he couldn't deny that he and Emperor Shendra were birds of a feather. Even so, if that skeleton creature was loosed upon the world, the damage would be astronomical.

If those bones truly belonged to the Dark King Corpse Dragon, then it posed a Calamity-level threat—something on a scale that could *not* be dealt with by mankind. Despite Shendra's confidence, there was simply no way he could control a thing like that.

All Gozim could do was hope someone would consign the monstrosity to oblivion. And that his brethren, who had stayed with him until the end, would manage to fight hard enough to survive this war.

He had prepared himself for death long ago. Or so he'd thought, but the emotions surging inside him as he stood at its door made him realize that he was still attached to this world and reluctant to leave it. That surprised him. His scorched cheek creased slightly with a rueful smile.

What's done is done. There's nothing more I can do.

The only thing he could do now was believe in those who survived and trust them to handle the rest.

As nothingness closed in on him, Gozim suddenly raised his head a little.

"Oh. You came for me."

No one was there. All that existed were the fires burning through inorganic material and the sounds of commotion coming from somewhere far away.

"Mm... I tried to do...what I could...in my own way...but..."
Silence.

"Y-You don't have...to laugh so hard. I know...damn well...that I was doing something...unlike me. Because...the best I can do...is play...a supporting role." Silence.

"Ah... If you say so...then...it was worth...trying, eh?"

Gozim smiled.

Silence.



"You're...right. I am a little...tired. Wake me up...when...morning...comes..." With that, he slowly closed his eyes.



"Listen up, you sons of bitches! If you don't wanna die, then run for your damn lives!"

After flying over the defensive walls surrounding the imperial capital, I'd linked up with Rir. Now, I was riding on his back, swinging En around aggressively and knocking the enemy squadrons down like bowling pins. I'd received lessons from a master swordsman not too long ago, and because of that, I could literally feel how much easier it'd gotten to wield En. My body knew exactly when to strike and how to swing her for maximum effect. Even though he and I hadn't trained together for long, the change was remarkable.

And then there were my other pets around me. As if fulfilling their lives' greatest ambitions, they were rampaging to their hearts' content. My massive red snake, Orochi, was using his massive body to destroy entire buildings here in the capital and smack around the enemy soldiers. Seimi the water droplet rode on his back and healed him as necessary.

As for the giant crow, Yata, he was everyone's eyes in the sky. He took note of the enemy's position and guided us while attacking them with his wind magic. Byaku the bakeneko confused anyone who got near us with conjury, basically minimizing the need for me to counter.

Naturally, our enemies weren't taking all this lying down. They'd incited their surviving monsters against us and were using the complicated terrain to loose arrows at us from blind spots. But, well, compared to the ridiculously formidable monsters of the Demonic Forest, these guys were chump change. Not to toot my own horn, but I was pretty confident that even I could defeat a hundred of the monsters controlled by the enemy. That was how weak they were. Most of the arrows missed their mark too on account of Byaku misleading them about our location through conjury.

Plus, it didn't look like the human and demon units of the enemy's army were coordinated, so that might've been part of it as well. The fiends and their

human counterparts should've been allies considering, you know, they'd formed the Human-Demon Axis. From what I was seeing, though, they all fought separately, scattered. Buuut as long as they were weak, it wasn't a problem for me at all, so I wasn't bothered.

"Ngh... Do not falter! We don't have to inflict damage, just stop them!"

"The empire's future hinges on this battle!"

There was just one teensy-weensy issue: no matter how much we kicked their asses, the enemy's resistance remained rock-solid.

It wasn't like I *enjoyed* killing people, and I sure as hell didn't wanna have to kill them with En, so I appreciated it when they bolted out of fear. Obviously, though, the other side had its own reasons for being so desperate.

We were currently one step away from the rampart surrounding the imperial capital. If we penetrated their defenses any farther, the enemy knew it would be game over for them. Even if they still had gas in their fighting tanks, they wouldn't have anywhere to leverage it.

Incidentally, the first part of the Allies' strategy had revolved around opening the main gate of the capital's defensive walls. Orochi had smashed through it to join up with me and En, which moved up our plans, allowing us to charge through as far as we could like we'd been doing since. The sheer size of Orochi's body made him an impressive mass weapon.

"Bleedin' 'ell... I figured we'd have a rough go of makin' it through the gates, so I was ready to die to get it done. But gate-crashin' so easily like this is a real damn disappointment."

The one who spoke to me with a wry smile was the Beast Lord, one of the generals of the Allied army and also a part of the night assault team on the ground. As a member of the leonid race in the therianthrope group of folks, he'd been seriously impressed when he first saw Rir. Not as much as the werewolves, the race Lew belonged to, but still awed. Though my buddy wasn't a living god, that was pretty much how people treated him. *You sure are Mr. Popular, huh, Rir?* But I understood. I sure as hell couldn't deny that he was strong and cool. I hoped that my other pets would also grow to his level in the long term.

"What can I say except that the only thing we're good at is suicide attacks. I bet you get it, considering how you're here fighting on the front lines despite being a general."

"Heh. I do. We're a race of warriors. Only talent we got is fightin', ya see. At the pace we're goin', I reckon we'll have the capital under our control in three days or less. Thanks to your monsters, the area around the gate's already ours, and won't be long now 'fore we knuckle down the main for—"

"Grrrr... Gawoo!"

Rir twitched suddenly, reacting to something. Interrupting the Beast Lord, he growled, warning all of us.

"Shit. Rir, where?"

"Grr!"

In answer, he pointed his face to the ground. *Under...ground?* I'd filled in a good chunk of the capital in Maps using my Evil Eyes, but when I considered the fact that the display didn't show anything underground, I wondered if maybe there was a facility of some sort beneath the city. Based on Rir's level of wariness, it might've even been the enemy's secret weapon.

"Hmm? Somethin' wrong, Demon Lord?"

"Rir sensed enormous magical power! I'm pretty sure something insanely strong is gonna show up, so be on guard—"

"Graaaaaaarrr!!!"

An unholy, ghoulish screech echoed all around us. It was so loud that it felt like it'd destroyed my eardrums. A beat later, we heard a *whoom*—a low, thunderous rumble that made the ground of the imperial capital shake.

"Damn, what the— Initiate protocol! *Initiate protocol!* All units retreat to the designated point!"

"Retreat! We have orders to retreat! Hurry, or we're done for too!"

At the same time, leaders of the Axis army raised the alarm and shouted instructions to their subordinates. Up until now, they'd been stubbornly resisting no matter how much damage they suffered, but now, they suddenly

scattered in all directions, withdrawing from the battle.

"Wh-What the hell?!"

"What's happening?!"

The only ones left behind were us of the Allied army and the fiends of the Axis forces who were supposed to be our enemies. Now, if I was being completely real, this didn't come as a surprise because somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd been wondering if the reason for the lack of teamwork between the fiends and the humans had to do with the latter hiding some kind of strategy from the former.

"Beast Lord! Shit's about to hit the freaking fan, so make sure everyone's ready to haul ass outta here at a moment's notice!"

"Will do! What 'bout you?!"

"I'm gonna check out what we're dealing with! You don't have to worry about me either! Yata, do you know where the sound is coming from?! Lead the way, homie!"

My pets and I split up from the Beast Lord and the night assault squadrons and started moving as a group.

"Aaagaaaaahhh!!!"

The bellow, seemingly infused with a deep resentment, continued reverberating steadily throughout the city. Along with it, I could hear the sound of buildings collapsing. I felt the ground beneath my feet tremble. Son of a... Is it destroying the ground because it's trying to worm its way up from below?

"Ca-caw!"

My guess turned out to be right, because Yata crowed impatiently to us from his spot in the sky, warning us that something was trying to come out of the ground. When he did, I produced my wings and flew off of Rir's back, heading up to hover next to Yata. Then, I scanned the landscape farther ahead.

Beyond the cloud of dust kicked up by collapsing buildings in the imperial capital was a skeleton. Literally a monstrosity of epic proportions. The imperials had probably forcefully connected the bones of different races, so its frame was

a mishmash of parts. Dark red veinlike structures ran throughout its body, pulsing like a beating heart. Pitch-black orbs of some sort of miasma floated in its sunken orbital sockets, jerking this way and that like eyeballs.

Also, there was something thrust smack-dab in the middle of its head, between the two horns that looked a lot like a dragon's. *Is that...a...sword?* 

Race: Undead Dragon

Class: Forbidden Spirit of the Dead

Level: ?6?

Titles: Dark King Corpse Dragon, The Sullied Defiler, Master of Death, Artificial Corpse, A Taboo Forced into Creation

"Whoa, whoa... Are you freaking kidding me?"

Plip. Cold sweat trickled down my back. I was pretty damn sure the Dark King Corpse Dragon was the thing the Spirit Emperor had defeated and whose name had been passed down through generations as a legend. I remembered what Lefi had said about him—that he was a dragon known for his use of necromancy, but he'd screwed up a spell and transformed into the living dead, running amok as a corpse who hungered for the flesh and souls of the living.

I couldn't see its level, but considering the oppressive aura it radiated, I guessed that it had to be as strong as Lefi, making it Calamity-level. Actually, no, that wasn't quite right. While the creature did give off a scary aura, it didn't feel like the same hair-raising, I'm-going-to-be-stomped-to-death kind of danger. So I'd downgrade it to Catastrophe-level, which was one below Calamity.

Not that that changes the fact that it's basically a zillion times stronger than me. Because first of freaking all, it used to be a member of dragonkind. Though an Undead Dragon had also attacked the Elvish Enclave, this thing was on a whole nother level.

Also, based on the titles "Artificial Corpse" and "A Taboo Forced into Creation," it must've definitely been the enemy's secret weapon. Thinking

about all the necromancy and Undead the imperials had used during the time leading up to this war, I had to wonder if those instances had just been experiments they'd done as part of their research into resurrecting this skeleton.

However, it was totally possible that they couldn't control it very well. Case in point, it wasn't attacking the Allied forces at all. It was staying in the area it'd crawled out into and was completely absorbed in smashing the surrounding buildings to smithereens. The monster showed no traces of reason. I felt like it was just acting on its destructive impulses.

""

If we're gonna get the hell out of Dodge, now's the time.

