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## **Prologue: New Subordinates**

I'd acquired new territory for my dungeon. How? Well, a dungeon had shown up in the Kingdom of Alisia, the country Nell was from. The two of us had eliminated its demon lord, and when I'd accidentally touched the dungeon's core, my body had absorbed it instantly, making the dungeon mine. The whole thing had pretty much happened by chance instead of deliberate action. I thought so, at least. But it was whatever. All was well that ended well.

Besides, I was super happy about having expanded my dungeon's domain since it meant I'd increased my Dungeon Point—DP—revenue stream. As a demon lord, I couldn't've asked for a better result. Hip, hip, hooray!

Maaan, it's so much fun going to the ocean. Who wouldn't be delighted with the addition of a new environment? Eventually, I wanted to see what all my women looked like in bathing suits.

However, there was a problem. The monsters who'd become my new subordinates.

"Cripes. You guys are really freaking creepy, huh?"

In front of me was a hodgepodge of undead-type monsters like skeletons and zombies. With vacant stares, they stood there silently and obediently just like I'd commanded. *Oof, nasty.* I'd been putting off how to deal with them since acquiring the dungeon, but I was done slacking. I needed to figure out what to do about them once and for all. It was time to put my thinking cap on.

Only the wraiths that used to inhabit this dungeon no longer existed. They'd remained hostile and aggressive toward me because they'd hated the very idea of being under the command of a living person, so Nell and I had teamed up to take them all out. But these guys here had accepted their new lot in life, which was why I'd left them alone.

Despite the large numbers we'd destroyed during the dungeon conquest, there were still hundreds of them remaining. By my estimate, anyway. I

would've bet I could stage my own zombie movie without the use of CGI if I used them all. That was how many of them there were.

I needed to make one thing very, very clear, though. In case anyone forgot, I did *not* like undead things. At all. It felt like corpses being used as toys, and that freaked me the hell out.

Except these guys weren't resurrected dead people. Probably. Theoretically, they were similar to my wraith sisters, beings birthed exactly as they were by the dungeon instead of existences with previous lives.

Ergo, to put it extremely bluntly, these undead monsters were nothing more than dolls. Grotesque puppets who acted according to my instructions. Very different from the wraith kiddos, who had their own consciousnesses and personalities.

Although I had to admit, they seemed kinda cute in their own way when I saw these monstrosities behaving so meekly toward me. *You know what? No. Forget I said that.* Still, despite my loathing for the undead, I couldn't muster up the desire to kill them.

"Hey, Rir. Can you communicate with them?"

"Grr..."

I spoke to Fluffrir, aka Rir, my family's beloved pet and the leader-slash-manager of my subordinates. He accompanied his rumble with an expression that said, "Uhhh, I'm pretty sure it'll be impossible for me to understand them."

"Rei, Rui, Roh, what do you three think?"

I'd brought the wraith triplets with me on the off chance they might have some insight. They did sorta kinda fall into the same category of monster as my new subordinates, after all. But when I asked their opinion, they, too, responded by shaking their heads from side to side. *Yeah*, *I figured as much*.

"Hmm. It's probably 'cause they barely have anything resembling minds, huh? Eh, no worries. I'll make sure to use them as my subordinates regardless."

"Grr?"

Rir stared at me, his questioning growl saying, "Are you serious?" I nodded

affirmatively.

"Yup, you heard right. It'd be a waste to exterminate them just because I hate 'em, y'know? And with that settled, starting today, I'm Necromancer Yuki! My undead army, won't you transform this world into one of darkness alongside me and the rest of my allies?! Mwa ha ha ha!"

"What is a ne-kro-man-sir?"

"Dwah?! O-Oh, shit, Lefi, it's you. Don't scare me like that, jeez."

Lefi stood nearby. I had no clue when she'd even shown up, but there she was.

"I decided to check in on you as I had some time on my hands. But, hmm, what a sickening sight indeed. I knew they were here, as I sensed their presence during our bar-buh-cue and fishing trips. Nevertheless, I did not expect there to be so many."

"Yeah, I was shocked too when I gathered them all in one place. I'm almost positive Nell would pass out if she saw this."

"Kah ha! Ah, yes. Now I recall that such things are not her forte. I can understand why after witnessing this, however. Pray tell what you intend to do with these creatures? Incinerate them?"

"Woman, what is it with you and burning everything down? Anyway, I racked my brains about it for a while, but I decided to keep them under my command and put 'em to good use."

"Gah. Surely you jest."

"Ohhh? What's this, dear? You're not even trying to hide your disgust at the idea."

I chuckled when Lefi's face twisted with displeasure.

"My reaction is perfectly natural considering their ghoulish nature. If anything, I would consider anyone unfazed by their husband keeping such things as the peculiar one."

"Well, I can't exactly argue when you put it like that. But these guys are different from the usual undead in that I don't think they actually had former

lives. I'm pretty sure the dungeon created them from scratch just as they are, same as our wraith girls."

I turned my head to look at said triplets and found them up to their usual antics. For whatever reason, the youngest, Roh, was ramming her head into Rir's right ear. The middle sister, Rui, decided to copy her and started doing the same to his left ear. A little ways behind them, the oldest, Rei, was holding her stomach, laughing hysterically.

"Grr..."

Rir looked pleadingly at me like he wanted me to rescue him from them. I pretended not to notice and turned back to Lefi.

"So, yeah, I figured if that's the case, I don't mind keeping them on. Also, even though I hate the undead too, once I saw them obeying me without question like this, it made me feel kinda bad about exterminating them just because they're grotesque mofos. Na mean? That's why I decided it wouldn't hurt to make 'em work for me instead."

"Hmm... Then I will not harangue you overmuch about this, seeing as you acquired this territory through your own efforts. Just remember this one thing: do not show the young ones these ghouls when they are here, as it will negatively impact their social and emotional learning."

"Social and emotional learning"? Did I hear her right?

"R-Right. You're totally right. I'll be careful. But wow. Never in a million years would I have expected the words 'emotional learning' to come out of *your* mouth."

"Hmph. Even I understand what I should prioritize now."

Lefi replied a bit bashfully. For some reason, it made me really happy, and I couldn't stop grinning.

"Wh-What is with that expression?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, ma'am. The only thought in my head right now is 'Damn, do I have the best wife in the world."

"Precisely. Which is why you should be exceedingly grateful that a fine

woman like me deigned to marry an imbecile like you."

"Ha ha ha! I'm grateful. I really am. From the bottom of my heart."

She turned away in a huff at my honest reply—blushing all the way to her ears.

## **Chapter 1: Infected Beast**

"Grr!!!"

Rir's lightning magic struck. For a moment, a brilliant flash of light blinded me.

"Haah, haah... Rir, move!"

As soon as he heard my words, instead of checking the area around him, he activated his special ability, Super Speed, and ran far away. A second later, something black and fuzzy rushed into the spot where my pet had just been. Everything within a thirty-meter radius instantly fell into decay.

It was just like the dark magic used by the No Life King, the demon lord I'd fought not too long ago. But the effect of this went way beyond what his had been capable of. Even if I didn't take a direct hit, just being in that space would strike me out.

As for Rir's lightning magic, it'd dealt no damage despite having landed a direct hit.

"Holy hell, this is ridiculous!"

I swore without thinking.

In terms of appearance, the monster that was currently chasing us could be best described as a creature. Its head sported dozens of eyeballs along with a bizarrely huge gash for a mouth. And instead of a mane or whiskers, it had dozens of tentacles growing out of it. Truly a horrifically disgusting sight.

Yeah, it really was less a monster and more a creature.

Its four-legged body resembled that of a beast of prey like a wolf or a leopard. Of course, it was freaking huge—pretty much twice Rir's size—but the most glaring difference between it and my pet was its complete lack of skin, which totally exposed its muscle fibers. Reminded me of one of those anatomical models of the human body. I could not emphasize enough how absolutely gnarly the thing was. I could literally see its heart.

Wasn't skin an insanely vital organ since it protected the body? So what the heck kind of evolution would something have to have undergone in order to have turned into *that*? It was the kind of enemy that would make you kiss your sanity stat goodbye just from looking at it. Instant cremation without a funeral service. If someone told me it was a clone of the evil god Cthulhu, I would totally believe them.

Race: Parasite Lion

Class: Infected Beast

Level: ?10

The creature was powerful enough that I couldn't view its stats with Analysis, something that hadn't happened in a while. I didn't even know where in the hundreds its level was. Three hundred something? Four? Maybe even five? As things were, I could see levels in the two hundreds with the ability, so it was definitely higher than that.

My money was on it having been taken over by something to transform it into what it was now. Normally, I would've used the dungeon return device to escape the minute I'd laid eyes on it. That was the kind of enemy it was. But it would be very, *very* bad if I left the thing alone.

For reasons unknown to me, it had left the western area of the Demonic Forest and traveled far enough to invade the southern part. If I ignored it, chances were good that it'd keep heading south until it hit the nearest human settlement, the town of Alfiro. If it ended up getting there, I knew the humans had no shot of killing it, which basically assured the town's destruction.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that leaving the creature unchecked would lead to an insane amount of damage being caused. In that case, the humans would definitely form a strike team and dispatch it. The people on that team? Ninety percent chance Nell would be one of them. This thing outclassed her so hard that there was no way she could manage against it.

Frankly, I didn't give a rat's ass about the humans. Yeah, sure, I'd feel sorry for any of them who died, especially if the few I knew were part of the fatalities.

That was hardly reason enough to challenge someone so much more powerful than me, though.

But if it was dangerous enough to hurt Nell too, that was another story. That made this creature an enemy I absolutely, positively could not overlook.

A little background. The monsters in the Demonic Forest rarely left the regions they inhabited, the ones I'd roughly divided into east, west, north, and south. Why? Because of the mana density in each specific area. Monsters loved places with rich concentrations of mana. The reverse was true as well, then—they hated places where the mana was thin. And the western area in the Forest had the densest concentration of mana.

This was all just my own personal theory, but I believed that the monsters living in the Forest had first gathered in the western part, lured in by the thick mana soup. But those who couldn't keep up in the vicious struggle for existence there had been forced to move elsewhere in order to survive. In this case, "elsewhere" was the eastern area, which had the second highest level of mana after the western. And then, finally, the monsters who couldn't even hack it there had headed to the southern area, where the mana density was the thinnest.

Incidentally, the northern area was Lefi's former territory. Although the monster population was higher now than it'd been before, the stronger ones still didn't come this way. Probably because they still sensed her power even though she was cooped up inside the dungeon.

Getting back to my theory, I was of the belief that mana was the reason monsters in the Demonic Forest were clearly segregated based on their strength. According to Leila, there were a few secluded regions in the world with extremely concentrated mana. The monsters living in those places rarely left their habitats there, which pretty much confirmed my theory. It also explained why humanoid species took advantage of monsters' behavior by building their settlements in places where mana density was low.

In conclusion, the stupidly powerful monsters inhabiting the western area had no reason to migrate to the other areas on purpose. They'd basically created their own ecosystem in the western part of the Forest. At least, they *should* 

have.

But. Sometimes. *Sometimes*, there were monsters like this one that tried to move to other areas. Usually, it was due to hunger. Or because they enjoyed the thrill of slaughter.

Whatever the reason, it was nothing but bad luck for us now. I just needed the damn creature to go back to where it'd come from and leave us the hell alone. It can mow down other monsters in the western area for all I care.

"Orochi, Yata, get rid of any monsters along our escape route! Byaku, Seimi, we can handle things here, so help them!"

I used the dungeon's Remote Communication function to basically shout my orders at the rest of my pets. Though they were a lot stronger than when I'd summoned them, it would be impossible for them to take on this disgusting thing. Rir was the only one who even came close.

A single hit from the creature would definitely send them to the next life. You might wonder how I knew this. Well, I'd actually seen with my own eyes what one instance of its magic did to another monster in the western area. It'd snuffed out its life in an instant.

I wanted nothing more than to get the fugg outta here too. If shit *really* hit the fan, though, I planned on throwing away my pride and running back to the dungeon to ask Lefi for help.

If I was being completely honest, though, the situation was already incredibly dicey. The Rot had actually gotten me once. It'd eaten away at my right foot, reaching up to the ankle before I'd hurriedly used a Super Potion to heal myself.

But this was par for the course as far as battles in the Demonic Forest went. Every monster's attacks were crazy lethal, so my job was always to figure out how to avoid those attacks while landing my own. All of which to say that my ability to dodge an opponent's attack had naturally improved. As of right now, I still hadn't sustained a fatal wound. Not even once.

Even so, I was dealing with an opponent whose stats I couldn't check despite me being stronger than before. And I'd learned something else too. Based on the battle so far, this thing didn't give a shit about us. It used its ridiculously powerful magic recklessly against us like we were just annoying, buzzing mosquitoes to crush. But it wasn't actively trying to kill us. Thanks to its sloppy offense, Rir and I could pick up on the moment it entered attack mode, which allowed us to run like hell and avoid it in the nick of time.

Damn. We're nothing more than a housefly to this monster, huh? So far, all we'd been able to do was pester it like this. It'd essentially amounted to buying time since we didn't have a decisive move.

But I decided it was time to mount a hasty—albeit temporary—retreat. Unlike other monsters, this creature didn't even register us as a threat. That meant we had a good chance of being able to escape easily.

"Gargoyle! Kraken! Go after it from a distance using a ranged attack! Doesn't matter if you hit it, just harass it and stall it! If it gets too close, run!"

I gave my magic to earth and water spirits suitable for stopping the thing in its tracks, then used spirit magic to create two pseudo-life-forms capable of attacking automatically. They obeyed my command immediately, spreading out around us. After that, I downed a bottle of the incredibly bitter Super Mana Potion to recover the magic I'd supplied to the spirits and gave an instruction to Rir, who'd been fighting by my side this whole time.

"Rir, change of plans! Don't attack it! We're withdrawing for now!" "Grr?!"

Translation: "We're letting this thing go?!" I didn't have time to explain things to him, though, so I just shouted at him in a rush.

"Yeah, but I have an idea, so just obey me! Sorry, Orochi and Yata, but ixnay my earlier instructions! Ignore the monsters on the road—don't attack them! Orochi, Byaku, Seimi, the three of you go where I tell you to, while you keep an eye on this disgusting thing's movements from the sky, Yata! Report every last detail to me if something happens!"

Then, Rir and I headed for the closest door we could warp from, leaving the infected beast behind.