That monstrosity was powerful enough to give Lefi and the Spirit Emperor a run for their money, setting it worlds apart from basically everything else alive. In terms of the residents of the Demonic Forest, it could survive without breaking a sweat even in the western area, where the strongest monsters lived.

Given the promise I'd made to Nell that I'd protect En, the pets, and myself, my next move was to run for my life while it still hadn't set its sights on us as targets. Just because I'd joined the fight on the side of the Allies didn't mean I had any reason to sacrifice myself for them. But if I split, will they be able to take that thing down? Doubtful. That was most likely impossible.

I wasn't trying to be arrogant when saying this, but to put it bluntly, my pets and I were their strongest combat assets. Even if they managed to defeat the monster without us, the Allies wouldn't be able to avoid the extermination of their army. On the other hand, if they decided to retreat, how far could they get with that thing as their opponent? Either way, there would definitely be a huge number of casualties.

Can I really let that happen?

I brooded in silence for a while. And then, an idea popped into my head. Though already dead, our opponent was a legendary dragon. Dragonkind was the world's strongest race and the unchallenged rulers of the skies. But didn't I have the one and only weapon capable of countering them?

Obeying my intuition, I opened Inventory and pulled out an old, worn-out spear made of bone. The God Spear, given to me by the dragon elders during my visit to the Dragon Hamlet.

"Maaan... I was really hoping I could've kept it in storage forever. Boo."



"Ngggh..."

Shendra pushed aside the rubble covering him and staggered to his feet, wiping the blood dripping down his forehead with his arm. Then, he quickly took stock of the situation. The ceiling of the underground laboratory had caved in, and most of the space was destroyed. A majority of the artificial Undead they'd kept on hand were also buried under debris and were now useless. Roughly half of the brilliant minds he'd recruited from the capital to work as researchers here were dead.

To put it mildly, it was a huge loss. However...

"It seems...we managed to activate it?"

He could hear the ghoulish roars echoing all the way down here. Through the hole in the ceiling, he caught glimpses of the colossal skeleton moving around. Gozim, the leader of the fiends, had gotten dangerously close to making their plan fail. Yet despite the man's interference, they had succeeded in awakening the Dark King Corpse Dragon.

In order for an Undead to function as an Undead, it needed a core. That could be any number of things—a command technique of necromancy, the instinctual drive to compensate for a lost soul, or something similar. But what they all had in common was that they required a substitute soul.

The Dark King Corpse Dragon was no exception. By the time he became a legend, he had already become an Undead despite still being alive. His rotted body had turned into a corpse while his soul was still inside it. And though the how of it remained unknown, his original soul, not a replacement, remaining in his festering body had allowed him to stay active back then.

In the present day, despite the dragon's original soul having long since perished, many years of research had led the empire to gather data that made

it possible to control it like a normal Undead. To do so, they had used prodigious amounts of dark energy to embed a command technique of necromancy. The biggest problem had been collecting enough of the negative magical energy to fill its huge body, but this war had been instigated for that very purpose. The imperials had incited the fiends to take hostile action, in turn forcing the enemy to form an alliance against them and create a large army.

They had then lured the Allies into the imperial capital and commenced the fighting on the battleground of their choice. Up until that point, everything had gone according to plan, after which all they'd needed to do was wait until the required amount of dark energy had accumulated. Unfortunately, they'd lost a good deal of the energy thanks to Gozim's rampage and had been unable to supply the monster sufficiently, effectively putting a stop to that part of their plan. However, the possibility of failure in activating the Dark King Corpse Dragon had been taken into consideration because of its nature as a construct, and thus a contingent plan had also been drafted. It centered on utilizing the greatsword Gozim had wielded, Totund Ruin.

The sword was an Intelligent Weapon, meaning a cruel consciousness was sheltered within it. When the Empire had first discovered it, withered of its power, all it could do was discharge a faint animosity to confuse people. But giving it to the leader of the fiends had caused it to grow tremendously via constant use in combat. It had developed to the point where it could now act on its own.

Having reached that level after devouring others, Totund Ruin possessed such a strong soul it was incomparable to ordinary living things. Essentially, it could now function as an Undead's core. Therefore, the contingent plan had been to impale the sword into the Dark King Corpse Dragon and use it as a medium to operate the Undead creature. Dark energy powered the Undead, so without enough of it, one couldn't even be activated. But turning Gozim's magic blade into a core would forcefully awaken the legendary monster. Furthermore, the sword's special trait of absorbing magic meant it would be able to draw in the dark energy from its surroundings even after activation.

The rest was a tug-of-war. Would Totund Ruin's thirst for magic prevail? Or would the power of an Undead made from the world's most powerful species

prove stronger as it tried to obtain the energy its body needed to survive? Though it was a vicious magic blade, Totund Ruin couldn't escape the yoke of being a weapon, so could it really resist the Dark King Corpse Dragon without a wielder of its own?

The answer was abundantly clear. As long as the creature's entire body was filled with negative magical energy, it was theoretically possible to use magic and bind it with commands. At this point, it was practically a case of brute force.

The smooth plan he had originally envisioned was nowhere to be found. Shendra knew they were walking a tightrope where if even one thing went wrong, it would all fall apart, but he was determined to succeed. And he would do it no matter the cost.

"Your Majesty, you're alive! I was so worried after the explosion blew us all a — Your head! You're hurt!"

His personal guards, who had been launched all around the laboratory, rushed toward him as he stood there with his fists clenched tightly. All of them sported injuries of one sort or another. Not a single one had come out unscathed.

"Never mind that. It's only a scratch. More importantly... Deputy Director! Are you alive?!"

One of his subordinates tried to patch him up, but Shendra stopped him with a hand, then shouted those words. A response came immediately.

"Y-Yes, sire! Over here!"

"I want you to reorganize the teams with the survivors and start working on repairing the apparatuses! Resume progress on the contingent plan!"

"B-But, sire. Though we succeeded in activating the Dark King Corpse Dragon, it isn't in a state to accept our control."

"Have all the troops withdraw to the labyrinth zone. The creature's true nature is that of an Undead, and Undead are irresistibly attracted to the presence of life. Once our soldiers disappear from its vicinity, it should naturally focus on the enemy's army. During that time, we shall regroup and bring that

thing under our control! Is that understood?!"

"I-I see... Y-Yes, Your Majesty! Your will shall be done!"

Shendra nodded when he saw the deputy director of the subterranean laboratory spring into action and start barking orders energetically to his subordinates.

"Giiiraaaaarrr!!!"

The Dark King Corpse Dragon's scream of agony echoed. Unlike an enraged roar, this was quite clearly the shriek of something under attack. The second he heard it, Shendra automatically looked up through the gaping hole in the ceiling. There, he saw a winged soldier sweeping through the sky while brandishing a weapon.

Is that...a demon on the enemy's side? Is he fighting the Dark King Corpse Dragon? Alone?

To his amazed horror, the man was fighting the legendary monstrosity, which should have been impossible to stop once it started moving, without backing down. Moreover, if his eyes didn't deceive him, the demon had the upper hand.

"Hmph. Seems a trial has been set before us. No matter. I won't allow anyone or anything to stand in my way."

I won't let a trifle like this obstruct my path to dominance.



"Whoa! That was way too close!"

Without hesitation, the giant skeletal dragon unleashed a pseudo-Dragon Roar. I'd only managed to evade it by suddenly braking with my wings before exacting vengeance by slicing off its positively splendid horns with the God Spear.

The weapon revealed its true nature when magic was poured into it. Its shaft lengthened, the blade turned transparent, and a gorgeous decorative tassel appeared. Like this, it was less a spear and more a naginata in form. As far as the sharpness of its blade, the word "annihilate" described its function better than "slice." The vacuum blades shooting from its tip cut through everything in

their path, from buildings to even the ground. A dull *thud* sounded in the air, like something crumbling.

"Giraaaaarrr!!!"

The Dark King Corpse Dragon's bellows had sounded like shrieks to begin with, and now, it screeched in pain as its horns went flying after I cut them off. Thanks to the God Spear, I was shockingly holding my own against the thing. But at this rate, it didn't look like I'd be able to take it down in one shot.

Because. It. Regenerated.

Even now, right before my very eyes, a black haze curled around the stumps of its horns, slithering repulsively in circles. Seconds later, the horns were back like they'd never left. This was how things had been going for a while now. The black haze would gather around whatever I exterminated and restore the bones to their original perfect condition. I knew I was causing damage. I just didn't know how *much* damage I needed to cause in order to defeat it.

In that case, all I had to do was slice and dice it to the point that the monster couldn't regenerate—or so I wished I could say. Sadly for me, another problem lay with my weapon itself.

"Ngh!"

So it begins. The sensation hit. Of magical energy rushing from all across my body straight into the God Spear without my volition. That right there was the problem. Every time I used it, the God Spear suddenly started absorbing my magic power on its own. And when that happened, even if I wanted to let go of the weapon, I couldn't, because my fingers refused to move under my command. It was like they were glued to the shaft with instant glue or something. Plus, no matter how hard I tried to resist the current of magical energy leaving me, I couldn't stop it.

I suspected that the God Spear's power to absorb the magic it sought was overwhelmingly stronger than my ability to block my magic from leaving me. The suction force would make any vacuum manufacturer crap their pants. Stupid-ass God Spear. "Divine," my left nut.

If this kept up, it would suck me dry of my magical energy, so I was

desperately trying to figure out a way to stop the flow of magic into the weapon.

"Haah... Haah... Gaaahhh!!! Son of a *bitch*! That hurts! It hurts, you ungodly bastard!"

After taking several deep breaths, I grabbed the large knife hanging behind me that I used for dissecting and cut my other hand off at the wrist without stopping to think about it. Even as I screamed and cursed in pain, I quickly took a vial of Super Potion out of the pouch hanging from my waist and poured the liquid all over the nub. The healing started right away, and soon, my hand had regenerated.

Buckets of sweat poured out of me at the excruciating agony. All I wanted to do was cry and scream without caring what others thought. But what exactly was so sad about being forced to cut off my own hand? Especially when I wasn't into the habit of self-harm.

Is it possible that this damn God Spear has another evolution beyond its current form of a naginata? Putting a certain amount of magical power into it must've triggered it to begin absorbing the extra it needed to take on that other form. Except the name of this spear included the word "God." Considering I'd needed to offer half of my entire supply of magic to even get it to this stage, it would need several of me to attain whatever form lay beyond. Maybe if I ever reached Lefi's level it'd finally be able to change into its third form.