We retreated and raced to the Demonic Forest's southern area, the section not far from the human town at the very edge of the Forest.

"Yata! Status report!"

I requested an update while rushing to get things ready for a counterattack. He replied to me via Remote Communication, letting me know that there'd been no change. The tentacle fuck was still heading in this direction—right toward Alfiro.

We'd managed to buy a little time through the sacrifice of the spirits I'd unleashed and the poor monsters that'd had the misfortune of happening to be on the path. But Yata estimated the creature would arrive in less than half an hour.

There was no way my plan would backfire. Although if the thing didn't come this way, that worked too. Because my goal in all this was to make sure Nell didn't get assigned an impossible task. So I guess I have no choice but to take it out myself.

Just as I girded my loins for the upcoming battle, a carefree voice spoke from next to me.

"Hmm, yes, I see. It is no wonder I sensed the presence of a powerful monster."

"Uhhh, Mrs. Lefi? Wanna tell me when you got here?"

Lefi. I hadn't even noticed her showing up. Flabbergasted, I questioned her, and she replied ever so casually.

"Oh, well, as I said, I detected the aura of something powerful in your domain, so I thought it prudent to ascertain the situation myself. Just in case, you see."

Real talk, having her here was *incredibly* reassuring. If the creature broke through our line of defense, it would reach the human town in less than an hour. I'd actually just been thinking I should ask her to come here in case my plan failed.

"Lefi... I'm honestly really happy you're here, but—"

"I know. You do not wish for me to interfere, yes? That was my intention from the start. However, should you find yourself unable to deal with this foe yourself, you are more than welcome to come crying to me for help. You are an overgrown man-child, and as your guardian, I will firmly take responsibility for the situation."

Lefi responded playfully, clearly understanding exactly what I wanted to say. Despite the fact that she spent ninety percent of her time being a lazy, goodfor-nothing NEET, she always came through in emergencies like this. My everdependable partner in crime.

"Yeah, sounds good. That said, all you gotta do now is watch. I'll show you that I don't need you to hold my hand and wipe my ass every time I face off against a powerful opponent!"

"Kah ha! Is that so? Then by all means, do show me how you have grown."

Our conversation went a long way toward dispelling the panic I'd been feeling so far. In fact, I felt like I could do anything now. Reassured because I had her next to me, I finished up the last of my preparations while thanking her in my heart.

"Crap! It's here!"

Not even ten minutes later, the nasty-ass tentacle creature slowly, heavily thumped its way out of the depths of the Forest. Blood dripped from its mouth as it chewed noisily on something. It must've eaten one of the monsters on its way here, maybe more.

The pseudo-life-forms I'd created using spirit magic had all reverted to their original spirit forms and disappeared at some point.

"Someone needs to teach you some etiquette, shit stain. And we're the ones who're gonna do it. Guys, time to give this thing a lesson in table manners!"

Roused by my words, my pets howled excitedly, ready to open up a can of whoop ass. The creature didn't react at all when it saw us. No, it just kept running toward us on the path, single-minded in its intent to continue its journey. It didn't even flinch despite Lefi's presence, though I knew for a fact that it was strong enough to feel the pressure of her might.

There's definitely something wrong with it, then. Actually, anyone could've figured that out from a single glance at its appearance.

"Oorah! That's right, come at me, you disgusting abomination! Gives me the willies just looking at those tentacles! And don't get me started on the rest of your freakish body! Maybe do something about that, 'cause I seriously wanna hurl everywhere!"

"I cannot tell if you are provoking it or pleading with it at this point."

I stood a bit ahead of where Lefi and my pets were. While continuing to insult the monster, I brought forth my water dragon and began to attack. The creepy tentacle horror didn't even bother to avoid it, though. It just kept charging straight ahead and let itself be swallowed up. But it didn't take any damage at all and unleashed its dark magic at me on reflex.

The dense magical barrage reminded me of a Gatling gun. If I accidentally let myself get hit, I knew I'd kick the bucket right away. Obviously, I couldn't let that happen, so I desperately flew up into the air to escape as I continued to attack it with my water dragon in an attempt to distract it.

Lured into doing exactly what I wanted it to, the tentacle thing looked up at me—and I immediately activated a dungeon trap. When I did, the ground it was standing on vanished, a pitfall with a radius of fifty meters appearing like a gaping maw in its place. Obeying the law of physics, the creature started falling inside.

"Do it!!!"

My pets sprang into action as soon as I gave them the signal. They started shoving the sediment I'd prepared into the hole. Orochi and Seimi could use poison, so I'd asked them to dump as much as they could into the earthen mix. Although I didn't know if it would work on the monster.

I helped from my hovering position directly above the hole too. I'd crammed as much sand and soil as I could into Inventory, and now, I poured it all out, just like a heavy waterfall. At the same time, I sent several earth dragons I'd created in advance into the hole and let them feast.

The name of my counterstrategy was "Take a Ride to the Center of the World!

I Ain't Scared of You, You Tentacle Freak! I'll Kill Youuu!!!" Yeah, just a little something I'd come up with. As far as the plan itself went, it was pretty simple: dig a pit a kilometer deep, drop the gross thing in, and then bury it under a pile of sand and soil.

The battle up until now had made it crystal clear that our attacks didn't hurt it at all. Therefore, to defeat it, we needed a method that didn't involve us just whaling on it. That'd gotten me thinking—while we'd had the tentacle atrocity under surveillance, I'd been able to verify that its lungs were working because of how visible its heart was through its skinless body.

In short, though it was a grotesque creature, it still breathed. My aim, then? Suffocation. I figured that if it was a living, breathing thing, cutting off its air supply should kill it.

Most of my preparations had revolved around digging this hole. I'd installed countless layers of pitfalls using the dungeon's function *and* we'd all pitched in on the digging. I'd wanted to make it as deep as possible, so it'd taken up until almost the last second to finish it. I'd have been a laughingstock if we hadn't made it in time. Except that it wouldn't have been funny at all.

"Mwa ha ha! Fall, you moro— No, wait. Fall, you crane fly!"

"Why did you intentionally change what you wanted to say?"

It took less than a minute with all of us working together to fill up the hole.

"Harden!"

And once that was done, I spent a buttload of DP to use one of the dungeon's protective functions, Harden, on an area with a one-kilometer radius to ensure the damn creature couldn't get out. With this, I'd done everything I could. If it still wasn't good enough, I would throw in the towel and meekly ask Lefi for her help.

At that moment, an explosive sound came from underground. Next came a series of rattling vibrations, as if the ground were being scraped away. The tentacle monster was obviously rampaging inside the hole.

Nervous, I stood ready to deal with anything that might happen. After a while, though, silence fell. A pleasant surprise awaited me when I went to check how

much DP I had. It'd gone way down because of how much I'd just spent, but now, it was back up. Waaay up. Seemed I'd succeeded in turning the creature into fertilizer.

"Pheeew... We managed. Somehow. Thank Lucifer it didn't have wings."

Relieved, I let out a huge sigh of relief, releasing all the tension that'd built up in my body.

Since it was a monster of the Demonic Forest, I'd accounted for the possibility that it might find a way to crawl its way back up. But it was safe to assume it'd done me a favor and bit the dust.

Dang, the dungeon really is super strong. If I'd been a normal warrior instead of a demon lord, I doubted I could've won against it. Thank you, dungeon.

Thank you, demon lord body.

"Oho. Well done. I honestly thought you would end up begging me for assistance."

"Heh heh heh. Didja see that, Lefi? As long as I have the dungeon on my side, a beast like that can't even be considered an enemy. The day when I require your aid may never come again."

"Is that so? Then henceforth, I shall trust in your power and gorge myself on confections without a care in the world when something appears."

"No, I'm sorry. I was lying. The day when I require your aid will totally come again, so I'm begging you to help me if I can't help myself."

"While it is never a bad thing to be honest about your deficiencies, I am surprised you succumbed so easily..."

Lefi smiled in exasperation. Then, suddenly, she glanced up toward the sky.

"Huh? What's the matter?"

"Hmm... This should not pose a problem. It was nothing. Now, then. I shall make my return to the castle. And you, Yuki? What will you do now?"

"I'll go home after I clean up here. I'm planning on being back before dinner, but this might take a while, so if I don't make it in time, go ahead and eat without me."

"Very well. I will inform the others."

Once she replied, she flew off in the direction of our home.

"Oookaaay, just gotta push through this last bit. Hey, guys, mind helping me out for a little longer? We need to do something about all the damage that thing caused."

Each of my pets answered affirmatively, but right after, Yata told me that something was coming close to us from the sky. Immediately, I pulled up Maps to check, and...yup, there was a blip. I hadn't noticed because I'd kept it open the whole time to get a bead on the tentacle horror's location. It seemed like it was another intruder given that the dot was red. But my Scout ability wasn't reacting even though the red dot was well within range. The ability worked by sensing the target's hostility and warning me accordingly, so it being silent meant that whoever or whatever the red dot was, it didn't hold any animosity toward me.

And based on what I saw on Maps, the blip was...

I waited there for a while before the shadow eventually descended to the point it could be seen with the naked eye.

"So, you hunted the beast, eh? As I expected from the Supreme Dragon's husband."

The blip was a dragon. One who looked familiar.

"Bordagaen, right? Wait, you were watching the whole time?"

"Indeed. Originally, that beast spawned near our dwelling. I've been monitoring it closely ever since, in case I needed to destroy it were it to come too far this way. But when I saw you and yours move to eliminate it, Your Lordship, I decided it would be a good opportunity to observe instead."

He was one of the dragons living in the Demonic Forest. I thought of them as neighbors. Well, insofar as they lived on the mountain one over from our home, anyway.

Bordagaen had been part of the dragon horde that'd helped us—possibly because they'd been forced to by Lefi—when we'd gone to rescue Iluna from

the humans way back when. If I remembered right, he was basically the leader of the dragons living in the Forest. And I had a pretty good idea why he'd stayed away until now. He was probably afraid of Lefi. And not just him either. The other dragons probably were too, which explained why they kept their interactions with her to an extreme minimum. They basically acted like she was a tyrant they lived in fear of. This particular dragon talked to me relatively normally, but the rest avoided me since I was Lefi's husband.

"Do you know what the monster was? It looked like it was being parasitized by something."

"Correct. That grotesque form was a result of it being invaded by a parasite."

According to Bordagaen, the monster had been under the complete control of a parasite. It was the type of parasite that burrowed into carrion, allowing it to infect whatever animal consumed the dead flesh. Once within the host, it would gradually devour it from the inside. Then, when it eventually gained control over the host's body, it would manipulate it, killing and rampaging in order to obtain food so it could reproduce. And finally, when the parasite had had enough, it would kill its host, turning the corpse into a new seedbed where it and its offspring would lie in wait for another animal or monster to eat them.

The parasite's reproductive ability wasn't that high, so there was no danger of it multiplying to pandemic proportions, but apparently, it could also parasitize humanoid species. You could bet your ass I planned on being even more diligent about cooking monster meat moving forward.

"I'm getting the heebie-jeebies just listening to you talk about the way it works... Can I ask you another question? Do you know why it was heading specifically for the human town?"

"When infected by that parasite, the host organism's appetite changes in a particular and peculiar manner. Evidently, humans entered the Forest some time ago and an infected monster ate them, so the parasite must have acquired a taste for humans."

"Humans did? I'm surprised they even made it that far."

Basically, they'd made it all the way to the western area of the Demonic Forest. The southern area was one thing since the monsters there were weak,

but infiltrating the western region was nowhere near easy. Maybe they'd gotten a little too confident and wound up being eaten instead.

"They were utilizing some sort of tool to keep monsters at bay while they searched for something. But they became overly reliant on said tool. By the time they realized something was wrong with one of their fellows, it was too late, and they all perished."

Searching for something, huh? I was definitely curious about what they'd been doing. Too bad they'd ended up as monster prey. Not only that, but it was their fault I'd gone to all this trouble today too. An extremely annoying and troubling tale.

"Monsters infected by the parasite are incredibly tenacious. They present a challenge even for us when we confront them. For you to have killed one in such a short time and without sustaining any injuries makes a humanoid like you worthy of the Dragon King's seat."

"You say that, but the whole Dragon King thing just sort of happened, y'know? Uhhh, just to be clear, though, that doesn't mean I'm looking for a fight with the title at stake. Especially since I'm weaker than you all."

"As if we dragons would do such a thing. We're not beasts without reason. It's true that in the past the Dragon King was most often a powerful dragon, but if we were to eliminate an alien existence such as yourself from the throne every time, the natural order would be disrupted. While there may be young dragons who carry resentment within them at the state of things, I'd appreciate it if you didn't lump us all together with those greenhorns."

Bordagaen chided me immediately with his entirely sound argument.

"Yeah, okay, you're totally right. Sorry for being rude."

"It's fine. Though I would have you know something important, Your Lordship. Since you are not a dragon, words are the only way you can understand, so let me tell you this. We dragons cannot fundamentally defy the Dragon King."

"What do you mean?"

In the explanation for the Dragon King title, I remembered reading the effect "Charisma increases tremendously when in the presence of dragonkind." Was

he saying it was even more powerful than I imagined?

"Only a few are capable of defying the Dragon King. Excluding those, the rest of us obey without question. It's proof of how much weight the title holds for dragonkind. As long as the Dragon King is not a lawless one, we have no reason to pick a quarrel."

Then was that damned dragon one of the special few who could oppose the Dragon King? He was definitely the embodiment of a rebellious spirit, so it *did* make sense.

And of course, it went without saying that Lefi fell into that category too.

"How do I put this... You dragons are a lot more peaceful than I thought. I only really have Lefi and the previous Dragon King, that black dragon, to base my impression of dragonkind on, so I just assumed you were all violent."

"They are the exceptions to the norm."

He continued in a wry tone.

"As a species, we are powerful. The most powerful. Therefore, we have no interest in fighting. We can defeat most opponents. Thus, we would much rather spend our days basking in the sun's rays, especially since that particular activity gives us such pleasure. And though most of us don't love sweet things as much as a certain Supreme Dragon, as long as we can indulge ourselves occasionally in a spot of honey or delicious meat, we are more than happy."

Theeen...does that make Lefi's laziness a special characteristic of dragonkind? Fighting didn't appeal to them because of their overwhelming power, which was why they preferred taking it easy, huh? A shockingly rational species, to be honest. Jury was still out on the laziness thing, but they were a lot more mature and ordinary than I would've ever imagined. Or maybe only the dragons living in the Demonic Forest were blessed with such a particular disposition.

"Wait. I just thought of something. The Dragon King title has an effect on you guys, right? But aren't you different from the dragons living in the original settlement?"

"Indeed we are. Though you'll find we are close enough, as our common ancestors are not so far in the past when you trace back our bloodlines. Beyond

that, the Dragon Hamlet is home to the largest population of dragons in the world. Therefore, everyone pays respect to the Dragon King who rules there."

So, the largest dragon community exists in the Dragon Hamlet, huh? Fascinating. It might not necessarily have been a metropolis in the normal sense of the word, but I was sure it was an important place for all of dragonkind. Aaand I was its current king.

Actually, I'd been thinking of taking a trip there for a while now. Figured it was the right thing to do considering my position and all. But every time I suggested it, Lefi would make a face, so I'd kept putting it off until now.

"The Dragon Hamlet... Might be a good idea to drop in at least once and say hi."



"No."

"Madam Lefi—"

"No."

"Begging your pardon, Madam Lefi, but might you allow me to finish? All I've said so far is, 'Hey, so, you know the Dragon Hamlet—' and I would very much like to tell you the rest."

"It is not difficult to surmise what comes after. You wish me to accompany you to the Dragon Hamlet, do you not? Well, my answer is no. I will not be going."

I couldn't help but smile at Lefi, who'd become incredibly stubborn on the topic. I'd known she had a strong aversion to the Dragon Hamlet, but I'd had no idea it was *this* bad.

"I know precisely what inspired this too. I wager that Bordagaen, who had been watching us from above, instilled some ideas in your head, did he not?"

"He didn't do it on purpose. He just told me what it means to be a Dragon King and I came up with the idea all on my own."

"Grr... He should have minded his own business. Later, I shall pummel him until every last scale flakes off."

"Whoa, hey, jeez, please don't. He's the only dragon who actually talks to me. Plus, he's a really good neighbor..."

I pleaded with her to stop because of course I'd feel bad if she beat his ass for something like this. Except Lefi replied to me with a puzzled look on her face.

"Hmm? What are you talking about? I will have you know that he was quite the rascal in his younger days. Though he was not as foolish as a certain black dragon, he arrived in the Demonic Forest after overcoming the other dragons' opposition only to challenge me constantly to fights, spouting nonsense such as 'I'll show you a dragon's true nature.'"

Huh? R-Really? He was a rascal? Huh. Maybe it was because dragons also went through a period in their lives plagued by main character syndrome? Ooh, then maybe he always runs away from Lefi now because he doesn't wanna remember his embarrassing past.

"O-Okay, he might have been like that back then, but he's a super normal dragon now, so, like, cut him some slack. B-Besides, I wanna show you off to all the dragons you know. Be like, 'Hey! This is my wife! Hands off!'"

"Mrgh..."

Her tail twitched.

"The reason you're not so fond of the Dragon Hamlet is because the other dragons annoyed you, right? But since I'm the Dragon King now and you're my wife, I don't think anyone is gonna pester you to become the Dragon King anymore. Because honestly, in terms of power, you're essentially already a Dragon King yourself."

"Hmm..."

She'd figure out that my line of reasoning didn't hold water if she actually thought about it a little. But I pressed my argument so confidently and matter-of-factly that she didn't do that. I could tell I'd successfully persuaded her because the expression on her face was saying, "Oh, I think you may be right..."

"Don't you wanna see the shocked looks on your old acquaintances' faces too? I bet they'll be stunned speechless when they find out you got yourself a man."

"Mm... I do, in fact, want to see that."

Winner, winner, chicken dinner.

"Then go with me. Please, please, please. Just once is enough. I can't get there without you since I don't even know where it is. Also, I want you to protect me on the off chance they try to fight me 'cause they think stuff like, 'A demon lord as the Dragon King?! Know your place!' I have no idea how well I'll be able to fight when I'm somewhere that isn't part of my dungeon's territory, y'know? You're the only one I can rely on."

The mature dragons probably wouldn't start shit, but the younger ones might be resentful enough to do exactly that. Bordagaen had said as much too. That aside, just like I knew she would, Lefi took the bait thanks to my "You're the only one I can rely on" line. Her nose went up haughtily in the air and her chest puffed out with pride as she spoke.

"It would seem I have no other choice! Very well. If you are so insistent on this, I shall accompany you. Good grief, you truly are useless without me!"

I felt a prick of annoyance at how comfortable she was getting on her high horse. I couldn't risk pissing her off or else she'd change her mind about going just to spite me, though, so I just smiled cheerfully and kept my mouth shut.

"Honestly, you cannot understand the struggles of a capable woman. Say it once more, that I am the only one you can rely on."

"Ugh... Madam Lefi, you are the only one I can rely on."

"Your words lack passion! You must say them in such a way that they rouse my motivation. For you see, if you do not, I may change my mind."

Oh, for the love of...

"L-Lady Lefi, you're the only one I can rely on! There's no one else like you in the world, my lady! You're the strongest there is! My lady, please! I want you to come with me!"

"For some reason, hearing you say all that—and in such a manner, no less—suddenly makes me feel uneasy. Sickened, almost."

"Damn you, you little witch! You get like this every time I behave humbly! The

only thing you'd even be good for on this trip is being my guide, you good-fornothing dragon!"

"What?! I am the good-for-nothing?! Th-Then I take it you are fine with me not accompanying you to the Dragon Hamlet!"

"Put a sock in it! If you think you can hold that over my head to talk shit about me, you've got another thing coming, stupid!"

"Aaargh! You have done it now! I will not go with you! I will not go to the Dragon Hamlet anymore!"

"How old even are you?! Stop acting like a little kid already!"

While Lefi and I screamed at each other, Lew interjected timidly.

"Um...I'm not sure if you two know this, but once in a while, your arguments can get *very* immature."

"It's only natural for birds of a feather, hm?"

"Whenever I see Yukiki and Lady Lefifi getting along like this, it always makes me smile for some reason!"

"You're right, Iluna. I feel calm watching them."

"You lot! This is not a spectacle for you to enjoy!"

"Yeah, what she said! Don't just use us as fodder to relax!"

"Gah, they saw us. You two, run!"

Lew, Leila, and Iluna fled, laughing hysterically the whole time.

## **Chapter 2: To the Dragon Hamlet**

"All right, we're heading out. Pretty sure you both know how to use that, so call me if anything happens, okay?"

"Sir, yes, sir! We'll definitely use this magical device if something happens!"

"Lew and I will be sure to contact you if we're unable to handle the situation."

Lew nodded vigorously, a Communication Orb: Revamped in her hands. Leila inclined her head as well, silently telling us that they could manage. The Revamped version ate up a user's magic like nobody's business. If Lew and Leila used it, their mana would be gone in a minute. But they had more than enough magical energy to use the Orb to send out a distress signal.

By the way, I'd also left a ton of useful items in the throne room for them. Things like Super Potions and Super Mana Potions. They knew how to use all of them since I'd been going on more and more trips lately.

"Rir, I'm leaving the dungeon's defense in your paws. Lefi won't be here this time, so if you notice anything weird happening in the Demonic Forest, let someone in the dungeon know right away."

"Grr."

Among my pets, Rir was the only one with the authority to control the dungeon. Dude was ridiculously smart, meaning he understood how to operate its functions. If we were talking IQ, I was almost positive his was way higher than any of ours. And on a completely related but also unrelated note, when I was explaining to him how to use the interface, it'd honestly been super heartwarming to watch him mess around with the display using his paw. In the end, using his nose had turned out to be the easiest way for him to use it.

"Lasses, listen well. Do not eat too many of the snacks, especially the confections. I know they are all delicious, but Leila's cooking is just as delectable. If you eat too many of the snacks, you will not have room for her meals."

"Okay!"

Iluna and Shii responded in unison. En didn't say anything because she was in her greatsword form. Naturally, I was taking her with us.

It moved me immensely to see Lefi saying something a parent would. Times like these reminded me that she was technically an elder for all of us. By a thousand years too. Which was why it would've been nice if she *acted* like one a little more.

"Okey dokey, we'll be back!"

Carrying sword En on my shoulder, Lefi and I left the dungeon.



"So, wife of mine, how far away is the Dragon Hamlet?"

I asked Lefi that while flapping the two pairs of wings on my back.

"Hmm. A fair distance, I would wager. I believe it will take us close to four consecutive days of flight to reach it."

"Four days... Dang, that's a lot."

I had enough food and clothes to last us a month, so there were no problems on the supply front. But flying for four days straight would be seriously freaking exhausting.

"The reason is that it is located on the edge of the continent. It is not a problem for us dragons to reach it as we can fly, but the journey is quite perilous for the wingless if they wish to come to us. Just like our home in the Demonic Forest is considered to be in a secluded region, the same is said of the Dragon Hamlet."

"Whoa, interesting. Does that mean the monsters there are strong too?"

"Indeed they are. As the place is rich in mana, it naturally attracts powerful creatures to settle down there."

"It sounds like the environment is pretty similar to the Demonic Forest, huh? What does the Dragon Hamlet actually look like inside? It's basically like a town or city for dragons, right?"

"Nothing. It has nothing interesting whatsoever. A very boring place."

Lefi harrumphed. Her attitude made me kinda suspicious, so I pressed her.

"Okay, so, I know you hate that place, but what do you hate about it, exactly?"

She thought about my question silently for a while before muttering an answer.

"Everything in that place is stagnant."

"Stagnant?"

When I repeated the word in confusion, my wife nodded firmly.

"Change is almost nonexistent for dragons. They do nothing, nothing happens, and the passage of time brings no change like it does to the humanoids, so everything is stagnant. I hated all of that, and the constant badgering to become the Dragon King also aggravated me, so I fled. But in the end, I, too, realized that I was a dragon, just like them. Nothing changed in my new nest. Until I met you, I spent my days the same way I had in the Hamlet—doing nothing as time wore on tediously and colorlessly."

"I guess that means the dragons don't really have a culture, then?"

"'Culture,' hm? That is a good way to phrase it. Unlike the humanoid species, we dragons do not have a culture. In the first place, we lack the appropriate bodies to create things. Strength is our one and only merit. As a species, we bring only destruction because we cannot create. Nothing but a blight upon the world."

Lefi spat those words, loathing clear as day in her voice.

Damn... So does she hate the very nature of the dragons as a race?

I couldn't say anything in response. But I knew I *should* say something, so I opened and closed my mouth like an idiot, trying to think of the right words. Maybe she saw right through me, because she softened her tone a little before continuing.

"In any case, that is what the Dragon Hamlet is like. The old coots in particular, who are the de facto leaders, are especially idle. Obviously, it is not

that I do not enjoy relaxing, but even I could not bear a hundred years of doing nothing, remaining motionless in the same place, let alone two hundred or more. Such asceticism is beyond what I can endure."

"Yeaaahhh... Not even sure you can call it 'relaxing' when it's on that scale."

If I stood in one spot for a century, I would've for sure lost my mind. Which reminded me, Bordagaen had said he liked taking it easy too. When he'd told me that, it'd made me think that dragons were way more chill and normal than I'd originally assumed they were. Given their extremely long life spans, though, the scale in which they saw time clearly went way beyond anything I could've ever imagined.

"Tis because we are a race that lives for millennia. A year or two for us is akin to a day or two for humanoids. Although I myself did not know that days could be so long until I lived with you."

"Well, I guess we're on the same wavelength, then. Until I met you—all of you—I had no idea every day could be so long. In a good way, of course. Before then, I'd lived my life out of habit, just time passing by."

"You are referring to your old life, yes? Kah ha! Truly fascinating how many profound mysteries fill the world."

"For real. Speaking of mysteries, I personally count your bottomless stomach as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Just sayin'."

"In that case, I shall include your odd power to attract wee lasses as one such mystery."

We glanced at each other, then burst out laughing at the same time. After that, we passed a good while in companionable silence before I spoke again.

"Hey, Lefi. I wanna go back to something we talked about."

"Hmm?"

Lefi faced me inquiringly, and I thought carefully for a bit before continuing.

"I... I think you might hate dragons as a whole."

I know how your own power frustrates you sometimes. You'll tell me, "I'll protect you" with a fearless smile, but I know that underneath, you're thinking

to yourself, "Because it's all I can do."

"But hear me out. I was able to meet you *because* you're a dragon. And not just any dragon, but the world's strongest dragon. Because your strength led to you living in the Demonic Forest. I couldn't have met you if any of those elements, which make up who you are today, were missing. So, uh...from the bottom of my heart, I'm glad you are the way you are. I'm glad you're a dragon —is what I'm trying to say, I guess."

I had a feeling I could've phrased all that better, but Lefi stared at me, wideeyed. A few beats of silence later, she chuckled.

"Hmm... Well, if you are going to say such things, it makes it much harder for me to disparage my own race, eh? In which case, I, too, shall be grateful for my existence as a dragon, as it allowed me to meet you."

She smiled softly at me. Then, she pulled herself together and continued.

"Now, it is time for us to fly with spirit. We have barely traveled a tenth of the distance to the Hamlet."

"Roger that, Houston. Still got a long way to go, huh? Might as well enjoy the flight, then."



"Wings. One of them has a tail and horns too. You scum! You're demons! If you try to invade us, we'll shoot you down!"

"Ooh. Dragoons, eh?"

Back on Earth, there'd been regiments in old-school militaries made up of soldiers called "dragoons," who'd used firearms while on horseback. But in this world, dragoons were literally what they sounded like—soldiers riding dragons in the sky. They weren't riding actual dragons, though. Instead, they were mounted on wyverns, which were demi-dragons that couldn't speak or use language at all. Honestly, the dragoons here looked cool as hell.

Based on their equipment, it didn't look like they were soldiers of the Kingdom of Alisia, a country I'd visited a whole bunch of times by now. The design on their armor was completely different. Three kilometers ahead, I could

see a fortress, so they had to have flown out of there.

The dragoons pointed their weapons at us. They were totally hostile. Unfortunately for them, the wyverns were scared shitless of Lefi. It looked like they were being forced to fly by their riders, but they kept shying away and curling in on themselves. I could see the dragoons doing their best to pacify them.

Hmm. What to do, what to do.

"Lefi, which way is the Dragon Hamlet?"

"On the other side of the dominion they claim."

Basically, we needed to break through them. I hesitated to get violent with soldiers who were just doing their jobs, though. Especially because they hadn't just attacked us right off the bat even though we were demons. They'd given us a warning and everything, which made it all the harder to hurt them now.