One more thing I felt the need to point out: I'd picked up on something when I first tested the God Spear out ages ago. The more magic it drained, the greater the presence of *something* became. Whatever that something was, it existed just out of reach, beyond the spear, and was likely the thing trying to transform the God Spear.

"And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." I might not have been all that educated, but even I knew Nietzsche's famous words. I had no idea what would fly out of the abyss. I just hoped I hadn't opened Pandora's box.

I flew down and landed on the ground near where the God Spear had fallen. I kicked away my hand, which was still clutching it, and grabbed the shaft.

Despite everything in me shouting to toss this godforsaken weapon into the depths of an ocean somewhere, I also knew that there was no other effective source of damage against the skeleton creature.

Rir and my other pets had tried attacking it once, but they hadn't even left a mark. In fact, when the black haze had started going after them, they'd retreated in a mad rush. If even Rir's fangs and claws couldn't hurt it, nothing else would work.

Well, that might not have been *strictly* true. En was on standby in Inventory, and she might've just barely been able to cut it. But in terms of sharpness, as much as I hated to admit it, this stupid thing had her beat by a country mile.

Long story short, against an enemy whose regenerative power remained unknown to me, my only option was to fight while slowing my weapon's ability to suck the magic out of me by cutting off my own hand. There was also a chance I simply didn't understand *how* to use the God Spear properly, which then begged the question of how exactly the human Dragon King of generations past had utilized it effectively. *If I name it Charlene or something and dote on it lovingly, will it finally obey me?* 

"Yeah, no, that's not happening. Rir, you guys okay?!"

"Grr!"

Rir, leading my pets, growled assertively, like he was saying, "No problem here!" while he and the others hunted the Undead that had started appearing. Oh, had I forgotten to mention the rotting dragon's ridiculous ability? Silly me. Well, as it turned out, the thing could generate Undead in its surroundings simply by existing. In this case, the people who'd died in this war had started coming back to life as the Undead. And the death toll had crossed ten thousand a good while ago. If I don't kill this thing ASAP, the corpse corps is gonna keep getting bigger.

"That sword..."

The greatsword lodged in the Dark King Corpse Dragon's forehead. I'd been watching it this whole time using my Demon Eyes, and I'd learned that some sort of magical energy exchange was taking place between it and the creature. No, that description was too kind. They were scrambling fiercely for magic.

The greatsword sucked in the black haze from the area directly around it and it rushed straight into the monstrosity. However, it looked like the sword itself was doing its best to resist having that energy stolen—just like how I was trying my damnedest to stop the God Spear from taking my magic.

For a while now, I'd wondered about that black haze. *Could it be negative magical energy?* 

Then, I used Analysis on the greatsword and found out its name—Totund Ruin.

"Totund Ruin... Wait, isn't that the redheaded asshole's weapon?"

I'm not sure I even wanna know how it got there. But if I break it, will I be able to stop the monster?



"My liege! Extermination of the artificial Undead is complete!"

"My lord! An Undead Dragon has appeared inside the imperial capital! Currently, Demon Lord Yuki and his subordinates are engaging it in combat!"

"Sire! The enemy troops have retreated from the battlefield! They're nowhere to be found!"

"King Fynar! In response to the Undead Dragon's movements, Undead have naturally started appearing on-site! Their numbers are increasing with time!"

"My liege! The night assault units who infiltrated the imperial capital have enacted a temporary retreat! They're awaiting your orders!"

Hearing the reports one after another, Demon King Fynar spoke quietly, his expression grim.

"I see. Then..."

The skeleton monster was visible even from here. He had been right about the unease he'd been feeling regarding the enemy's movements after all. They had been scurrying around behind the scenes. The Human-Demon Axis's goal had been to resurrect that thing.

"Darling Naforazey and Madam Eldgalia. Tell me. What do you make of this?"

Elf Queen Naforazey and the ovine demon Eldgalia each answered his question in her own way.

"First and foremost, we intend to push back against that Undead Dragon. As we are all aware, the Undead are drawn to all things living. Thus, the fact that the enemy suddenly withdrew in the midst of battle means they did so to avoid being attacked by it. However, this also suggests that the enemy does *not* have control over the creature. I can't decide whether this is a good tiding."

"That pernicious magical energy gives off an awful sensation... If we try to deal with it using this army, we'll undoubtedly lose more than half of our troops. The situation would be much, *much* worse if not for that demon lord pitting himself against it."

"Hmm... In *short*, whether we flee or fight, we *must* do something about the monster."

Everyone looked at the Demon King, impatience and anxiety in their gazes as they awaited his instructions. He closed his eyes in thought. In direct opposition to the commotion of the battlefield, a peculiar silence blanketed the command headquarters. A heavy tension enveloped the space. And then, the Demon King opened his eyes.

"Right, then. Each unit will select a *captain*-class representative to form a *provisional* unit. Only the *cream* of the crop will do, and they will *raid* the imperial capital. All *other* troops will seek out and destroy *any* Undead that appear. The *shock* troops will split into *two* units, one to support those on the *ground* against the Undead, and the other to support the *airship* squadrons in the sky. Master Lemiro."

"How may I be of service?"

Lemiro Gilbert responded to the Demon King addressing him. Instead of his usual butler's uniform, the previous hero had donned well-worn armor bearing the scars of battle. Deployed in place of the king of Alisia, who had remained behind to provide logistical support, Lemiro was the commander of the humans in the Allied army.

"As of *this* moment, I place *you* in command of the entire army. Everyone *knows* no one can compete with *humans* when it comes to organized combat.

Once you've *gauged* the situation in the imperial capital, I shall *defer* to your judgment on whether we *continue* fighting or *retreat*."

"I humbly accept the appointment."

"Fynar, does this mean that you, too, will enter the fray?"

He nodded in answer to Naforazey's question.

"I simply *cannot* stay on the back line when Yuki is doing *his* best. Therefore, I'll *join* the skyward-bound half of the *shock* troops and give *direction* from aboard an airship. Although it isn't *quite* what I expected, there's no denying that *this* is the climax of this war. And here is where *we* will bring it to an end."

Thanks to the enemy's frequent use of the Undead, Fynar had prepared a few secret stratagems in advance. The odds were in their favor.

"Now is the time to settle this. Once and for all."



"Go, you bloody Undead, go! Stop him!"

Upon hearing Emperor Shendra's shout, the grotesque soldiers—the squad of artificial Undead—began to move. Their foe was the infernal demon with two pairs of wings who was responsible for making the Dark King Corpse Dragon roar in agony. The biggest threats were his offensive power and maneuverability. He flew over the imperial capital as he pleased, his attacks on the creature almost mocking.

But as far as offensive power was concerned, well, the Dark King Corpse Dragon had that in spades too. It had the strength to destroy any mighty military host with ease. Though its performance was lacking because it had been activated using an insufficient supply of dark energy, with the passage of time, its sluggishness would disappear and the monster would once more be able to move properly.

Yes, so long as they eliminated that blasted demon, victory was a stone's throw away. That was why Shendra had gathered a group of artificial Undead bearing wings and ordered them to attack him. Suddenly, however, the book he always carried hanging on his shoulder from a leather strap opened by itself.

"Gah! Guards!"

At his yell, his personal guards, who never left his side, immediately took up defensive positions. In the next second, a volley of arrows and spells flew at him. Not a single one hit him, but another deluge of airborne attacks raced toward the artificial Undead that had taken to the sky. Somehow or other, they crashed to the ground like they'd lost their strength and eventually stopped moving.

"The fact that Lord Gozim has yet to return but *you* still live means he's passed on, doesn't it?"

"Tch. If it isn't one thing, it's bloody well another!"

The fiends had launched the surprise attack. And the one who had spoken just now was Derwes, Gozim's trusted confidant and lieutenant, and the man in charge of their organization. His voice was cold as he continued.

"We lent you our strength in battle and risked our lives fighting the enemy, and still you unleashed that horror without a word to us. Such an abominable betrayal you have committed. If these were normal circumstances, I would be forgiven for giving voice to my fury. Instead, I'll say nothing. I know not what you intended, but it was the right decision to take thorough measures against the Undead, just as Lord Gozim ordered."

The artificial Undead's incapacitation had to do with a special liquid applied to the arrows the fiends had loosed. Called "Sacred Water," it was created by distilling Holy Water, itself effective against the Undead, through a unique process that amplified its effectiveness several times over. It cost just as much to make a vial of this as it did a Super Potion, the highest grade of healing medicine also known as an elixir. Whether he wanted insurance in case the Undead escaped their control or he had anticipated treachery like this from the beginning, Gozim, the leader of the fiends, had ordered its production.

"Drivel! The one who attacked first was your bloody boss himself! All I did was extend my hand to him and offer him the opportunity to see order restored to this world by us joining forces in this war! But the fool went and slapped it aside!"

"I know not what happened between the two of you simply because I wasn't

there to witness the scene myself. However, I will say one thing. Though the past is gone, the present yet remains. And we both knew we would become enemies someday."

Shendra's face twisted in fury at Derwes's icy smile.

"Spare me! You didn't realize until now what was happening right under your own noses! You couldn't even prevent your own leader from getting himself killed! What the hell are you capable of at this juncture?! Nothing, that's what! Kill them!"

And so, some distance away from the battlefield, a wild free-for-all began between those who should have been on the same side. Neither reason nor just cause existed there. Only a growing rage and enmity between the two sides. Hatred for their opponent drove their bloodlust to new heights, far beyond what they'd shown the Allies. Amid this clash of swords and magic...

"Now then, you lovely humans. Might you be so kind as to stop moving?" ...a blade pressed silkily against Shendra's neck.

"Wha— This voice!"

Someone had taken advantage of the mayhem to slip through the emperor's personal guards and now stood behind him. That person was the Silent Assassin, Runougil.

"Y-You bastard! You're supposed to be dead! You were stabbed through the heart!"

"Heh heh heh. Since you seem to be unaware of how I escaped death's clutches, why don't I tell you all about it? You see, demon bodies are much, much more robust than humans'. Well, I *did* use the forbidden arts this time, though."

"Your Majesty!!!"