As I went back and forth over what to do, Lefi turned to face the dragoon squad. She narrowed her eyes sharply and stared coldly at them.

"You there. Do you know whose flight you are currently impeding?"



"What?! How dare a girl like you speak to me— D-Dandai! What's wrong?!"

Immediately, the wyvern flying directly in front of us stopped moving. In a panic, its rider tried to make it listen to him while pulling on the reins.

Lefi hadn't been talking to the dragoon. Nope, she'd directed her remark to his wyvern. Glared at by someone who overwhelmingly outclassed it in terms of power, the wyvern had apparently decided to prioritize Lefi's orders rather than its own rider's. The moment she'd spoken, it'd jerked in fear, then frozen as if saying, "P-Please, go ahead..."

It wasn't so much that it understood Lefi's words but her anger directed in its direction. I felt kinda sorry for it. *Stay strong, buddy.* 

"Right, then. This is our chance. Come, Yuki."

"Y-You got it, boss. Man, I sure am glad you're around."

"C-Come on, Dandai, fly for daddy! You can do it! H-Hey, you two! Stop right there!"

We gave the desperate soldier the slip by just flying straight ahead, continuing on our journey.



"So this is where you were, Captain! An emergency mobilization request has come in from Fort Granda! Two unknown demon intruders flew over the domain. The dragoon squadron moved to intercept them, but they cast some sort of suspicious magic on the wyverns, and now they won't listen to their riders."

"You're joking, right? I'm supposed to be off duty today."

Zelim, the man whom the soldier had called "Captain," was at a restaurant for lunch. After hearing the report, he stopped eating, not even bothering to hide his displeasure.

"I'm very sorry, sir. But at the moment, we have no idea what they're up to. At this rate, they may invade the capital, so Fort Granda is requesting that you at the very least confirm their identities." "Did they take down any of our people?"

"No, sir. The demons only stopped the wyverns' movements. They didn't attack, so no injuries to report. But they're flying so terrifyingly fast that the dragoons can barely keep up with them."

"Hmm, which might mean this is simply a show of force or something along those lines. Well, whatever the case, I understand and will head over soon. Get everyone in our unit ready."

"Already done, sir. All gathered and ready to depart at your order."

The unspoken implication of his subordinate's words and his barely concealed impatience told Zelim that the soldier really meant, "Get a move on." Zelim replied nonchalantly, though whether he affected such a breezy tone on purpose or subconsciously was anyone's guess.

"Oh, is that right? Sure makes a man happy to know he has such fine, upstanding people at his beck and call. Yes, indeed. Ma'am, can I get the bill, please!"

"Goddammit! This is all your fault! If you hadn't intimidated every last one of them from head to tail, we wouldn't have an entire freaking battalion of dragoons on our asses! What the hell are we supposed to do now?!"

"Hmph! As far as I am concerned, you should be grateful that we are still moving forward, considering you cannot even think of a solution! Regardless, all we must do is go through them and our problem is solved. Is that not correct?"

"No, it's not correct! We're basically surrounded at this point! It looks like there are at least three squads of them!"

When Zelim arrived at the scene, he found the suspicious man and woman bickering.

"Whoa, whoa..."

"Are the units in Fort Granda even doing their jobs? Wait, Captain? Why are you here?"

It didn't take long for his troops to become exasperated by the sight of the

duo holding what amounted to a lovers' quarrel. Zelim, however, was frozen stiff. He and he alone was shaking with fear.

What... What in the world was that? The young girl in the pair. She looked to be a sweet little girl, like any her age.

But that description didn't fit her at all. He could feel an enormous, overwhelming pressure coming from her. It felt like terror had a death grip on his heart.

Had she done something to him? No. She wasn't doing anything at all. His body was just trembling from the sheer gulf in power between them. Was this the same reason the wyverns had become unable to move?

It was well-known that, unlike humans, monsters and other creatures could instinctively sense differences in strength. In fact, Zelim could clearly tell how frightened his own mount was. As a dragoon captain, he'd been given a zilant, the highest-ranking of the demi-dragons. Zilants were powerful enough to easily rout weaker monsters and normal demons. But his companion knew. It knew how exceedingly low its rank was in comparison to *that*.

Zelim could sense pressure coming from the man as well. Not as much as was coming from the girl, but enough so that he could walk shoulder to shoulder with her. Which made him think that the man could trounce every single person here if he felt like it.

They were both so powerful, it amazed him that his comrades couldn't feel the force radiating from them. Or maybe they *did* feel it to some extent but thought nothing of it because the two were demons. After all, demons were stronger than humans. That preconception was most likely the reason no one else here noticed how abnormal the man and girl actually were.

Even as he swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth from fear, Zelim activated Analysis out of a sense of duty. That he possessed such an ability was the biggest reason he'd been appointed to the post of captain. When he did...

Ah, I see.

Despite feeling strangely satisfied at discovering the girl's true identity, he started barking orders.

"All of you, fall back. Do not, I repeat, do not engage. I will deal with them."

Zelim's subordinates were slightly taken aback by the air of desperation around him, which was very different from his usual carefree attitude. Still, they obeyed his instructions and retreated. The soldiers who had first encircled the duo also withdrew since he was currently the highest-ranking officer among them.

It relieved him to see his comrades follow his commands. With their safety assured, he and his mount drew closer to the bickering pair, who hadn't paid any heed to them whatsoever.

"Good grief, you never let a single thing go! What are you, some sort of haranguing mother-in-law?!"

"Oh my! How very rude! This 'mother-in-law' is only thinking of *your* well-being, yet you treat her so poorly! And I suggest you look inside yourself before casting stones, dearie!"

"Stop using that disgusting manner of speech! It makes my skin crawl!"

"Uhhh, excuse me for interrupting. I'm Captain Zelim, belonging to the Northern Front Forces of the Ellane Allied Federation. Might I inquire about the reason for your visit here today?"

His words jerked the two of them back to their senses as they recalled the situation they were in. They stopped arguing immediately. The man cleared his throat, perhaps embarrassed at having their exchange witnessed by everyone in the vicinity. Then, he spoke.

"It's nothing serious. Um, I guess you could say we're going home to meet the parents? Well, I'm not, if you wanna get technical. I'm just along for the ride. And we came this way by chance on the way there."

"Going home to meet the parents..."

Based on the man's words, Zelim realized that the one who was returning home was the girl—the Supreme Dragon. *A dragon's journey home after a long period away...* If he remembered right, there was an unexplored region called the Dragon Hamlet far, far beyond this country. *And that was where they were heading, eh?* 

Unlike the girl's information, the man's seemed to be obstructed, as Zelim couldn't determine his race even using Analysis. However, Zelim was almost positive he wasn't a dragon. He didn't feel like a therianthrope or demi-human either, so his subordinates' guess of him being a demon was most likely correct.

Perhaps he was the girl's chaperone? Actually, the details didn't matter. Not in this situation. If all they wanted was to pass through this country on their way to their destination, he would let them.

"Understood. Then please, take this. As long as you have this note, you can go in and out of anywhere in the country as you so choose. In addition, I'll make sure to inform the military that you aren't a threat."

"C-Captain, what are you doing?!"

Zelim silenced his shocked subordinate with a hard stare.

"Ooh, this'll come in handy. Thanks a bunch for your consideration. I was really worried about what to do if we had to keep dealing with something like this for the rest of the trip. Oh, hey, while I have you here, would you happen to have any recommendations for lodging up ahead? I'd reeeally appreciate it if you did. We need to find somewhere soon to bed down for the night, ya feel?"

When he heard the man's words, the muscles in Zelim's face spasmed for a moment because all he wanted was for them to leave now and never come back. But he controlled himself and maintained the polite smile on his face as he replied.

"L-Lodgings, yes? Hmm, let me think... Right. Ten kilometers ahead, you'll find one of our country's towns. There's a very good hotel there, so if you'd like, I can guide you."

What he meant was, "I'll be taking the opportunity to surveil you if you accept." Though he wondered what to do if they expressed displeasure, he still made the suggestion even as a cold sweat trickled down his back...

"Oh, really? Then yeah, I'll take you up on your offer. Lefi, you good with that too?"

"Yes, I have no issue with it."

They both agreed readily, not the least bit perturbed. When Zelim sighed in relief, the man talked to him in a friendly tone.

"Hey, you don't have to be so worried, dude. You probably already know this, but we're not gonna do anything bad. We really only just wanna pass through. Tomorrow morning, we'll leave with no fuss. You won't even know we were here."

Zelim froze unwittingly. The man's words made it seem like he'd seen right through him.

Tarnation! Today was supposed to be my day off too!

He cried out inside, but naturally, everyone around him was oblivious to his inner turmoil.



The kind soldier guided us to a lavish hotel. We were eating dinner in its restaurant.

"Man, this is a really nice hotel, huh? Even the food is beautiful, not to mention delicious. That old soldier did us a real solid recommending it to us."

"Indeed. Moreover, he was kind enough to handle the complicated lodging procedures on our behalf. He saved us quite a bit of trouble. Ah, En, the juices from the meat are dripping."

"Mm...?"

"Here, turn to me. I shall wipe them off."

En didn't know where the juices were dripping, so she looked down at her clothes to check. Shaking her head ruefully, Lefi picked up a napkin and set to work. Watching them made me incredibly happy, and I couldn't help smiling a little.

All right, time to set the record straight. I knew the soldier hadn't brought us here solely out of the kindness of his heart. I could see people who looked like spies all over the place keeping an eye on us. In fact, it seemed like a lot of military types worked here as staff, and that the hotel itself had deep ties to this country's military.

The older soldier who'd talked to us had seemed kinda high up on the ladder, and I guessed that he had Analysis, so I was pretty sure he knew who Lefi was. Unlike me, who hid all my stats, she made her Supreme Dragon title visible to everyone. So I totally understood his need to keep an eye on us since, from his perspective, she was basically a nuclear warhead walking around in his country. He and his people needed to be ready to deal with us in case something happened.

On a totally unrelated note, the looks on their faces when I'd suddenly taken En out of Inventory and she'd used her Anthropomorphization ability had been priceless. The people watching us had been so shocked that they'd stopped moving entirely, their eyes as wide as dinner plates. It was absolutely hilarious.

En used to hate being stored in Inventory, but thankfully, she'd gotten used to it with time. Nowadays, she didn't send me her thoughts about being in there. Having said that, I had no doubt that it would be boring as hell to be left in there for a long time, so I made sure to take her out both for breaks during the day and at night once we'd gotten to wherever it was we were staying. Like now, for example.

According to En, the inside of Inventory felt like "a futon at night." The "night" part had scared her for a while in the beginning, but once the "futon" part had gotten stronger and more familiar, the inside of Inventory had actually become comfortable for her. She didn't hate it anymore.

Apparently, a huge part of that had to do with the fact that she could feel my magical energy in there really well. Something like that, anyway. To be honest, I hadn't really understood everything she'd said. But the most important thing was that I wasn't forcing her whenever I put her in there, so that was a huge relief. In a perfect world, I'd get to carry her around in her sword form all the time. I would've loved that. The problem, though, was she was ridiculously heavy as a greatsword, which would make long journeys kinda tough even on me. *That just means I gotta get stronger*.

"I just realized that it's been a while since we've gone on a trip together."

"Indeed. For one reason or another, much of my time since meeting you has been spent in your dungeon."

I tried to think about who I'd gone on the most trips with. Aside from En, it had to be Nell, whose work was in the outside world. The more I thought about it, the more I realized Lefi and I had hardly ever gone outside together.

But her just being in the dungeon was a huge weight off my shoulders whenever I needed to leave. I never had to worry about anything with her there. It was a big reason I'd been able to go on those excursions with Nell in the first place.

"Truly, my lady, I cannot express to you my gratitude for holding down the fort while I'm out. It's all thanks to you that I can leave the dungeon without any anxiety."

"Kah ha! Be at ease. As one half of our pair, it is my duty to protect our home."

My wife gave me a very manly smile with those words.

Dearest Mrs. Lefi, you look very cool right now. Very cool. But if I can be honest for a second? You have meat juice dripping down your chin just like En did a few minutes ago. In fact, it's all over your extremely confident face.

I wasn't sure if I should point that out to her.

"Lefifi...you're dripping. I'll wipe it."

"Wha— Ah, y-yes..."

In a reversal of the earlier roles, En did her best to wipe up Lefi's mess. Cheeks flushed, Lefi pursed her lips in embarrassment. Even if it wasn't her intention, her attitude warmed my heart.

For a while after that, we continued enjoying our dinner tremendously. When there was a pause between the courses being delivered to our table, I turned to Lefi and spoke.

"Hey, Lefi, I was wondering. Are we gonna keep flying over this country? If we are, I'd rather avoid what happened today. We should fly around human settlements as much as possible and only go to towns or villages for a place to stay at night. If we can't find any, we can just sleep under the stars. That's what I was thinking, anyway."

Lefi frowned in thought at my words. She looked a little worried, herself.

"You bring up a fair point. Frankly speaking, I have not flown through this area in close to a century now. I was surprised by how much has changed since then, which means my memory is not very reliable here. The speed with which humanoid species, especially humans, advance is astoundingly high. Regardless of how unreliable my memory may be, however, I can tell you for certain that this town did not exist a hundred years ago."

Ahhh, okay. I get it now. No surprise the geography had changed over the course of a hundred years.

"As far as I can recall, I *feel* like there was another country on the way to the Dragon Hamlet. Nevertheless, you are correct. It will be irksome to say the least if we are hounded again. Thus, we shall stay away from human settlements as far as my memory allows."

"Please and thank you. Even we'd be no match if we spent the rest of the trip having to deal with armies like we did today. We got lucky today because of the reasonable captain with Analysis, which is why we can take it easy like we are now. But anybody who didn't know what you are probably would've just attacked us, no questions asked."

"We will deal with that when the time comes. And when the time does come, I will simply annihilate our opponents."

"Yup...I'll fight too," chimed En.

I chuckled at their determined expressions. The two of them were already rarin' to go.

"R-Right. Of course we will. But I'd rather not let it get to that point if at all possible. Wouldn't it be nice to just enjoy this trip and get home without incident?"

"I suppose I do not disagree. Fine, then. We shall do our best to take a route uninhabited by people. It might end up being a roundabout course, however."

"I'm totally okay with that. Let's take our time, relax, and have fun. Right, En? You wanna take it easy too, dontcha?"