"Tut-tut. Didn't I tell you not to move? I'd appreciate it if you would disarm yourselves as soon as possible."

"Argh!"

If looks could kill, the glare the captain of the imperial guards shot at Runougil

would have done the deed. He ground his teeth so hard that the sound was audible and gritted out an order to his comrades to toss their weapons away. The moment Shendra's personal guards were unarmed, the embittered fiends violently forced them to their knees, immobilizing them.

"Tch... The timing of this is suspiciously good. I take it you were connected behind the scenes?"

Runougil refuted Shendra's claim.

"Not at all, actually. The fact that we're enemies hasn't changed. With that said, it seems their hatred of you lot, who *should* be their comrades, overpowers their hatred of us in the Allies. Wouldn't you agree? Which is why I had a little tête-à-tête with them just a smidge before this event."

"Bah. Who in their right mind wouldn't fly into a rage when those who wear the masks of ally stab you in the back from the shadows? It's an obvious truth that they are worse than those who were always enemies."

Derwes retorted snidely in response to Runougil's words.

"Heh heh. Straight from the horse's mouth. Am I right in assuming there's no love lost between you two?"

"You cur. Tell me how you survived. Your heart should have stopped."

"Hmm. It's supposed to be a secret, but I'm feeling generous, so I'll tell you. The technique is called 'Spirit Split,' and just like it sounds, by dividing your soul into several parts, you can temporarily avoid death. The chance of resurrection is about thirty percent, and it comes at the cost of half your lifespan and a lifetime's worth of magical energy. Can you imagine how glad I am that it worked in the eleventh hour?"

"I see... That's why Maps showed no reaction."

One of the powers granted by the labyrinth was called "Maps," and it acquired information on enemy positions by referencing mana and magical energy. It was how Shendra had ascertained both the enemy's movements and the fiends' surprise attack moments earlier. However, if both of those components dissipated completely from a body, then of course it would be impossible to capture data on someone's location.

"Which reminds me. I'll be taking that book, thank you. You seem to be a demon lord, and if I recall correctly, demon lords use books or slates of some sort to utilize a dungeon's power, yes? I won't let you get in the way of that man fighting the skeletal monstrosity. So your loss isn't against a champion like him but a foot soldier like me."

Runougil plucked the timeworn book hanging at Shendra's side from the leather strap, then promptly hit him in the back of the head with the hilt of his sword to render him unconscious. He quickly and skillfully restrained him with rope he extracted from somewhere, thereby completely immobilizing the other man. After hefting the bound emperor over his shoulder, he glanced pointedly at Derwes, the fiends' second-in-command, and spoke.

"Go. I don't know what was in it, but my master received a secret message from your leader. So go. That creature doesn't care about friend or foe."

"If Lord Gozim has left this mortal plane...then we surrender. Tell your master that."

That was all they said before turning away from each other and going their separate ways.



Damn. Its movements are getting better. The monster whipped its long, thick tail at me, destroying a few of the city's buildings and streets along the way. I jumped back to evade it, and just as I was about to counterattack, I saw its distorted claws heading my way, so I put some distance between us.

The bone dragon's awkward, sluggish movements had steadily grown more and more fluid. If it'd attacked like it just had earlier in the battle, I would've been able to counter it easily. But whether it had adjusted to its new body or instinctively remembered its movements from its old life, it wasn't as easy to deal with anymore.

There was no end to the Undead outbreak either. While the things were nothing to write home about individually, they came back to life in the heart of the imperial capital and wound their way between the gaps in buildings, attacking from all directions. It looked like the climax of a zombie movie the way my pets were constantly on the defensive. While I appreciated them

keeping the Undead at bay so that they wouldn't interfere in my battle, I knew they were reaching their limits too. Time was the true enemy here.

"Haaah!"

After somehow dodging its attacks, I aimed for Totund Ruin, which I thought was the creature's weak point, and sliced off its head with the vacuum blade that flew from the tip of my God Spear. But... *No dice, huh?* 

The attack had landed, but no thanks to the damn black haze, the head regenerated like it was nothing. At this point, it looked like the magic blade was basically a part of the skeletal frame. What was more, my Demon Eyes told me that the greatsword's resistance to the bone dragon had weakened, possibly because my attacks had chipped away at its strength.

Shit. I failed. Then that means...

"All I can do now is drag it out myself!"

I'd been fighting without getting too close or too far, but now, I whooshed forward and closed the gap between us in an instant—only for the Dark King Corpse Dragon to suddenly bend itself backward and fling its body around wildly in an attempt to keep me away.

"Balls!"

My plan had been to cut off its head and immobilize it. But the thing began firing Dragon Roar at me repeatedly, probably by lowering the force of the attack, so I couldn't get close to it. *Crap on a cracker. Looks like it might've realized I was aiming for its weak point.* 

"Quit trying to show off your smarts, you son of a bitch! You don't even have a goddamn brain!"

Impatience started burning inside me at the ongoing deadlock and I thought furiously how to break it. Then—

"Yuki, this is Fynar. We're about to attack the monster. If you don't want to get caught in the cross fire, be a good boy and take your pets with you a safe distance away."

The Demon King's voice reached my ears as if the wind itself had carried it

directly to me. Is this...the elves' Whisper magic?!

"Guys, fall back!"

My pets did as I said, and so did I. Good thing too, because it happened right away. Some unknown liquid rained down on the bone dragon from the sky. What the hell? Baffled, I looked up, and before I knew it, I saw the airship squadron up there. In the next instant, all kinds of magic rushed toward the monster.

"Wooow! That's some show you folks are putting on!"

"Aaaaaaa!!!"

The magical aerial bombing proved extremely effective, wiping out most of the Undead in the area. As for the bone dragon, its movements dulled again like it'd run out of steam. The damaged parts of its body were also incredibly slow to regenerate.

I activated my Demon Eyes for an even more detailed look and discovered that the negative magical energy swirling through its body had thinned considerably. When I'd used magic to attack earlier, I might as well have been throwing pieces of tofu at it for all the good it'd done. Did that mean there was something special about the liquid the airships had released?

"Oh dear. It's still moving, hm? Yuki, the liquid we used is called 'Sacred Water,' and we just exhausted our entire supply of it. Am I correct in assuming from your movements that you're trying to remove the sword embedded in its forehead? If so, I can tell you definitively that it is the focal point where the dark energy gathers. Thus, I leave the rest in your capable hands."

"You got it, man!"

I didn't know if he heard my answering shout, but it was whatever. Now that the monster couldn't get away so easily, this time for sure, I sliced its head off with the God Spear and got on top of it.

"Yo! Been a while! Oh no, you look so much stupider than you did the last time we met! How sad."

I tossed the God Spear into Inventory, then wrapped both hands around the

cursed magic blade—Totund Ruin. I gripped it tightly and pulled as hard as I could, using every iota of strength in my demon lord body.

"Nnngh! Hrrrrrgh!"

The burden was ridiculously heavy on both of my arms. It felt like trying to pull rebar out of solid concrete. In that moment, the black haze exploded from the greatsword and began eating into my flesh, starting with my fingers clutching the hilt.

An irresistible, overwhelming dark energy. It clamored in my head like the fierce curse that'd been plaguing En had done the first time I held her. A violently disgusting sensation moved up my arm like worms and centipedes crawling. It reached my shoulder and encroached on the rest of my body.

"Aggghhh! I hate this! I hate this so much! I wanna die! I can't deal with this shit! I can't! I just can't— Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the actual *fuck*?! Shit! You weren't doing that until just now, you revolting freak!"

At the same time, the bone dragon's torso began to move all by itself in front of me, its bones rattling something awful. Maybe it was trying to reclaim the head I'd cut off, because it extended its bone arms toward me.

"Attaaack!"

"Aaayeee!!!"

That was when a flood of Allied soldiers went on the offensive with their battle cries.

"We ain't lettin' that horror get in his way!"

"Pull! Pull it!"

Did I just hear the Beast Lord and Dwarf King lead the charge? The unit seemed to consist of the best of the best, each one of them at a fairly high level judging by what Analysis told me. And they'd launched an attack on the torso closing in on me. Though they weren't able to inflict any damage, they did everything they could to hinder its movements, including grabbing it by the tip of its tail to pull it backward and focusing their attacks on its legs, which bore its weight.

Thanks to the thinning of the black haze known as negative magical energy, they no longer had to worry about being caught by it, which was why they were able to go on the offensive like this. My pets had joined them at some point too.

And so, everyone stalled for time, betting on me to get us out of this stalemate. Unfortunately, though, Totund Ruin still showed no sign of giving in to me. No matter how much effort I put in, the damn thing didn't budge a single millimeter.

"Grr! Don't underestimate me! Because I! Am the man who uses every trick up his sleeve! To move that slug Lefi! When she's being particularly hardheaded about moving! In general!"

It felt like all the blood vessels in my arms were about to burst and my muscles were being torn to shreds. Maybe it was because the sword used the dark energy devouring my flesh, but a powerful urge to vomit rose up within me, and I could tell the circulation of magic inside me had gone haywire. But even then. Even then, I didn't let up an iota. My whole body stiff, teeth gritted, and blackened arm on the verge of breaking, I bore down with all my might.

"It makes no difference to me if you wanna hole yourself up in there like some fucking NEET who refuses to leave his room! I can handle anything you throw at me! Do you understand?! Then give up already and let me pull you the hell out!"



*Pop.* I felt it move. A crack appeared in the creature's forehead where the blade had been stuck. It widened in direct proportion to how much I exerted myself. And then, with a *whoosh*, the dark energy burst out and exposed the entire length of Totund Ruin's blade. I'd pulled it out. *Hell to the motherfrickin'* yes!

Even as I lost my balance from the momentum of pulling it out, I took out the God Spear from Inventory lightning fast, poured my magic into it to transform it into its naginata form, and cut Totund Ruin clean into two, destroying it. Then, I used my wings to regain my balance, and just like that, I charged straight at the bone dragon.

First, a vertical strike. After I sliced it in half, I slashed it numerous times in the shape of an X, basically dismembering it into as many pieces as possible. Immediately, the God Spear tried to suck my magic out without my permission, probably because I'd poured too much into it in the first place. But did I care? Not even a little.

"Ha ha ha ha! Maaan, butchering sure is loads of fun!!!"

I cackled like a maniac, high on the fighting spirit surging through me. Ignoring the rapid decrease in my magical energy supply, I just kept attacking single-mindedly.

"Follow him! But it's on yer head if'n ya get caught up in his attacks! Ain't no one here gonna fix ya up!"

"Ga ha ha! If yer wantin' ta tell yer bairns tales o' yer travels, now's the time ta make some mem'ries!"

Sensing the end of this monstrosity, the end of this war, the Allied soldiers around me also swung their weapons excitedly. We all hacked away at the body of the Dark King Corpse Dragon, which was no longer able to regenerate properly, like we were working on some kind of construction project.

"All troops! The ultimate magic of the shock troops is ready! Retreat now!"

And then, the Demon King's voice resonated everywhere. I figured he was using voice amplification magic to make his announcement. Almost in unison, we fell back, putting a decent amount of distance between us and the creature.

Not a second later, the aerial attack began.

Numerous roaring lightning bolts painted the sky white. The light of judgment destroying evil. The extremely dense light, so intense it could be felt as mass, made a mess of our hearing, and the rising smoke rendered our vision useless.

I'd say a minute passed like that. The high-pitched ringing in my ears faded gradually, and when the smoke cleared, there was nothing but white dust lying everywhere. No sign of the monster's original form.

"Huzzaaaaahhh!!!"

That war cry erupted from the depths of our souls and shook the imperial capital.



"Yuki, thank you. There's so much I want to talk to you about, but for now, I'll summon the medical unit. Have them take a look at you, because for any normal person, that would be a lethal dose of dark energy. So I have to admit, I'm positively mystified by the fact that you're still standing."

"You know, that actually explains why I'm feeling kinda blah."

"Again, normally, 'blah,' as you put it, wouldn't be the end of it."

Seeing the traces of devourment still lingering strongly on my body from the negative magical energy, the Demon King seemed half astonished and half exasperated as he called for the medical team.

"Sooo...what happens now?"

I asked him that question while obediently letting the medical team, who'd rushed over right away, tend to me.

"All that's left is a *throwaway* match. With the enemy beating a *hasty* retreat and the bone monstrosity *defeated*, I'd say the imperial capital has *fallen* in the face of our combined might. Although I'm *certain* the enemy didn't think we *could* beat it."

"What do you think they planned to do if we failed to take it down? The damn thing was running wild, and from the looks of it, I seriously doubt they had any kind of control over it."

Sure, I'd destroyed my share of the city's landscape, but I was positive that the thing had caused the most destruction.

"They must have had *something* in mind. For them, it was *meaningless* to simply *resurrect* the embodiment of destruction, so I *believe* there was a *method* to their madness. I *realize* my next question is completely *unrelated* to the topic, but are all those right *hands* scattered about *yours*?"

"They sure are. And let me tell ya, it hurt like hell cutting 'em off."

"I see... I think I'll refrain from pressing you further."

Smiling wryly, the Demon King continued.

"Thanks to your pets' diligent violence, the aftermath of the Undead outbreak is easy to deal with. The only thing left is to secure the emperor and—"

"You'll be glad to know I've already taken care of that, my lord. Without issue, I might add."

Clad in black clothes, the owner of that voice strode over to us, carrying an unconscious man over his shoulder. Hey, wait a second. I saw this guy in the demon world. What was his name again? Runougil, I think? Pretty sure he was one of the Demon King's most powerful subordinates. I turned out to be right when I checked his profile with Analysis.

"Runougil! You're alive?!"

"My sincerest apologies for the delayed report, Your Majesty. Let's just say I ran into a bit of trouble along the way. Oh, hello again, Lord Yuki. I trust you've been well since we last met? And I believe thanks are in order for your splendid efforts, so many thanks."

"Yeah, been a while. The tournament is when we last saw each other, right? So, can I assume that man is..."

"Yes, the one and only Emperor Shendra."

And with that, he dumped the man on the floor. Huh. So this dude is...

"Urk..."

Maybe being dropped woke his ass up because Emperor Shendra groaned as

he slowly opened his eyes. He blinked a few times before looking around, then sat up, still bound.

"Has the Dark King Corpse Dragon been destroyed?"

"Indeed it has. You certainly gave us a run for our money by creating such a nuisance. Why, I do believe this is our first time actually meeting in person. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm the Demon King, Fynar Regnerius Saturnia. A pleasure, I'm sure, Shendra Gandr Reauxgard, twenty-second emperor of the Reauxgard Empire."

"Bah. I know of your reputation, Demon King Fynar. You're a sharp and talented one. Which is why— You there."

The emperor meant me. I'd just been standing there, idly listening in on their conversation.

"What."

"You're a demon lord, aren't you? From your lot's actions thus far, it's clear that you have obtained information regarding the labyrinth. Then there's your power, capable of overwhelming the Dark King Corpse Dragon. As a demon lord yourself, you should understand."

After debating silently for a few seconds whether or not to reveal my true identity, I decided to confirm what the man had said.

"Yeah, I'm a demon lord."

"I knew it. Demon King Fynar, can you truly trust this demon lord?"

Though clearly puzzled by his question, the Demon King nevertheless answered him after a thoughtful pause.

"Yes. Yes, I can. You saw him yourself, didn't you? Fighting against that horror for the sake of the Allied army, putting his life on the line."

"I see."

Emperor Shendra clammed up and stewed in silence over something, then spoke again.

"I have a condition for our surrender."

"You're *already* in our *custody*. Do you have a *compelling* reason I should even *listen* to this *condition* of yours?"

"Of course I do. Whether or not I call on my men to surrender will greatly reduce the unnecessary losses that will follow. That being the case, you'll listen, won't you?"

"Fine. Speak."

"Let this demon lord take the dungeon core that exists in the Reauxgard Empire. Only then will I surrender completely."

"Say what now?"

The fugg is this tool going on about?

"Are you saying...you want me to become this place's demon lord?"

"I am."

Emperor Shendra nodded readily in response.

"Tell me why."

"I sought power, and you have it."

"That's not an answer."

"Hmph. Very well. The labyrinth has been passed down through generations of the imperial Reauxgard bloodline. However, only the first emperor held full power."

Yup, the man had begun to spin his tale. Because of course he had.

"When I ascended the throne, I, too, inherited the labyrinth, but the only functions available for my use were incomplete. In all likelihood, it's impossible for an ordinary person to become a demon lord. The labyrinth is useless if inherited by someone unsuitable. One won't gain much power, and will forever be a babe in the woods surrounded by wolves."

"..."

I had *thoughts* on Shendra's words, and I mulled them over while listening to him. I had, in fact, found it curious that the enemy hadn't really leveraged their dungeon's powers despite having a demon lord on their side. With so many

dead, the demon lord should've acquired gobs of DP, but no additional monsters or traps had appeared. Based on what this emperor had said, then, I suspected some kind of restriction was in place. *Hmm, inheriting a dungeon...* 

If a dungeon was destroyed, its demon lord would die. Conversely, if the demon lord died, the dungeon's power would be greatly weakened, meaning it would ultimately be destroyed anyway.

But I knew damn well that there were exceptions to the rule. For example, the phantom ship dungeon I'd taken control of. Despite me having killed the poor Undead guy who'd become its demon lord, the dungeon itself hadn't been destroyed. Because I'd absorbed the dungeon core and become its new master.

Now that I think about it, can the rest of the adult gang in my dungeon be considered candidates for demon lord? Since I'd approved them as users, they were now able to use the dungeon's functions, albeit in a simplified form. So on the off chance I died, that dungeon in the Demonic Forest might actually continue to survive. Except in that case, it wouldn't qualify as a complete succession.

The shape of the vessel, huh? I remembered what the Spirit Emperor had told me during his visit to my dungeon. Over time, I'd adapted to the dungeon, which had eventually allowed me to use the functions I couldn't before. For example, accessing Maps and a part of the DP Catalog outside its territory.

Borrowing the Spirit Emperor's words, because a demon lord was bestowed with an "amorphous vessel," they were able to obtain the power they needed to survive. But it didn't work like that for others. Only demon lords. That was because the vessels of the various races of mankind didn't change from their fundamentally fixed forms without racial evolution. Therefore, only a demon lord could truly inherit a dungeon.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was only a matter of time before the problem solved itself. Just like how dragonkind had adapted to magical energy over a long, long period of time, becoming stronger as they grew older, if someone adapted to the magical energy of the dungeon over time, perhaps they could acquire demon lord status instead of being born as one from the get-go. Unfortunately, humans just didn't have long enough life spans to see that possibility play out.

"And that is unacceptable. All the neighboring nations around us are potential enemies. We've been at war with each other for far too long. Even if we join forces for a time, it isn't uncommon for us to become enemies again in the next generation. The likely reasons for such a vicious cycle have to do with the vast plains that make it difficult to define borders and the unstable climate. When a favorable climate allows life to flourish, the fighting declines. But when it worsens, the wars double in number and ferocity. Records confirm this."

Emperor Shendra continued, sounding like a scholar. Which made me realize that maybe his expertise actually lay in research. He might've been better off doing that instead.

"The previous emperor pursued a policy of reconciliation, but that only led to him being ridiculed as a weak ruler. You can't begin to imagine how many disadvantages this country endured and the unnecessary strife that arose as a result. Everyone says they want peace, but that is a lie. This world requires *power*. Without it, there can be no peace."

"Man... Hypocrite much? You yourself were responsible for starting wars left and right. Case in point, us, here, now."

"Yes, warfare is precipitated not by a passive attitude but by active action. Though others may not see the difference. In any case, I am the emperor of this country, and I would invade any number of nations without hesitation if it meant keeping my people alive. Hmph. Never mind my failure at present."

He snorted derisively at himself.

"In the end, I was merely a researcher who used only his head. I could think of plans, but I lacked the ability to put them into action. However, *you* are different. Like the first emperor, you were chosen by a labyrinth."

*"…"* 

"You possess extraordinary power—enough to rival the Dark King Corpse Dragon. Should you become this country's ruler, our neighbors will fear and respect us, and our military's might will restore order to the world. One more thing, Demon Lord. In that event, you understand that you stand to gain as well, don't you? The amount of power a demon lord can wield depends on the size of the area under his labyrinth's control. And the labyrinth stretching across the

Reauxgard Empire is vast."

"And what if I were to start a genocide in this nation?"