"As long...as I'm with you two, anything is fine."

"Ha ha! Oh, yeah? Anything's good as long as we're together, you say?"

I practically melted at En's adorable comment. With a laugh, I patted her head.



"So, how are our guests doing?"

"They're just like any other happy family, sir. They ate, chatted, then went as their cozy trio into their room. But, Captain, is that *really* the legendary Supreme Dragon?"

The expression on Zelim's face was indescribable as he replied to his puzzled subordinate.

"Aye. I have no doubt about that. No doubt whatsoever. Except...she's very different from the tales."

The mystery started with why a dragon had even taken on the form of a human girl. There was no denying her true identity based on the overwhelming aura radiating from her. But he also understood his subordinate's misgivings.

Perhaps they were using some sort of magic, because at present, neither the girl nor the man had any demonic parts like wings or horns visible. For all intents and purposes, they looked just like ordinary humans. And Zelim knew that this was only strengthening his subordinate's doubts.

"Oh, another thing I wanted to ask. Who's the little lass? I know she wasn't with them when I led them here."

"The child wearing some sort of folk costume? She came from his sword."

"She came...from his sword?"

"She came from his sword."

His subordinate answered him with a completely serious expression. Zelim ruminated in silence for a bit before muttering to himself.

"I'll be damned... I have no idea what's happening anymore."

"You and me both, sir. Although I have a confession to make. When they

started flirting and cuddling with each other while I was surveilling them, it made me feel sad for myself..."

"I understand your feelings, but I need you to hold on for a little longer. That girl is the greatest threat this country has faced since its founding. Well, a slightly disappointing greatest threat, if I'm being honest."

His subordinate smiled ruefully at that last part.

"Then, since it's an order, I'll do my best."

"Being a soldier sure is tough at times like this, eh?"

"Truer words have never been spoken, sir."



"Ngh..."

The sunlight shining in from the gap in the curtains woke me up. As soon as it did, I felt a numbness in my arm and a weight on top of it. I turned my face toward the source and found Lefi. She was sleeping peacefully, using my arm as a pillow. It was comforting to hear her soft breaths and feel her silky hair so close to me.

Oh, that's right. This isn't the dungeon. The hotel staff had prepared a room with a double bed for us, so we'd figured that we might as well take advantage of it and sleep together.

But anyway, looking at her face from point-blank range made me realize all over again how unbelievably gorgeous she was. Long eyelashes. Snow-white skin. I didn't even know how many times I'd seen it—or maybe it was *because* I saw it every day—but I could say for certain that I'd never, ever get tired of looking at her face. That was how beautiful she was. Not that I'd ever tell her that to her...well, her face.

For a while, all I did was stare intently at Lefi's sleeping face, when suddenly, I felt a warmth around my stomach. What the heck? I folded the blanket back to see what it was and found a sleeping En curled up like a kitten between me and Lefi. I smiled unconsciously at the adorable sight of her and gently combed my fingers through her hair.

There was a part of me that wanted to stay like this with the two of them forever. But we had stuff to do, and we couldn't do it with them sleeping, so I patted both of their shoulders firmly.

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"Goood morning, ladies! Rise and shiiine!"

"Mm..."

"Ngggh..."
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They both slowly started waking up when they heard my voice. First, En, who did so while rubbing her eyes in a super cute way. As for Lefi...nothing. She was still lying in the bed.

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"Psssst. Lefi. Wake up. It's morning."
"..."
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Even then, she still didn't wake up. In fact, maybe it was because she was still half asleep, but she suddenly wrapped herself tight around me. For a second, my heart skipped a beat at the feeling of her soft body against mine.

"Gah...! Hooo, that was too close. Almost got me. Yo, Lefi, I know damn well you're awake. I saw your tail twitch when you heard my voice. And if you think you can trick me that easily, well, I've got a bridge to sell you too. That kind of sneaky shit is only cute when the little-girl gang does it, okay?"

*"…"* 

She still refused to wake up. A sore loser who continued sleeping—that was our Lefi.

"Oh, so that's how you wanna play this, is it? You're gonna keep pretending to be asleep, are you? Aight, bet. I'll take that as permission to execute my own counterstrategy."

I signaled at En with my eyes, and she nodded, immediately understanding what I planned.

"Which is...this! Lady wife, prepare to be plunged into the pits of tickle hell!"

"Huh?! Wah ha ha! Ha hee ha ha hee! Sto— Wai— Bah ha ha hee hee hee!"

Once I'd given En the go-ahead, we'd started tickling her mercilessly. Even Lefi

couldn't keep pretending to be asleep then, and she started shrieking and squirming desperately under our assault.

"Mwa ha ha! Tremble under the might of our teamwork! There's no escape for you now!"

"The pits...of tickle hell are perfect. Kill our opponent with laughter."

"Ha hee! Hee hee hee! I-I understa— Wah ha ha! I-I shall awaygen— Ha ha ha!"

"Huh? 'Awaygen'? Ha ha ha! Whatchu talkin' 'bout, Willis?! You need to use words people speak and enunciate them, woman!"

"Y-You ogre! E-Enou— Ah! Wai— Gah ha ha hee hee!!!"

For a while after, Lefi's laughter echoed all throughout the room.



Lefi pursed her lips in annoyance as she flew next to me.

"Good grief. You truly are a brute! Do you not know what the word 'limit' means?!"

"That's your own fault for pretending to sleep for so long. If you'd just woken up like I'd asked you to, you could've avoided such a tragedy."

"You...could have avoided it."

"How laughable to hear those words from the very person who perpetrated said tragedy! That aside, do you now understand that such was your lovely wife's way of showing you affection? You should be happier."

The way she harrumphed in such a sulky way was super cute.

"Ha ha ha! You're right, that's my bad. Next time, I'll go overboard with happiness, so how about we do a little PDA?!"

Grinning, I threw my arms around her and spun her in circles as we flew through the sky.

"Wah! S-Stop! Stop that right now, you imbecile! We cannot fly like this!"

"Mmmm. Boy, oh, boy, I sure feel like I'm on top of the world when I hold my

lovely wife like this! Soft, warm, and cozy!"

"Y-You dunce! Do not rub my cheek! E-En is watching us!"

"Bwa ha ha! Why're you so embarrassed? Let's show the whole world how lovey-dovey we are!"

"Yes...it's good to get along."

"Look, En agrees with me! So let's canoodle to our hearts' content!"

"B-But that does not mean we should be behaving thusly in midair. Haah... You really do not listen to a single thing anyone says when you are in this mood."

Lefi finally figured out that I had no intention of letting her go, so she sighed in exasperation and gave up. She didn't try to force her way out of my hold. Instead, she patted my head like she was comforting a child.

We were once again en route to the Dragon Hamlet. Just before we'd left the hotel, the older soldier who'd been super-duper nice and accommodated us so thoughtfully had come to send us off, check us out, or both. In any case, when he'd seen us again, he'd looked incredibly relieved. We hadn't done anything bad, obviously, but I did feel kinda bad for the ruckus we'd initially caused.

Right now, we were flying above a forest, far away from human settlements just like we'd planned. I wasn't surprised by the large population of monsters since the area below us was deep in the forest. Maps showed me tons of hostile responses, so I was carrying En with me just in case.

Having said that, these monsters were nowhere near as strong as the ones in the Demonic Forest. If I felt like it, I could've probably killed one with just a punch. Of course, I wouldn't actually do that because I didn't wanna be covered in blood, guts, and other things.

So, as I flew next to Lefi, carrying En in her sword form on my shoulder, I noticed something huge floating far off in the distance.

"Is that... Whoooa! Is that an airship?!"

The thing was too far away for me to figure out how big it was, but based on the huge mountain range behind it, it had to've been pretty dang massive. Though I wasn't sure how it operated—probably magic—it was a double-headed blimp. I was inclined to believe it could hold a good number of people.

Wooow. I had no idea airships existed in this world too. Actually, on second thought, maybe it wasn't too strange that they existed. Considering the dragoons I'd seen on the way here as well as the existence of winged demons, the folks living here clearly understood the importance of aerial combat. It made sense that their main reason for developing this kind of technology was military necessity.

Who knows? In fifty years, there could be fighter jets flying through the air like normal and I might even be able to see some really fierce dogfight battles between the jets and monsters. Since I was gonna be alive for a super long time, wasn't there totally a chance I'd get to witness that level of technological advancement firsthand? Man, I'm seriously looking forward to it.

While I let myself get carried away with excitement watching the airship, I finally noticed something kinda weird about it.

"Hey, Lefi. Is that smoke coming out of there or am I seeing things?"

"You are correct. That is indeed smoke."

"Mm...it's puffing up everywhere."

Did airships always blast out so much smoke? Did they fly by spewing fire like that? It was hard to tell because of the distance, but was it possible that the design on the side of the blimp part wasn't actually a design but a monster?

"Yuki, I believe it is being attacked by a monster and will plummet soon. What say you?"

"I...agree."

At this rate, the airship was on course for a crash landing.

"What shall we do, then? I am fine with leaving them to their own devices."

"Ummm... I don't really wanna get involved either, buuut..."

But now that I was watching it happen in real time, I couldn't exactly do nothing either. Just wouldn't've been right. While I debated on our next steps, En spoke to both of us telepathically.

"I...know what this is. It's called 'foreshadowing.""

"Huh?"

"If we...go to save it, there's going to be a princess inside who's been kidnapped by an evil magician. And when we beat him, the princess will be grateful to us. Master, let's go save the princess, okay?"

If she'd been in her human form, En's eyes would've been sparkling like never before. That was how she sounded right now as she pleaded with me. All sorts of rebuttals popped into my head. One, there probably wasn't an evil magician or whatever involved since the falling airship was being attacked by a monster. Two, no way would a princess ride an airship on a route so far away from any human settlements. As if I'd say any of that out loud, though.

"You know what? You're right. Let's go save them."

For whatever reason, I just couldn't find it in myself to tell her no. Not when she sounded so hyped. And so, I said yes with a rueful smile.

When we were about fifty meters from the airship, the reason for the damage became clear. Bugs. Bugs, bugs, bugs. Enormous monsters that looked like ladybugs were attacking the whole blimp.

"Holy smokes. Talk about a freaking swarm."

"A...bug festival."

Begging your pardon, Miss En, but they are most definitely not something that cute-sounding. One thing I'd learned about her recently was that she really liked bugs. After my numerous horrific experiences with this world's gigantic ones, it was safe to say that I hated them with a passion. Iluna, Shii, and the wraith triplets were relatively fine with them compared to me. They didn't go out of their way to avoid them. En, though. En was different. My little sword girl actually *liked* them.

According to her, she liked how they scurried around chaotically. When she'd told me that, I'd kinda brushed it off with an "O-Oh, yeah? You like bugs, do you, En?" But unfortunately for Miss En, not a single atom in my body could agree with her.

Wait, I'm getting way off track here. Back to the situation at hand.

With my enhanced demon lord vision, I could see a huge hole in one of the airship's balloons. The other one was working overtime to just barely keep the ship afloat, which explained its warped, precarious flight. The hull was leaning heavily in one direction under the burden. Was that the reason for the fires? And on top of all that, the damn ladybugs were having a grand ol' time munching on the airship.

Long story short, despite the airship being on the verge of breaking in midair, whoever was piloting it was doing all they could to stop it from free-falling and crash-landing. It'd be flight-ready again once the monsters were eliminated and the broken parts were repaired. In my layman's opinion, at least.

"Oookaaay... Lefi, can you get rid of those bugs? Pretty please? I'll be back in a jiff."

"I shall handle it. What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna have a little chat with the captain."

With that, Lefi and I split up. I circled the airship in search of the wheelhouse. *Aha, there it is.* All the way at the front of the ship was a glass-enclosed cabin with instrument panels and what looked to be a PA system inside. I didn't know what any of it was or did, but it seemed to be the place I was looking for because of all those devices.

A few monsters were crowded around it too, clearly trying to bore their way inside. I could hear the ship's crew desperately fighting them off with magic and swords from all the way over here. Amid the chaos of the battle, a single man, looking harried as all hell, shouted instructions while operating the rudder. He must be the captain.

I swung En and slashed my way through the monster swarm. It took less than a minute to exterminate them and secure the area. Then, I flew through one of the broken windows and straight into the wheelhouse.

"Wha— A-A demon?!"

A few of the shocked crew members tried to attack me, but I easily parried them with En before raising my voice determinedly.

"Hey! If you don't wanna die, I'll help you out! Will this airship fly once the hole in the balloon is plugged up?!"

"Y-You'll help us?! As if we can trust anything a demon says! What are you scheming?!"

"Look, dude, if you wanna argue about this, I'm more than happy to go back and forth with you. But do you really have time for that? The way I see it, you folks have two choices. Crash-land into the next life, or find a way to continue living in this one by working together with an unknown demon. What's it gonna be?!"

My words flustered the crew members. Every one of them stopped waving their weapons around and looked to the man operating the rudder—the one who was most likely the captain—for a decision. For a moment, he seemed stunned, maybe because he hadn't been able to keep up with the hits that'd just kept on coming one after another. I could relate. I would've felt the same way.

"Y-You... Who are you?"

"What the hell does it matter who I am or why I'm doing this?! Just hurry up and answer my damn question! Will this airship fly if the hole is plugged up?!"

When I shouted at him in response, he finally got his shit together and realized what he needed to prioritize. Resolve burning in his eyes, the captain replied assertively.

"Y-Yes! As long as the hole disappears, the wind magicians can make it fly again by using their magic from inside the ship!"

"You got any tools to fix it?!"

"Yes, but because of the monsters, we've already failed twice in our repair attempts! We only have enough tools left for one last attempt!"

All right, cool. If they could fix it themselves, I'd let them do just that.

Ever since my last trip to the royal capital with Nell, I'd become able to use the Dungeon Points Catalog, aka the DP Catalog, outside the dungeon's territory too. If worse came to worst, I'd use it to buy a huge tarp or something to force the hole closed. But if all I had to do was get rid of the monsters so that they could mend it, that seemed easy enough.

"Got it! I'll take care of the monsters while you and your people handle the repairs!"

"I... I won't regret trusting you, right?!"

"Do you really have a choice?! It's either that or you all die!"

With those parting words, I flew outside via the same window I'd come in through. Earlier, when I'd gotten a look at the whole airship, I'd noticed that most of the monsters were concentrated at the rear, so my plan was to get rid of any on the way there. Wait, what?