"If you were fool enough to take pleasure in such a fruitless activity, you wouldn't have lent your aid to them in the first place. I place my faith in you on that score, Allied Forces."

I hadn't even noticed that the other leaders had gathered here until he spoke directly to them. The Elf Queen, Beast Lord, and Dwarf King all listened intently to our conversation.

"I'm not asking you to govern anything. You would only be responsible for vanquishing any invaders. All the pesky details of ruling you can leave to the other kings and queens here. That prospect alone would be advantageous to them, so they have no reason to refuse. So there you have it, Demon King. That is my condition for surrender. Defeated in the war, this country will find peace under the power of this demon lord. I ask you to accept this."

"What say you, Yuki?"

The Demon King asked me that.

"Let me ask you one question. Why?"

Emperor Shendra grinned and answered, understanding exactly what I wanted to ask.

"Because it is the duty of a ruler. I entrust my people to you."



Not long after, the fiends' lieutenant commander, Derwes, showed up and surrendered. My target, Gozim, their leader, had apparently died without my knowledge in a fight against Emperor Shendra. I had so badly wanted to kill him... But I sure as hell hadn't expected this ending.

"Here, huh?"

Shendra had shown us to his private chambers in the imperial castle. That was where he'd left the dungeon core.

"You're sure about this, right, Demon King? Once I touch this, the whole

shebang is mine."

"I am *indeed*. That *was* his condition, after all. Besides, I have *no* problem with *you* becoming the ruler. The others *also* understand and have *agreed*. Not to mention that we *probably* would have not only *lost* the war but also been *unable* to defeat the Dark King Corpse Dragon *without* you. Think of this as your *remuneration*."

"All right."

I touched the dungeon core. When I did, just like the time when I became master of the phantom ship dungeon, it vanished instantly into the palm of my hand like it'd been sucked inside. I opened the menu, and when I checked Maps, all the areas around the Reauxgard Empire had been added in. Now I could install one of my special doors and travel between here and the Demonic Forest whenever I wanted.

"Well? Don't keep us in suspense, Yuki."

"All clear. The empire is under my control now."

"By the *laws* of the Reauxgard Empire, then, this means *you* are its new *emperor*. Congratulations. Now you are the *ruler* of a nation *just* like us."

In the Empire, there existed a law stating that whoever inherited the dungeon became emperor. As a result, I'd assumed the throne as the twenty-third emperor of the Reauxgard Empire. It hadn't even been that long since I was acknowledged as the Dragon King, and here I was taking on *another* unnecessary title.

I replied to the smiling Demon King with an exasperated tone.

"Man, gimme a break. I don't know jack shit about politics, trade, or capturing the hearts of the people. Also, I'm not poking my nose anywhere near the administrative stuff, so I expect the rest of you to do a bang-up job."

"Fine, fine. Though you'll be the emperor in name, if anything happens, I'll make sure your orders are followed."

While we chatted, I surveyed the inside of Emperor Shendra's private chambers. I discovered that I'd been right when I'd speculated his real job was

researcher. The only things on display were rows of research materials with writing on them, various records, and experimental equipment. No signs of luxury anywhere. If anything, the space was really simple.

The opposite of justice is righteousness. A clichéd saying, but it wasn't wrong. The evil so easily presented in stories didn't exist in real life.

"Thanks for dumping trouble on me."

Fine. Challenge freaking accepted. I'll do my part, even if it is a hassle. This place is under my command now, so at the very least, I'll protect it from enemies.

## **Epilogue: For Whom Do You Wield the Sword?**

The war was over. When the emperor of the Reauxgard Empire announced the nation's defeat, the imperial soldiers surrendered. There was still a great deal of cleanup to be done, but since it was late at night, the Allied soldiers took turns resting.

Amid this backdrop was Demon King Fynar, who had yet to rest. Alone, without any of his attendants, he descended to the imperial capital's underground laboratory.

"So this is where you were. It has been much too long, Gozim. Just look at the wretched state of you."

What he had discovered was the silent corpse of Gozim, the leader of the fiends. Battered and beaten, his body was riddled with wounds everywhere. A single glance was enough to tell Fynar that the other man had risked his life and fought with everything he had.

"Your recipe for the Sacred Water saved us. Thank you. Though even you hadn't been aware of the existence of the Dark King Corpse Dragon, you still realized that they were scheming something, hm? Good grief... I honestly don't know how to take this letter of yours."

The Demon King removed a letter from his breast pocket and unfolded it, the paper flapping noisily as he did. It contained the formula for the Sacred Water, a general outline of the fiends' operations moving forward, and finally ended with the words, "Take care of the rest."

He had received this letter a short while before the attack on the Elvish Enclave. In short, the Demon King had known. And he had remained silent. He hadn't breathed a word about the impending attack on the Enclave or the demon lord on the enemy's side. Until Demon Lord Yuki had arrived, Fynar's knowledge of the labyrinth had been only slightly more than average, but he'd kept even that information hidden from his allies.

"As always, your words are few. Far too few. That part of you remains just as it was when you were the captain of my personal guard, hm?"

He chuckled, half exasperated and half rueful, then continued talking to himself.

"I won't deny how dismayed I was when I first heard that you'd raised a banner in the name of the fiends after leaving my service. I thought of how difficult it must have been for you to forgive me when you saw me search for a road to peace with the humans even after they burned your village in their war against your people. But...I was wrong, wasn't I?"

He thought back to the events of a decade past. A report had come in of Gozim's homeland being attacked by humans. At the time, he had been Fynar's subordinate, so when he'd anxiously requested permission to be deployed on a mission there, the Demon King had allowed it—only for Gozim to never return. The enemy had retreated, and Fynar's own reinforcements had returned without having fought, but Gozim had apparently remained in his scorched village, asking to be left alone, and then disappeared.

The next time he'd appeared was four years ago. By that time, he and his followers had already begun calling themselves the fiends and were beginning to emerge as a force hostile to the Lord of the Demon World. And a year ago, when the two of them had reunited in the tournament in which Demon Lord Yuki had also participated, Fynar had truly thought that Gozim had become his enemy. A terribly dangerous one who threatened the demon world.

"You knew. You knew that with the current state of things, peace would never come without a battle. That without a common enemy to unite the many and varied races, it would be impossible to deepen our bonds any further. So you became the threat. You led the outcasts of the demon world, grew in power, and joined forces with Emperor Shendra, who wanted supremacy. And you became the enemy of the world."

Fynar didn't know when they'd started cooperating with each other, but he suspected that Shendra's influence was behind Gozim's use of the Undead. He remembered this awkward man being conscientious in the strangest ways. Perhaps he'd thought using necromancy was the right thing to do if he was

going to play the role of a villain. It seemed the relationship between the fiends and the humans of the Reauxgard Empire had been fraught, yet he had played his part well up until this point. Perhaps the fact that they both seemed to distrust one another and had been planning to use each other to the fullest had worked to their advantage.

"We could no longer *ignore* your *ever*-growing presence. So, we *naturally* began to consider *cooperation* with other states, and then the *attack* on the Elvish *Enclave* occurred. That was a stroke of *brilliance*, you know. I'd say it *absolutely* determined our future moves."

A deep alliance forged by and between different races. If not for the surprise attack, it would have taken them much longer to reach that point. Thinking back, Fynar realized that the last time an alliance was formed in the demon world between the four races of demons, elves, dwarves, and therianthropes, they had also sent artificial Undead to attack. Gozim had to have kept the current situation in his mind since then.

The Demon King had wanted a quick battle because, thanks to the information Gozim had supplied, he'd been able to devise a plan to crush their enemy in a single blow. Emperor Shendra's secret plan revolving around the Dark King Corpse Dragon had meant crossing a dangerous, unknown bridge at the time, but in the end, it was Fynar's camp that had won the gamble.

"Ah, speaking of the Dark King Corpse Dragon, you did something about it, didn't you? While the monster was certainly a threat, from the looks of it, I very much doubt it was revived in its complete form. I knew some kind of mistake must have led to it being released in its weakened, incomplete state. Because there was no need to do so otherwise."

Demon Lord Yuki had successfully defeated it, but according to Madam Eldgalia, an ovine demon who had been on the airship with him, the creature had been in an unfinished state at that point. It had still been absorbing negative magical energy, the energy of the Undead. To her, it had appeared as if the monster had been forcibly awakened before the resurrection process was completed.

Evidently, the greatsword implanted in its forehead had been responsible for

collecting the dark energy. But how much more damage would have been done if it had been revived as a perfect frame that didn't need such a tool to operate? The war had still been ongoing then, and in a month or two—no, two months would have been the limit in terms of military supplies, so the army would have been forced to disband. Without rations, it would have taken a long time before large-scale mobilization would be possible again, meaning the fighting would likely have continued for several years.

In that case, it would have been checkmate. Instead of simply losing the war, there was even the possibility of several species being exterminated. If they'd been unable to eliminate the Undead Dragon, it would have turned into a catastrophe of such magnitude.

"Of course, all of this is just speculation on my part. No one knows your true intentions anymore. But. I don't think I'm too far off the mark. This war is your victory. You had all of us, including that emperor, dancing atop the image you'd painted in your mind. Blast you... How I wish you could have lived to show off your skills under my command."

Though Fynar's words were playful, his tone conveyed the complicated mix of emotions brewing inside him. It was as if he were pressing his sadness deep down into his heart.

"From now on, your *name* will be a *taboo*, Gozim. You'll be *marked* in the annals of history as a *heinous* criminal and *abhorred* by the people.

However...I'll build your *grave* next to your dear *wife*'s. This I *swear* to you."

Then, he fell silent for some time. All he did was stare intently at Gozim's dead body.

"I have to *go* now. I have a *mountain* of work *waiting* for me, you see.

However, since we're on the *subject* of crime, I'm *just* as guilty as you because I kept *quiet* despite knowing almost *everything* you had planned. So I'll take care of the rest. The *seeds* you sowed *won't* go to waste."

The hope of a fool who tried earnestly to change the world. The wish for which you gave your life. I'll engrave it all into this world for you.

"Farewell, my *friend*. For as *long* as I live, I'll *never* forget the name of the *great* man you are."