Their numbers had gone down dramatically. Up until a few minutes ago, there'd been so many of them swarming it that I would've sworn it was the military transport aircraft from Tormekia that crash-landed in a certain windy valley. But now, even as I tried to grapple for an answer, a few of the bugs in front of me suddenly dropped into the forest below when their heads exploded.

I'd seen that before. It was Lefi's magic. Specifically, it was the thing where she used her magical energy to put pressure on her target's head and crush it. I was pretty sure not even five minutes had passed since we'd split up. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that that was plenty of time for her. Seemed I had my answer.

Smiling wryly, I flew toward Lefi, who was slightly above the airship and totally focused on controlling her magic. I moved in close enough so that she could hear me over the racket and spoke into her ear.

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"Lefi, I'm ba—"

"Eep?!"

Her shriek sounded way hotter than it had any right to.
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"'Eep'?"

"D-Do not speak directly into my ear! I-It is a t-ticklish sensation!"

Lefi blushed furiously, most likely embarrassed because of the strange noise she'd made. She pressed one hand to the ear I'd offended.

"Huuuh... So what you're saying is that your ears are your weak spot?"

She sure does have a lot of weaknesses, doesn't she? Her tail, her horns, her wings, and now, apparently, her ears. And those were just the ones I knew about. Out of all of them, I'd say her weakest point is... Hmm, probably her wings. I made a mental note to conduct an experiment to determine if I was right.

"N-No, I am not saying that at all! Anyone would react thusly when another suddenly breathes into their ear!"

"Eep!"

I imitated her voice and squirmed deliberately.

"Gaaah! Y-You! How dare you mock me?! I have no doubt you would react the same if I did such a thing to you!"

"Eep!"

"Th-That is the last straw! You have signed your own death warrant! I will make you know the ticklish sensation until it causes you pain!"

"Ack! Gah! Aha ha! Wait! Wait, stop! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, okay?! I won't do it again!"

Enraged, Lefi shoved her face next to my ear and started blowing into it super aggressively. I twisted and turned, trying to escape while laughing hysterically, when En relayed a message to me telepathically. She sounded exasperated.

"Are we...not killing the bugs?"

Her words were like a splash of cold water. Lefi and I remembered the situation we were in, one where we had no time to screw around like this. We both cleared our throats to regroup.

"R-Right, then. Lefi, once we defeat the monsters, the crew should be able to repair the damaged part, so let's finish this up. You handle the ones here, and I'll take care of the ones over there."

"U-Understood. I shall annihilate them. Mark my words."

Lefi and I split up again, focused on our respective tasks. We sure didn't get a move on because we were running from En's silent rebuke. Nope, that wasn't it at *all*.



"The monsters are gone... They're really gone. Thank you, our newfound demon ally!"

As Lefi and I flew around destroying the monsters, a few men carrying tools appeared from inside the airship.

"Yeah, no sweat! I think most of the ones swarming the outside of the airship are dead, but are there any inside too?!"

I shouted so they'd hear me over the wind. I needed to ask because even though we should've been done, my Scout ability was still reacting.

"Aye! The others are taking care of it right now! Would you lend them a hand?!"

"Okay, you got it!"

Taking Lefi with me would be a bad idea. Considering how clumsy she was, I totally foresaw her inflicting a huge amount of damage to the airship itself while fighting inside. I also felt like swinging En around inside would result in me breaking a bunch of stuff from the shock waves alone. There was no way I'd let any of us be responsible for making the airship crash-land, not after everything we'd done thus far, so I decided to leave them both out here.

"All right, Lefi! Take care of En! I'll be back after I get rid of whatever's inside! More monsters might show up, so be on your guard!"

"Yes, understood! Hmm, though it has been some time since I last held you in this form, your heft remains as unmistakable as ever, En. Very nice."

"Hmph... I'm not heavy."

"Kah ha! You are correct. Forgive me, I spoke out of turn."

When I gave En to Lefi, I heard them chatting away like it was just another day in the neighborhood. *Sorry, En, but I think your real form is hella heavy too.* But wow, the fact that she'd reached a point where she was concerned about her

weight was kinda funny and adorable. She seemed like a real, proper girl now.

I decided then and there to watch what I said and did. I'd be a demon lord who worried about women's sensitivities. *Maaan, life sure is strange...* 

A network of pipes, valves, gauges, and such ran along the inside of the ship. The unrefined, mechanical interior didn't feel very otherworldly at all. *I guess man-made stuff pretty much looks the same across worlds, huh?* 

Also, I'd only been half serious when I'd first wondered if this airship was a military one, but I was almost positive I'd been right. A passenger airship would've been waaay more attractive.

"Found ya!"

I slipped into the ship from where I'd met the repair guys and had been relying on Scout to take me where I needed to go. It hadn't taken long for me to arrive at the battleground.

There were...a lot of monsters. Around ten of them. They'd forced their way forward through the narrow hallway, smashing it apart as they had, and were currently fighting with the soldiers. From the looks of things, the humans were being overwhelmed.

What the heck had happened for the situation to have even reached this point? Had these folks bombed the monsters' nest? Or had they encountered an evil magician after all? *Hmm... I'll just ask them later.* 

"Third squadron down!"

"Ngh! Have those with minor injuries help carry the heavily wounded and fall back! The rest of you, we defend this to our last brea—"

I wove my way through their tactical formation and punched a ladybug right in the head using my brand-new weapon: a pair of brass knuckles.

**Saiken:** Black brass knuckles made by Demon Lord Yuki. Allows the user to decimate the enemy and achieve victory with their own body. Quality: S-.

I called my brass knuckles "Saiken," meaning "crushing fist." They were made of the extremely reliable adamantite and sported big knives in the pinky finger sections, meaning I could slash with them too. The knives were the perfect size, aka not big enough for En to pout about. To be honest, though, unlike Nell, who was a skilled fighter, I couldn't pull off the fighting technique necessary to combine punches with slashes, making the knives half just for show.

Which begged the question, why would I add such a feature? Because it made me look hella cool. Remember the war club I'd used in the phantom ship dungeon campaign? The one I'd named Goumetsu? Well, these brass knuckles had the same sorcerous circuit in them, Explosion. In other words, just like with the club, my target would explode on contact with Saiken.

"Mwa ha! Your shells are too weak!"

A nice *kaboom* upon impact, and the bug's whole body exploded, splattering innards everywhere. It was gross.



Once I'd destroyed the first one, I went after the others one after another, punching their literal lights out. No technique, just pure power. Sure, they were just punches, but boy did they ever pack a punch. Get my drift? Because my super demon lord body transformed me into a literal weapon.

Bwa ha ha! Hear me roar, for I am the Fist Lord, he who destroys all things using his fists!

Blood boiling with excitement, I pulverized my enemies relentlessly. Then, a ladybug suddenly flew at me from one of the side cabins. But thanks to Scout and Danger Detection, I'd seen its ambush coming from a mile away, so I swung one of my brass knuckles down like a hammer and stabbed it in the head with the knife. What?

It was stuck. I'd driven it in with so much force that I couldn't get it out. I tried my damnedest to pull it out, even wiggling it from side to side, but it just would not budge. I'd made one edge of the blade serrated to have it function as a parrying dagger, but alas, that might've been a mistake.

"Ah, crap. Hold on. Time out."

The damn bugs decided to swarm me instead, because of course they wouldn't understand what I was saying.

"Gaaah! Get off! H-Hey! Y-You ain't gettin' the best of me!"

I used my free arm to counter the attacking bugs and then I went on the offensive with the brass knuckle still lodged in the one ladybug's skull. I ended up incinerating the whole lot of them. I had ended up causing a wee bit of damage to the inside of the airship, but it wasn't like I'd blown the whole thing up, so I had hope they'd forgive me.

"H-Hey! Who the hell is that man?! Which unit is he from?!"

"I-I don't think he's one of ours. The captain relayed a message over the speaking tube about a demon helping us and not to attack him even by accident, so..."

"What?! A-A demon?!"

"Y-Yes. I checked with the captain to make sure, and it's all true."

I'd put away my wings in the cramped confines of the airship, so it was hard to tell at first glance that I was a demon. After I'd started fighting, the soldiers in the vicinity had gone still, confused as hell about what was happening. What mattered was that they hadn't attacked me. Just one shot at me might have been a misfire, but even then, I wouldn't have given them a free pass.



"Sweet, that should do it. Any more reactions from Scout... Nope! All clear!" I exhaled deeply.

Cleanup had taken a lot more time than I'd thought it would. Not only was the airship massive, but its interior was complicated too, so cleaning every nook and cranny had meant walking all over the place, and it'd taken ages to get anywhere.

"You... No, I shouldn't just refer to you as 'you.' Let me call you 'sir.' You saved our lives. Thank you, sir. From all of us."

The captain walked over to me from the wheelhouse and bowed his head. I waved away his words with a flick of my hand.

"Nah, it's fine. I just helped out 'cause my little girl asked me to."

"You have a little girl?"

"Don't worry about it."

Aside from the captain, who'd been focused on keeping the airship afloat, everyone else on his crew had devoted themselves to damage control. A little while ago, they'd finally managed to stabilize the ship enough that it was flying properly again. Crash landing avoided and crisis averted.

"More importantly, what the heck did you guys even do for such a huge swarm to attack?"

I'd figured they would've bolted as soon as Lefi got near, but the damn bugs hadn't even flinched. They'd just continued their assault on the airship. There must've been a reason for that. The captain's face turned grim at my question.

"We were progressing on our route as we usually do, so we ourselves didn't do anything different. However, I do have a suspicion. I don't have any

conclusive evidence for it, but there's a possibility the attack was orchestrated on our country, the Ellane Allied Federation, by an enemy nation."

Mm. An attack using monsters, eh? If I remembered right, the Ellane Allied Federation was the same one the dragoons who'd surrounded us earlier on our journey belonged to. So this airship came from there, huh?

"Is there a country capable of using monsters like that?"

"Yes. The Reauxgard Empire, located south of here. It's a hegemon that utilizes such methods to accomplish its goals. Again, though, I don't have proof, and there's no way to identify how they did it. Perhaps an ability or magical device. Who's to say?"

So he said. But my gut told me he had some kind of information he was using as a basis for his suspicion. *Damn it, this is my fault.* I'd used Analysis on him and the rest of his crew, but because of the urgent situation, I'd only checked their levels. If I'd taken the time to actually look over their stats, I might've been able to learn more about him and the others.

"Can you think of any reason they would target this ship? Oh, of course, you don't have to answer if you're not at liberty to say."

"No, that's not a problem. Reauxgard most likely wants this ship's data. This airship is the embodiment of our latest technology, so the information related to its fundamentals, such as its motive power, is classified. By shooting us out of the sky through the use of monsters, they would have been able to acquire the remains of this ship, thereby getting their hands on technology they never had to put in the effort to develop."

Interesting. So it wasn't any strategic resources in the cargo hold they were after but the whole airship, because the ship itself was the top secret information. Sheesh. Every country in this world had problems of their own, it seemed. Like how the ones I'd visited so far were at war with others. Had modern-day Earth back in my old life been like this too?

"Can I ask what you're doing here, sir?"

"I guess you could say I'm on my way home. I saw your ship on fire and starting to fall, and the rest is history. My conscience wouldn't have let me rest

if I'd abandoned you all, so I figured I'd help out in whatever way I could."

"Ah, I see. Well, I appreciate it. If not for you, we would have perished alongside the ship. Our country is also at odds with demons, but we won't forget your aid for as long as we live, sir."

"Ha ha! Just think of it as you guys getting lucky. I think that if you guys can figure out a way to repel monsters, you should be able to fly more safely."

"Yes, that's a fair point. As a military airship, it's certainly vital to have a method for defending ourselves. We should either have dragoons accompany us or outfit the ship itself with a countermeasure. The problem is that adding parts to the ship will lower its speed, so how to avoid that..."

The captain stroked his beard as he absentmindedly started turning the problem over in his mind. Seeing him like that, I continued with a chuckle.

"Right, well, I think it's about time for me to head out. Thanks for letting me look around inside. I had fun."

"Oh, you're leaving already? I would have liked to extend you more of our hospitality as thanks."

"While I appreciate the thought, we still have stuff we gotta take care of too. We're not in a hurry per se, but I'd also feel bad if I hung around with the airship in this state. Although I'm totally down to visit if it ever becomes a passenger ship."

"Hmm... Understood. Then let me at least give you this to show our gratitude."

The captain handed me something that looked like a medal. It was made primarily of silver and beautifully decorated. A single glance was enough to tell me that it was fairly valuable.

"Huh? What is it?"

"A substitute for a letter of introduction. As long as you have this, no one will question your identity."

"But it's a medal, right? Are you sure you should just be giving it away willy-nilly?"

"It certainly is important, but *you* are the one who should be honored by our nation. If anything, I'm sorry that this is all I can offer in repayment."

"Uhhh, you can take it easy on the honoring bit... All right, in that case, thanks. If I ever get the chance to visit your country for real, I'll definitely use it. Well, until we meet again."

"Indeed. And should our paths cross once more, let me treat you to a drink. From the bottom of my heart, thank you again for helping us. Atteeention! Salute!"

The captain and his men saluted me sharply in unison. I put the medal away in Inventory and raised my hand in acknowledgment, then flew outside the ship. When I drew close to Lefi, who'd been hovering nearby waiting for me, En spoke to me telepathically, still being held by my wife.

"Master...the princess?"

"No princess inside, sadly. Only soldiers."

"Oh...I see. That is sad. What about the evil magician?"

"That's still a possibility, actually. The captain said there might have been an evil magician who used monsters to attack the airship."

"Hmm... Then En, daughter of the Demon Lord of Justice, will beat the bad guys."

"Ooh, you're so right. Justice definitely has to put the bad guys in their place, huh?"

I responded to her, charmed and amused by her words. Then, Lefi whispered in my ear.

"Yuki... I believe it is high time you teach the wee ones that demon lords are, as a whole, evil creatures. It is for their own good as they mature."

"I have *technically* told them something along those lines. But they said that was weird 'cause I'm not evil even though I'm a demon lord, so they're not exactly convinced. Although I gotta admit, it made me happy to hear 'em say that."

"Well, they are not incorrect. You are less evil and more mischievous, I

suppose. An imp rather than a devil."

"Oh, yeah? So that would make you an imp's wife, wouldn't it? You good with that?"

"Hmm. In that case, I recant my statement. Allow me to rephrase. You are the greatest evil this world has ever known."

"Correct. Never forget that I, Yuki, the evilest and most heinous demon lord, was born solely to destroy the entire world!"

"Then as one who is your mate, I am Lefisios, the most wicked woman of the era, and the time has come for me to take my place at your side and devote myself to my own interests. All shall kneel before us."

"Huh...? But you two aren't evil."

Lefi and I burst out laughing at En's displeased objection.



After the incident with the airship, we'd resumed our journey through the air, and nothing else of interest had happened. It was nighttime now. Since we were deep in the remote region near the Dragon Hamlet and thus there were no human settlements to be found, we were camping under the stars for the first time.

"Okay! This should do it!"

Looking at the simple dwelling I'd created for us using earth magic, I exhaled in satisfaction. I'd made a square stone structure. In *Craftmine* terms, it'd be called a tofu house, but my particular tofu house boasted a living room, bedroom, pit toilet, fireplace, kitchen, table, and chairs. Basically, it had everything a real, honest-to-goodness house should.

I'd made the walls and ceiling all at once, so there were no seams. The only way a draft could get inside was through the entrance. In other words, it was well insulated against the cold.

As for lighting, I'd hung a lantern I'd bought with DP from a hook on the ceiling. I'd also bought a set of outdoor-type bedding from the Catalog. There was a certain charm to the lantern light, so I really liked it on a personal level.

By the way, I'd built the bath outside since I'd ended up going with an openair style one. I was looking forward to enjoying it while staring up at the stars, y'know? Besides, I seriously doubted anyone was around in this secluded region. Didn't have to worry about monsters either with Lefi around.

For what was essentially a night of camping, my makeshift tent was fairly luxurious. Actually, it was closer to a hut or a quaint little B and B. I had loads of experience making tiny houses for the little-girl gang whenever they wanted to play house, so creating something like this was as easy as breathing to me now.

"You are very skilled indeed. I myself cannot use elemental magic in such a manner."

"Mwa ha ha! This is what I like to call a demon lord's secret technique. Be jealous!"

"Speaking of, Yuki, you are always going on about 'demon lord' this and 'demon lord' that. But do you not think it bizarre that you make such statements even when creating play items for the wee ones?"

"Pshhh. No. The way I see it, I've perfected everything I have, including all the methods to make little girls happy, precisely *because* I'm a demon lord."

"Well, I suppose if it pleases you, I shall not quibble."

Lefi sounded like she was humoring me. But just then, En mumbled to her from next to me.

"But Lefifi...you always say 'Because I am the Supreme Dragon' too."

"Geh! I-Is that so?"

"Yes... So you're birds of a feather."

En nodded vigorously at Lefi, who looked puzzled. Clearly lacking in self-awareness, this one was.

Gradually, En's expressions had been getting richer and more varied. It was a very good thing. I wanted her to keep growing up like this, as a child who could express herself properly.

"All right, enough chitchat, you two. Let's go inside and eat dinner. What do you wanna eat?"

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"That foodstuff called 'gyo-za.'"

"Ramen..."

"Cool, how about a ramen set, then? How do you want it?"

"Hmm... I shall choose tonkotsu."

"Miso...for me."

"Okey dokey. I think I'll do tonkotsu too."
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The three of us stepped inside the hut as we talked. I opened Inventory to take out the food I'd prepared in advance and arranged it on the table. I'd shoved the hot, fresh ramen inside as soon as it was done. Now, its savory aroma filled the room, stimulating our hungry stomachs.

While I took out the gyoza Lefi'd asked for along with a complete set of seasonings and chopsticks, she and En helped me set the table. It didn't take long for dinner to be ready.

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"All right, let's eat! Bon appétit."
"Yes, bon appétit."
"Bon...appétit."
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We pressed our palms together, said our usual thing, and picked up our chopsticks.

"Mmmm. Calling this 'good' would be an understatement. Leila's cooking skills are reaching master level, huh?"

Leila had pretty much made this ramen from scratch, broth and all. After trying out the ramen from the DP Catalog a few times, she'd completely memorized all the ingredients involved and set about making her own improved version. It probably wasn't impossible for me to do it too since I could buy all the ingredients off the Catalog, but I suspected she had a better sense of taste than other people. That combined with her sharp observational skills and insight was how she'd been able to craft something this insanely delicious.

With just a sample taste, she could pinpoint exactly what was missing. "Hmm, I believe this needs a bit more acidity," or "I think a spoonful of salt will enhance

the taste even more." She'd say stuff like that all the time. Heck, she could even transform Lew's cooking failures into culinary masterpieces, so she was practically a pro in my eyes. If she ever opened her own restaurant, I was sure her business would boom.

"Truly. Our household can no longer function without her."

"Miss Leila...is strong."

"Indeed she is. Try as I might, I cannot think of a more apt word to describe her."

"I totally get what you two mean."

No one in our family could hold a candle to Leila. Maybe she was the secret boss of my dungeon. That was a theory I could get behind.

"The chashu...is hot and yummy."

"Ever a lover of meat you are, hm, En? Here, eat some gyoza as well. It, too, is scrumptious."

"Yes...gyoza is yummy too."

She huffed and puffed determinedly as she happily used the chopsticks to carry the hot food into her mouth. Just watching her was a soothing balm for my soul.

"Ha ha ha! Why don't I give you one of my slices of chashu?"

"Hmm, I have no choice either. I shall do the same. Be sure to savor every bite."

"Wooow...a meat festival. Thank you, Master, Lefifi."

En was insanely hyped, which was unusual for her, and she excitedly pumped both fists into the air when we offered her more meat. Lefi chided her with a "Stop that. It is poor manners." I couldn't help laughing while I watched them.

And that was how we spent a very pleasant night in a very un-camp-like environment.



A strong wind whooshed past us.

"Ugh! It's so cold. Feels like the temperature just dropped all of a sudden."

Up until yesterday, the temperature had only felt slightly lower than the Demonic Forest's, but it was chilly as hell around these parts today. Looking up at the sky near the mountain range, I could see snow clouds there, so clearly, this region was just that cold.

The Demonic Forest had a subtropical climate, making it hot all year round. Because of that, you could say my tolerance to the heat was higher compared to my old life, which conversely meant my tolerance to the cold had probably gone down. Although I supposed it didn't make much difference since I'd set the climate inside the dungeon to a comfortable one. Sometimes, I changed it whenever I got excited.

"Indeed. This means the Dragon Hamlet is not much farther now. Unlike the Demonic Forest, the area around it is cold. Snow falls often."

"Dang. So you're from snow country, huh?"

"You could say that, yes. Yuki, use your wind magic to create a warm breeze around yourself. The same that you use when drying our hair. I have been doing just that for some time now."

"Ah, my dryer magic? I didn't even think about that."

I'd been wondering why she didn't look cold at all compared to my shivering ass. Now I knew the answer. I followed her advice and used my dryer magic, the very same one I'd invented ages ago and which I used basically every day. I summoned warm air around myself.

Ooh. Roasty toasty. This felt really nice. Went from freezing my nads off to basking in a warmth that reminded me of the sun in springtime.

If I thought about it, wasn't blasting yourself with a dryer from head to toe basically creating your own personal heater? Then I would call this variation of dryer magic "heater magic." It was the type that always cloaked your body in warm air without drying it out. But I did still have to make sure I didn't overdo it and get sick instead.

"Ever since adapting to this form, I have come to realize that it is quite inconvenient to be humanoid at times like these. I am much too sensitive to the

slightest of temperature changes."

"Oh, yeah, I remember you mentioning dragon bodies being tough against temperature changes."

"Indeed. We can feel how high or low the temperature is, but heat and cold do not affect us. Although I do recall this one time when a nearby volcano erupted. I did not enjoy bathing in the lava. I found it much too hot and unpleasant."

"Uhhh, Lefi? Preeetty sure any normal living thing would straight up die if it bathed in lava."

"Aside from myself and the ancient codgers, the rest of the dragons ran away screaming because it is, in fact, fatal to normal dragons."

Phew, good to know. Only the ancient dragons were the outliers, huh?

"Cheese Louise. My wife is so dependable. *Too* dependable, actually. Makes me wanna cry."

"Kah ha! Happy tears, yes? More importantly, Yuki, I see it."

I turned in the direction Lefi pointed. When I squinted far off into the distance, I saw two mountains thrusting straight through the clouds and a deep, deep ravine wedged between them. It was gargantuan, like the jaws of some creature.

"Is that..."

"Yes. The place where I was born—the Dragon Hamlet."

## **Side Story 1: Nell around That Time**

It was yet another workday for Nell, who had left the dungeon and was back in her home country. Most of her duties revolved around maintaining law and order in the capital. They included tasks like capturing criminals, protecting the Church's VIPs, and patrolling the various city districts. In short, jobs that didn't fully capitalize on her talents as a hero.

Not much time had passed since she'd officially become a hero, so it wouldn't have been wrong to consider her still in training, which explained why a lot of her work was relatively minor. But she'd been taking on other kinds of jobs lately after asking her commander for them. Currently, she was performing one such duty.

"Shiiii!"

Her holy sword, Durendal, made a *shink* as she unsheathed it. With it came a simultaneous glint and splash of blood.

"Giii?!"

"Grrraaah?!"

Two monsters shrieked. They were bear-type monsters called bloody bears, and because they'd recently acquired a taste for human flesh, there had been many fatal incidents in this area lately. The adventurers and knights dispatched to eliminate them had been unsuccessful thus far, leaving the region's human settlers in fear for quite a long time.

Bloody bears were strong enough to live in the Demonic Forest's southern area, and Nell had to deal with not one but two of them. The pair seemed to be mates, and they coordinated their attacks, making them unmatched against the humans' half-hearted attempts to destroy them.

Except those two monsters were now running away while screaming in fright because they were outclassed by her unilateral display of power. She slashed at their bodies relentlessly with her sword and deflected any counterattacks they

managed to remember to execute. If they had been normal monsters, they would have been dead several times over by now. The fact that they still lived was a testament to their toughness, but the direction of the battle was already clear.

Unlike Yuki, who emphasized firepower, Nell focused on maneuverability in combat. She moved quickly at all times and slashed at her opponent relentlessly, no matter how shallow her cuts. Her style of combat was meant to chip away at the opponent's stamina. As a woman, she was biologically weaker than men, so she knew how difficult it was for her to put weight behind her attacks.

Even so, as she was now, she was physically much stronger than most men anyway. Her superhuman strength allowed her to smash a boulder with a single punch. But keeping in mind the strength of the monsters in the Demonic Forest, she still felt like her attacks lacked force. Against those particular opponents, it didn't matter how often she attacked them, because her blade wasn't strong enough to inflict even shallow wounds on them, so her damage amounted to nothing. For that reason, she racked her brain on how to improve.

Nell had asked her commander, the lady knight Carlotta, for advice on the problem as well. When she'd confided her worries, her superior's response had been along the lines of "Well, it's no wonder you're having so much trouble. Your goal isn't exactly normal." The woman hadn't bothered concealing her surprise.

"I heard some folks were concerned about the current hero's abilities considering how overwhelmingly powerful the previous one was. But clearly, the ones spreading those rumors are all idiots. Although I have to admit, I was one of those idiots too."

"Agreed, Commander."

A group of knights acting as her guides on this monster hunt were watching her fight with awkward smiles that could more accurately be described as wry grimaces. This order of knights was a local one, and most of its members were from the region. They had accompanied Nell with a readiness to put their lives on the line to defeat the monsters terrorizing their homeland. Once the

operation was in full swing, however, they'd found that their worries had been groundless.

In the end, their jobs consisted solely of acting as her guides. Their moment to engage in the battle had long since passed, so the only thing they could do now to help her was remain far enough away that they didn't interfere with her fight.

The nobles who stood atop this order of knights had thrown themselves on the country's mercy after repeated attempts to deal with the mated pair of monsters had failed. And the government's response had been to send Nell. These knights had known that the current hero was a young girl, but only once they'd actually gotten a look at her had they realized that she was much younger and prettier than they'd imagined. Naturally, until seeing her in action, every single member of the order had been quite worried about her capabilities.

A pretty face might have been well and good in times of peace, but fighters would have rather welcomed a brawny, fearsome-looking man. In that respect, Nell's appearance was far from strong. Not to mention that they were well aware of the recent mess regarding the current hero, so they had been concerned as to whether they could really trust this girl with defeating the enemy—and with their lives.

In reality, they hadn't needed to worry about entrusting their lives to her because they had yet to actually engage in combat. So far, they'd just been placed on standby in the rear.

However, it was only recently that Nell herself had become this proficient a fighter. She'd always had the talent; her potential had never been in question, as it had been one of the major factors in her selection as a hero. But up until now, it wasn't her inherent talent so much as her lack of courage that had held her back. She no longer quaked in fear in the face of an enemy, nor did she flee dramatically like the very hounds of hell were chasing her. She had learned how to confront the enemy head-on in the best way for the situation, which explained the rapid improvement in her combat abilities.

"All right, that should do it."

Soon thereafter, Nell's battle ended in her victory. As soon as she shook off the blood staining Durendal's blade, the two bear monsters dropped to the ground. *Mr. Yuki, Rir, and the other pets would have taken them down with one strike. They were still too strong for me, which is why it took some time to defeat them.* She walked toward the knights waiting a short distance away as those thoughts ran through her mind.

"Mission complete. Would you please perform the necessary verification?" "I... Yes, understood."

They headed toward the corpses of the bloody bears and gingerly confirmed that they were, in fact, dead. The two monsters had stopped breathing completely.

"We can confirm they're dead. Thank you very much, Ser Hero. I apologize for my frankness, but we honestly underestimated your abilities. We were baffled by what the country must have been thinking to dispatch a lone girl. And so, we would appreciate it if you could forgive us."

The knight commander bowed deeply, and Nell chuckled lightly as she sheathed her holy sword.

"Oh, no, don't worry about that. I still have much to improve on, so I agree with your sentiments. Please, don't worry about it."

"If you think you're lacking, then that bodes ill for the future of us knights..."

"Not to worry, Commander. I can go back home to work my family's fields if we're disbanded."

"I'll be helping mine with their tavern, so at least I won't be *completely* useless."

The rest of the knights followed up their commander's words with light jests and laughter.

"All right, gents, that's enough. Don't be rude to the hero."

"Heh. You're not being rude at all. I actually prefer it to be lively. Anyway, as we discussed prior, here are the monster parts. Use them however you all see fit."