After speaking those words, the Demon King left the underground laboratory. Upon returning to the surface, where the afterglow of victory still lingered, he immediately spotted Yuki the demon lord nearby. Something that looked like an insect was perched on his hand. He activated his magical storage, placed the insect with earlike wings in the rift in space, and then spoke to Fynar.

"You did what you needed to do?"

"Yes... Yes, I did. Will you kill me now, Yuki?"

"Well, I do need you to handle the postwar cleanup of the Reauxgard Empire now that it's under my control. So do a good job and I'll pretend I didn't hear anything."

Fynar huffed out a laugh.

"I won't disappoint you. After all, it's too soon for me to die since I still have so many things left to accomplish. I'll do my best to satisfy you."

Demon Lord Yuki scratched his head and sighed deeply.



The war ended in the Raceless Allies' victory. Discussions about things like how to deal with the Reauxgard Empire and the fiends were set to take place at a later date, but at the very least, the handover of territory was certain. Reparations were apparently going to cost the empire a pretty penny as well. The Demon King had said that paying it out all at once would be too radical and might lead to an anti-government movement, though, so the payments would be spread out over a long period of time. Another possible option was substituting it for the transfer of technology possessed by the empire.

He'd also mentioned that I could claim a portion of the reparations too. But I'd turned him down on account of becoming this country's ruler after absorbing the dungeon core. In terms of the books, that alone had put me seriously in the black, even after factoring in expenses, and I didn't need more on top of that. I was probably—okay, definitely the one who'd gained the most in the end. Plus, there was the DP Emperor Shendra hadn't used. Actually, to be completely accurate, he hadn't been able to use it. Either way, it was a huge amount, so honestly, I wouldn't even know what to do with cash money at this

point.

As for the future governance of the country, the member nations of the Raceless Allies planned on running things together in harmony. They were even discussing using the imperial capital as an experimental city for coexistence between different races. The situation would probably be chaotic for a few years, but I hoped that they'd manage things well. And though I fully planned on delegating all the annoying tasks, if something happened, I didn't mind lending a hand here and there. After all, this place was part of my domain now.

Thus, the war that would later be called the Great Corpse Dragon War came to a close. There was still a lot left to deal with in terms of the aftermath, but man, I was *exhausted*. So after saying my goodbyes to the other monarchs and Madam Eldgalia, I set up a new door capable of utilizing spatial magic and returned to the Demonic Forest.

"All right, guys, see you around. Thanks a bunch for everything you did this round. Seriously. I'll hit you all up if shit hits the fan again."

I said goodbye to my pets in the forest, then took my wings out and flew through the night sky. When I arrived at the usual cave, I flew straight through, heading toward the door set deep inside that connected directly to the real throne room.

"We're home."

I said those words in a soft whisper. It was super late, and I didn't want to wake everyone up. Deep asleep, I placed En in her sword form against a wall in the room. That was when someone sat up in her room after sensing my presence. It was Lefi.

"Mm... Yuki, En, you are returned? Welcome home."

"We're back. Sorry, did I wake you?"

"It is fine. You need not worry about such a small thing. Hmm, let me check you for injuries... The flow of your magic is disrupted. You were too heavily reliant on elixirs, is that it? Good grief. Do not tell me you did something reckless again."

A single glance had been enough for her to figure out the condition I was in.

She'd said all that with slightly accusing eyes.

"Ha ha... I really can't hide anything from you, huh? Yeah, it was rough. Really, really rough. The enemy resurrected the Dark King Corpse Dragon. You know, the one the Spirit Emperor defeated."

"Hmm. The Dark King Corpse Dragon, you say? But the old man's earth-destroying conflagration should have incinerated the creature to naught..."

"Earth-destroying conflagration," eh? It sounded scary as hell, so I decided not to ask for details.

"Ohhh, so that's why its form wasn't complete. Only the head and torso of the skeleton came from the Dark King Corpse Dragon. The rest of it was cobbled together from a bunch of different monsters, and they revived that patchwork abomination. The version I fought was probably considerably weaker than the original one the Spirit Emperor did. Still, I had a bad time. A *real* bad time."

Although most of it was the God Spear's fault. None of the monstrosity's attacks had actually hit me in the end because of its sluggish movements.

"Oh, almost forgot. I got a country out of it."

"A...country?"

"Yup. I became the emperor of the enemy nation, the Reauxgard Empire. Only in name, though. I left the actual governance and stuff to the others. They're the professionals."

"Riiight... I cannot even begin to fathom what series of events led to such a result, but if you say so, then it must be true. Does this mean we are now part of an imperial family?"

"It sure does. Look at me, moving up in the world from a petty demon lord to an emperor in name only. Whatcha think about that, huh?"

"A very unexpected promotion indeed."

Lefi chuckled in exasperation. Just talking to her like this put my heart at ease. I could feel my mind steadily relaxing.

"Lefi."

```
"Hmm?"
```

"I feel at home when I'm with you."

"Gah ha... Would you like a welcome home kiss, then?"

"Hell to the yeah I would."

"Oh... I was jesting. But I will do it anyway. Kneel."

"Huh? Oh, sure."

I did as she instructed and knelt on the floor. The position put my eyes at Lefi's chest. She thrust both hands into my hair and ran her fingers through it.

"I am glad you all returned safely."

Then, she pressed her lovely lips to my forehead before wrapping her arms around my head and cradling it against her chest.



"I'll always come back. Because you're here."

Still on my knees, I wound my arms around her slender, delicate frame and squeezed tightly. I didn't want to let her warmth escape.

# **Special Story: The Roots That Ground Me for Life**

With an "I'm going for a walk," I left the living room. My destination was the door in the meadow area connecting to the door in the cave which led to the Demonic Forest. The cave that had started it all for me. The cave where it always felt nice and cool, and where stalactites grew down from the ceiling.

Well, it would've been really bad if something happened to the little girls, so I'd actually broken off everything hanging from the ceiling and cast the dungeon's Harden function on the remaining stubs to reduce the dangers. As we all knew, accidents could happen if you cut corners with stuff like this.

My feet clacked against the stone floor of the giant cave. When I exited it, the Demonic Forest spread out in front of me. A stunning stretch of nature that went on forever.

"..."

I sat down, then planted my hands on the ground behind me, leaned back, and stared at the view. A gentle breeze blew past, ruffling my hair. Even though I saw it every day, it was still as beautiful as ever. I never got bored of it.

But this forest was a terrifying place. Despite me having grown over my time here, there were still lots of monsters inhabiting this region that I was no match for, so dropping my guard meant death. I'd been expanding my dungeon for a long time, but I still hadn't been able to take control of the entire forest. Incorporating the western area, where the monsters were the strongest, into my dungeon domain would take another fifty years or so. In terms of efficiency, it would probably be better to expand my territory outside the forest instead. Although I planned to spend my long life span doing my best to gain control over the whole thing, I couldn't help but wonder how long it would take.

That was the hopelessly harsh environment of the Demonic Forest. Having said that, I didn't know how to put it, but for whatever reason, this place now felt like home to me. Every time I left the confines of the Forest for the outside world and came back, I always thought, "I'm back." They say home is where you

make it, and man, had I chosen a dangerous place to do that.

"Well, I'll be spending the rest of my life right here, so all's well that ends well."

The dungeon and my roots. As long as the dungeon existed, I planned on living in this forest until the day I died. So I, too, would grow to love and become familiar with this dangerous, majestic, beautiful, and mysterious wilderness.

As those thoughts tumbled through my mind, I heard a sound.

```
"Grr."
```

"Oh, hey, Rir. You're here."

I'd called Rir earlier using Remote Communication, and now, he lumbered through the forest toward me.

```
"Grr?"

"Nah, nothing important. I just wanted to chillax, ya feel?"

"Grr..."
```

His growl made it sound like he was chuckling ruefully, humoring me with a "Yes, yes, I understand." Then, he flopped down on the ground next to me. I leaned against my pet's super fluffy body and spaced out as I gazed at the Demonic Forest.

I wondered how long I'd been staring at the scenery like this. Having Rir by my side meant I could let my mind wander. Just when I started nodding off, I heard my name being called from the cave.

```
"Yuki."

"Mmm..."

It was Iluna and Lefi.

"Oho, what do we have here? Were you and Rir napping, perchance?"

"Oh no. Did we ruin your nap?"
```

"Nah, you're good. What's up?"

"Right. We were playing with everyone in the dungeon just now. Since we are possessed of kind hearts, we decided to traipse out here to invite you to join us, on account of your lonely self."

"Lady Lefifi wanted to play with you, Yukiki!"

"N-No, you dolt, I did not!"

"Okay, okay, I got it. Count me in. Hey, Rir, why don't you tag along too since you're here?"

"Grr."

"I'll tell you what we're doing right now! We're in the middle of an exciting battle of the minds! Something about psy-cho-lo-gi-cal warfare too! Right now, Miss Leila's camp and En's camp are the strongest!"

"Y-Yeah? Very cool... Uh, Lefi? What exactly are you guys playing?"

"Make-believe diplomacy."

"W-Well, as long as you're all having fun, I guess?"

With Iluna in the middle, the three of us held hands, laughing and talking as we walked back to the castle.

This was how I lived my life in this place every day.

### **Afterword**

Hello, this is Ryuyu! Thank you very much for buying volume 10!

This volume included everything I wanted to write about. It's a story I've wanted to write ever since this work first took shape in my mind. Everything up until this point was groundwork for this volume. It wasn't like I had a solid plot, but I was able to introduce the characters I wanted to, make them act, and bring their stories to a conclusion. That being said, the story didn't exactly progress how I'd imagined.

The original plan was for Gozim and Yuki to team up to fight Emperor Shendra. Instead, though, Gozim ended up playing an important role in the background and dying in a blaze of glory. Meanwhile, Shendra was supposed to be more of a demon-lordlike enemy, but he turned into more of a scholar.

I hadn't even thought about the Dark King Corpse Dragon until halfway through, and before I knew it, the monster had appeared and started wreaking havoc. Then there were the other characters, like the Demon King, who also asserted themselves and really stole the show... As usual, these are the results of the characters doing their own thing. Honestly, I'm not sure what to make of it all.

There are parts I think I wrote well, and of course, there are also parts that could have been developed better. Regardless, I'm super satisfied with how I've been able to get the story to this point. I truly couldn't be happier about it. Not when I was able to transform the vague images that existed in my head into a solid world through the links created by words and finally reach the goal I had in mind, which is this volume.

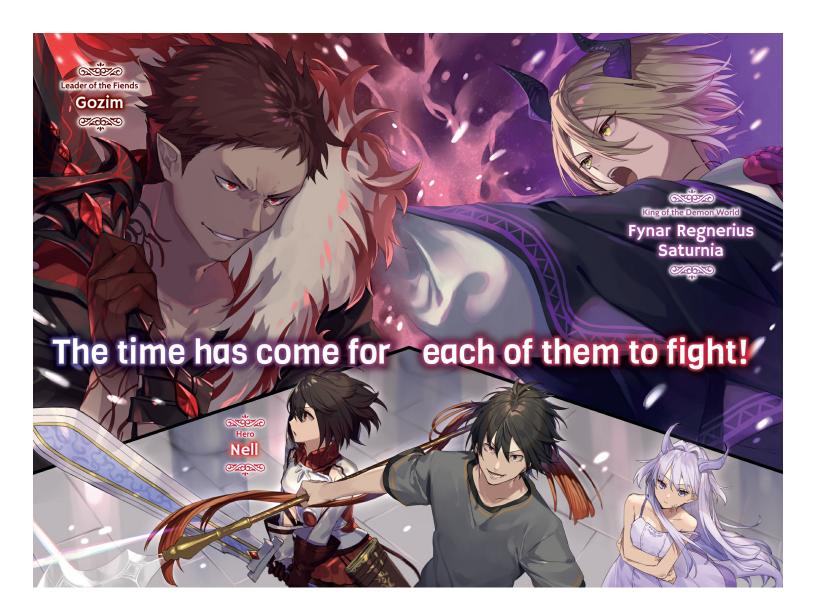
I haven't yet decided on the general direction of the story moving forward, but the EXP I've gained so far has helped me tremendously. Not only have I honed my skills as an author, but I also feel like I have a clearer understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, as well as the trajectory I should be aiming for. I want to use what I've learned thus far to further improve this work so that

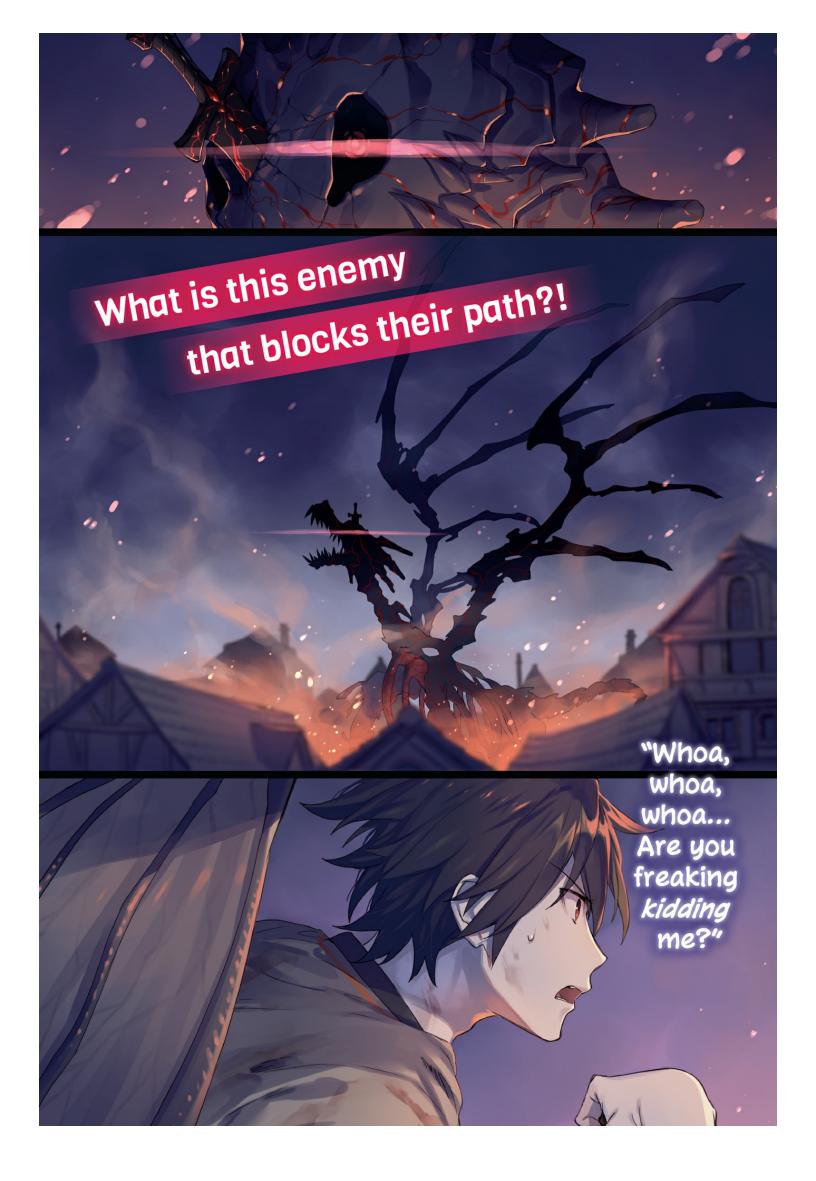
people can enjoy it even more!

Finally, I'd like to end with acknowledgments. To my editor, who helped me put this story together, to Daburyu, and to Note Tono. To everyone else involved, and to the readers who read this story: thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

See you again soon! Ciao!

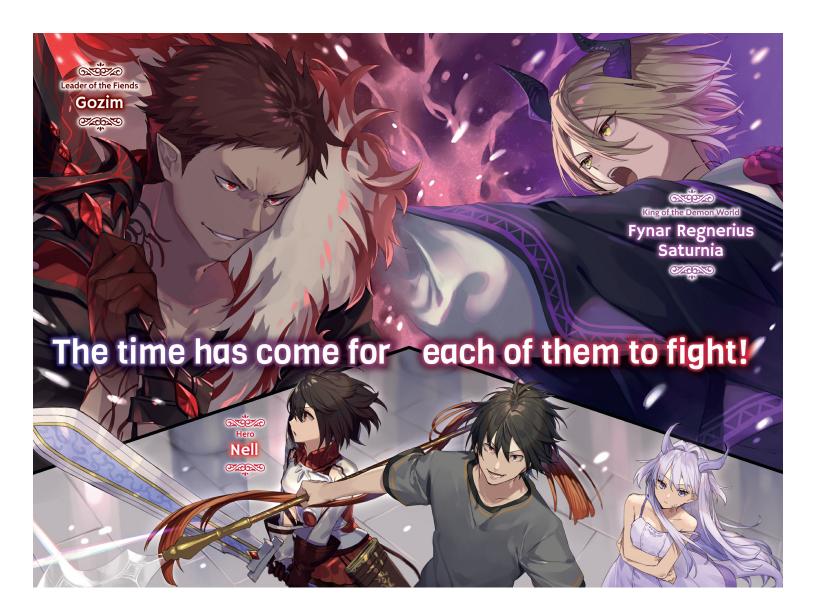


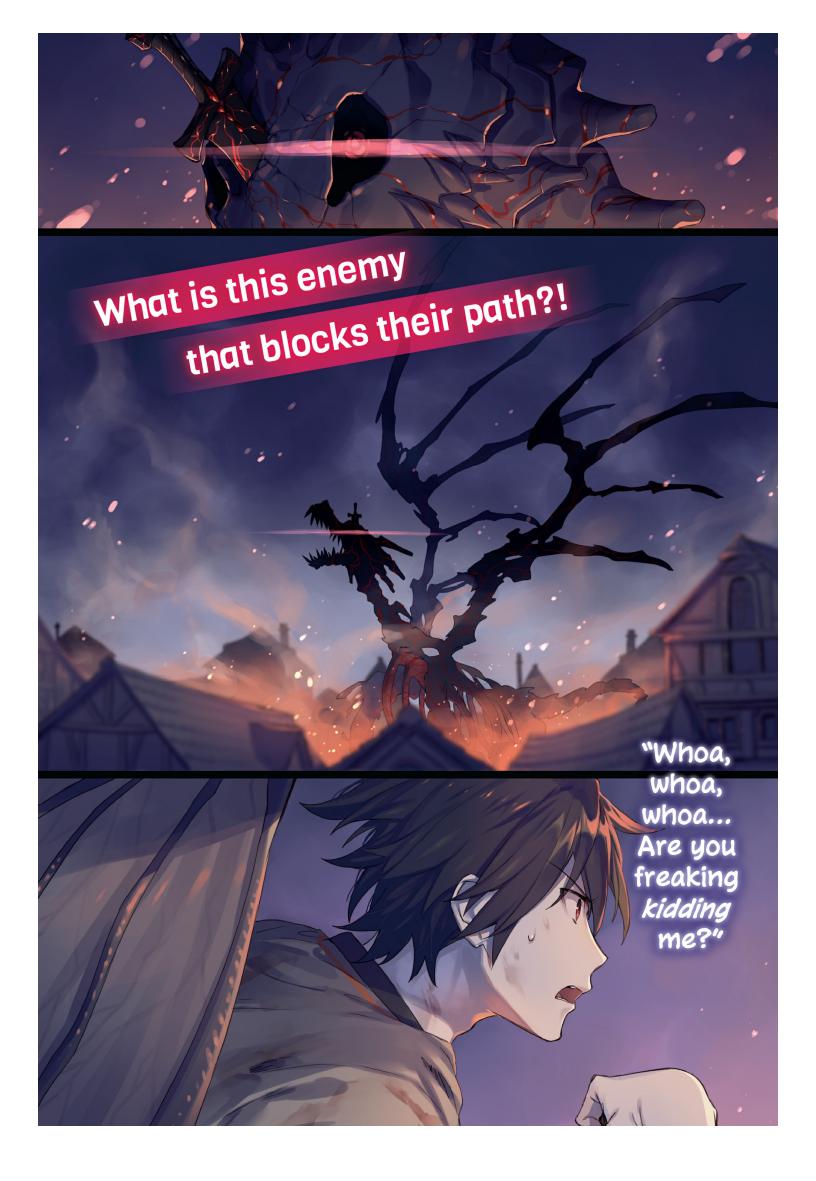












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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in My Dungeon: Volume 10

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. 10

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