"These will come in quite handy. With monsters possessing such magical power, not a single bit of them will go to waste. We'll be able to use everything, from their hides to their bones to their flesh."

Then, the knight commander took out a large drawstring pouch from the wagon they'd brought with them and handed it to Nell.

"This is for you, Ser Hero."

"Um, what is it?"

He responded to her puzzled inquiry right away.

"The bounty placed on these monsters' heads. Please accept it."

"Huh? N-No, I can't! I was simply doing my job, so I definitely can't accept this!"

"This is all we can offer you, so please, take it. Please."

The knight commander's insistence was firm. In fact, he was so overcome with gratitude toward her for defeating the monsters destroying their home that he was deeply embarrassed by only being able to offer money as recompense.

"All right, I understand. Thank you very much, then."

She took the drawstring pouch of reward money from him—and then immediately gave it back to him.

"Begging your pardon, Ser Hero, but...what's the meaning of this?"

"I'm donating this money. Please put it toward the funds you'll be using for repairs."

"A-Are you sure?"

"Yes, because I'm positive you all won't use this for drink and merriment. I know I'm being a nuisance, but I appreciate your cooperation."

Nell smiled cheerfully, her expression mischievous.

Incidentally, she was ambivalent about receiving the bounty in the first place. She frankly had no need for money anymore. It wasn't because she disliked it or had suffered because of it. Due to the poverty she'd grown up in while being

raised by her single mother, she had been very careful about her money once she'd started earning a real salary as a hero.

Now, though, money itself wasn't a major concern for her. Living in the dungeon with Yuki had changed her mindset on it. With food, clothing, and shelter provided for and the fact that he would prepare anything she could ever want, things from the outside world no longer satisfied her. Attire, weapons, daily necessities, and personal care items were all things she could obtain in the dungeon, and she never wanted to use anything from outside it again, especially things that fell into that last category. The quality of other goods was also low compared to what the dungeon had to offer, so she found herself with a distinct lack of desire for material goods.

And while she worked, the Church arranged lodging for her, meaning she didn't even have to pay rent. Her salary went solely to food. For all of these reasons, money no longer mattered to her.

Ergo, being handed such a significant sum prepared by the local government had only served to put her in an awkward position. It hadn't made her particularly happy either, so asking for it to be used in the region's reconstruction had not only meant her conscience would rest easy, but it was also what she'd truly wanted. Though her intentions in turning down the reward money were good, Nell acknowledged they were also quite self-serving. But the knight commander knew none of this and merely nodded over and over again, deeply impressed.

"I see... Yes, I see. Since you insist, I'll do as you request and dedicate the entirety of this bounty to the reconstruction budget. From the bottom of our hearts, we can't thank you enough. Everyone, attention! Salute!"

Thus did the heroic tale of her tremendous benevolence spread throughout the region, discussed in taverns everywhere and used by parents to regale their children as a bedtime story. This meant the popularity of both the hero and the Church grew, delighting the organization. She, on the other hand, couldn't tell anyone that she simply had no need for money, so she accepted her superiors' praise silently with a rueful smile.

The longer she lived in the dungeon, the more steadily Nell's sense of



## **Chapter 3: The Dragon Hamlet**

Satan Almighty, that place is scary-looking as fuck.

The closer we got to the deep valley sandwiched between the towering mountains that looked like the gaping jaw of a terrifying creature, the more I could feel the pressure emanating from it. I knew the sensation. It was the instinctual danger I felt whenever I ran into a particularly dangerous monster in the Demonic Forest.

The force was probably—no, *definitely* radiating from the dragons, more and more of which were coming into view. An increasing number of them circled the skies, and even from this distance, it was easy to see that they were agitated. Maybe they realized Lefi was approaching.

"Yuki, you are not to leave my side from this point onward. Naught should come to pass, but stay with me in the unlikely event something happens. En, it is our job to protect his hide."

"Yes... I'll do my best."

"Roger that. You're the expert here, so I'll leave it to you. Thanks to you too, En."

Pathetic as it was to admit, I was the weakest one here. So I'd be a good little boy and let Lefi protect me. En too, since I couldn't fight without her and whatnot. My powerlessness in this situation made me feel empty inside.

With those thoughts in my head and En on my shoulder, I continued flying next to Lefi until we finally reached the front of the valley. She'd said that there wasn't much here, and now that I was looking at it, yeah, there was a distinct lack of any man-made—or rather, *dragon*-made structures. But the description "sacred mountains" fit the bill perfectly. The sight of an entire ravine being formed by two towering mountains and used as a habitat was impressively overpowering.

In any case, the scale of the valley was absolutely enormous. Caves were

hollowed out in the mountains' cliff faces to make it easier for them to live. They were big enough for dragons to curl up their giant bodies comfortably inside. There were also flat platforms that seemed to be living spaces. Like I'd said, there was a distinct lack of dragon-made artifacts, but there were a bunch of huge pillars and ridiculously high steps built along the cliffs, leading deeper inside. For whatever reason, the overall vibe of the place reminded me of a shrine.

But what really caught my eye were the dragons themselves. Based on what I could see, they numbered around 150 or so. Despite their keen, intense stares in our direction, none of them were stepping up to come talk to us.

I saw something else in their eyes—dread? *Pretty much the same reaction as the dragons in the Demonic Forest, huh?* Actually, these guys' fear might've been stronger.

"So this is where you were born, Lefi..."

"Correct. I believe I spent my first six hundred years here. After that, I spent some time traveling with the Spirit Emperor, assisting him with his work. While doing so, I searched for somewhere pleasant I could settle down. Ultimately, about a century ago, I decided on the Demonic Forest."

"Wait, what? What exactly did you help him with?"

"That old man was in the business of exterminating creatures that might annihilate the natural world. My assistance was related to that. Do you recall the tale I told you of the Dark King Corpse Dragon? Well, as a form of insurance in the event he lost the battle against such foolish opponents, he invited me to join him."

"Ooh, like a mercenary. That's so cool."

"Yes...very cool."

Lefi chuckled softly when En and I complimented her, thinking the same thing.

"Kah ha! Cool, am I? If you two believe as much, then I must thank the Spirit Emperor the next time I see him, eh? Right, then. To begin with, there is someone I must take you to meet."

Since she was familiar with the Hamlet, Lefi guided us inside. We traveled for a few minutes, then stopped.

"Hmm, this presence. 'Tis one I know. How nostalgic."

Lefi landed in front of an elderly dragon who slowly raised his head and stared at us. His scales were a little dull. Cracks ran here and there through his claws. A long beard grew under his mouth, and his eyelids drooped. A single glance at him was enough to tell anyone how old he was. But his eyes blazed fiercely, conveying a sense of youthfulness.

"Lefisios. It has been a long time."

"Hmph. I see you are still alive, Rhodanus."

She replied with an insult right off the bat. I couldn't really feel any real malice in her words or tone, though, which meant this elder dragon must not have been someone my wife hated. Or at least, he was someone she didn't dislike *too* much.

"Heh heh heh. I yet evade death's clutches. And I shall continue to for another three thousand years. I see your guard is not nearly so high as it used to be, and truth be told, this surprises me. In fact, I would go so far as to say 'tis the most surprising thing I have experienced in the last millennium."

"Let me be clear that it is not I who is the strange one here but *you* all. You take doing nothing to the very extremes."

"Hmm. Perhaps you have the right of it. Our way of life is certainly not prone to change."

And with that, the elderly dragon fixed his gaze intently on my face.

"And this must be... Ah, I see. I take it this Dragon King slew that fool? To be blunt, I believed *you* responsible for his demise, Lefisios."

"I did nothing. My husband managed to defeat him on his own. Truly, you cannot comprehend how great a nuisance he was. Why did none of you stop him? What in damnation were you lot thinking?"

"There is no excuse for our inaction, so I apologize for the trouble he caused. We did not discover this until it was too late, but he had been enticed by an

outsider. 'Twould take much too long if I told you all the particulars. However, your husband, you say? To think I would live to see the day when that word fell from your lips."

The elderly dragon chuckled in delight, then spoke directly to me.

"Will you not tell me your name, new Dragon King? I am Rhodanus, the eldest dragon in this hamlet."

Name: Rhodanus

Race: Ancient Dragon

Level: 89?

His level's in the 890s. Still below Lefi's, huh? I knew it was a bad habit of mine to compare anybody stronger than me to Lefi, but my wife was probably the outlier, to be honest. Anyway, the fact that this elder dragon's level was so high that he could crush me as easily as taking candy from a baby made me feel relieved in a weird way, which maybe wasn't good. I needed to remember to steel myself while we were in this dragon village.

"I'm Yuki. Nice to meet you. Uhhh, mind if I ask you something, Rhodanus? How old *are* you, exactly?"

"Hmm... I do not recall exactly, but my oldest memory is from six thousand years ago. Although I do recall that the humanoids' civilization has changed roughly ten times over in my life span."

He tilted his head thoughtfully, like he was trying to bring back his old memories.

Six. Thousand. Years. Yeah, that sure was long enough for civilization to shift a few times and then some. If he'd witnessed so much, then it was very possible that some culture at some point had recorded this old dragon's existence in their literature.

It reminded me of the conversation Lefi and I'd had once upon a time about long lives. But to think a legend existed who actually *had* lived for so long.

Mind-boggling.

"Now, tell me why you two are here."

"Well, a lot of stuff went down after I became the Dragon King that kept me from being able to stop by, so I figured now was a good time to visit and say my hellos. Plus, I wanna let you all know that Lefi—excuse me, Lefisios—is my wife now."

"Indeed. I wished to throw your and the others' words back in your faces by demonstrating to you all that even I could find myself a husband."

"Heh heh heh. I see, I see. You have come a long way, Lefisios."

For a while, Rhodanus stared at Lefi, deeply moved by the change in her. Then, he continued.

"I understand your reasons. Welcome home, Lefisios. And welcome to the fold, new Dragon King Yuki. Hmm, the first thing for you to do would be... Ah, yes. Let us start with engraving your name into the dragon annals."

"So, in the end, what actually occurred here? I do not see several of the older dragons. There are fewer of the younger dragons I knew as well."

Lefi questioned Rhodanus as she flew behind him.

"Hmm. At present, only seven-tenths of the number you remember still remain. Some time back, a demon with red hair came to the Hamlet, proposing that we join forces with him to 'change the way the world works.' 'Twas plain that he intended to rely on the dragons' strength. Were the Dragon Kings of eld still in power, we would have laughed in his face and rejected him outright. Alas..."

A demon with red hair... Unfortunately, I had a nasty inkling about who he was talking about. It had to have been Gozim, the leader of the fiends and the man I'd fought a while back. He was definitely a ginger.

"Mm. Then he was the one who tempted them? The outsider you mentioned earlier?"

Surprisingly, Rhodanus shook his head in response.

"No. 'Tempt' may be the wrong word. At least to me, his desire to transform this world was real. I could feel that he believed every word he spoke. While his invitation was a foolish one, his words did not lack conviction."

Transform the world, huh? Ultimately, I still had no idea what'd driven him to make the moves he did, why he'd started a war in the demon world in the first place. But I suspected I'd find out one day.

I felt that way because the fiends hadn't stopped maneuvering behind the scenes. According to Nell's information, hostilities continued in the demon world. Interference against humans had increased too. In that case, the day would definitely come when we'd confront each other again. All I had to do was wait for it.

"Thus, that demon's message inspired the young dragons dissatisfied with life in our village. It had an especially powerful impact on Gyuohga, as he was the strongest among the youngsters. The foolish whelp began to rave about how 'dragons should rule the world as those who possess colossal might' and 'we dragons must display our strength to those in the outside world.'"

Gyuohga was the shitty-ass black dragon I'd killed a while ago. Color me surprised to learn he was literally a power player among the young dragons. Based on what Analysis showed me, a few dragons in the Hamlet were weaker than or about as strong as me, with a handful of them a smidge more powerful than me. But they weren't the norm, because more than half of the village's population outclassed me exponentially. The ones who weren't all that strong were probably pretty young.

"Well, the young are prone to such sudden outbursts. We old ones let them be, thinking they would see the light of reason in several decades. However, that fool's ambitions were stronger than we had anticipated. One night, Gyuohga trod into forbidden territory where only the Dragon King and select leaders among us are granted entry."

Regret clouded Rhodanus's expression as he kept talking, remembering the incident.

"I do not know what happened then, but by the time we realized, 'twas too late. Gyuohga had become the new Dragon King, and the previous one lay in his

abode, slain, blood everywhere. I believe... I believe he caught the old king by surprise. 'Tis the only way Gyuohga could have succeeded in killing him, for the fool had not the might otherwise."

"If you knew all this, why did you all do nothing to stop him?"

"By the time we grasped the full extent of the situation, the fool had already fled the Hamlet. We considered giving chase, but killing Gyuohga would have brought with it the possibility of dividing the village into two factions and creating conflict betwixt the young and everyone else."

A war among the dragons, huh? That'd be scary as all hell.

"Of course, should the young band together, they would still be no match for the rest of us. But 'twould not do for us dragons to commit the folly of killing each other. Such an action would pose a grave threat to our very survival as a race. It pains me to say this, but should this extreme ever come to pass, we would rather be annihilated by outsiders than by our own. That is why I must apologize again for the trouble we have caused you."

Lefi fell into a contemplative silence after listening to Rhodanus. A few moments later, she spoke.

"So if I understand this correctly, a few of the elders left because they did not wish to be involved in this mess, and the young ones who left did so because they loathed you elders."

"Correct. A dragon's life is long. Young or old, we are free to live our lives as we please. That is what it means to live. Some like you adapt to the world outside and change for the better, while others return to the Hamlet without ever adapting to life outside it. But should this home of ours be destroyed, where next are we to settle and bring new ones into the world?"

"Home, eh?"

Lefi sneaked a glance at me as she spoke. I was pretty sure I knew what she was thinking. In fact, I was pretty sure we were both thinking the exact same thing right now.

"Forgive me for becoming maudlin. Setting that aside, we have arrived."

Thanks to our little chat, we'd reached our destination before I knew it. A huge cave opened up in front of us. Looking around, I realized that the massive stairs in the valley led here. We hadn't used them since we'd flown here.

"The forbidden realm. How nostalgic. Yuki, it is easy to slip while inside, so watch your step."

"W-Will do. Thanks."

The two of them headed inside like they knew what they were doing. I followed behind them, and right away, I could see the whole interior of the place.

It was a massive shrine. Rough pillars naturally made of the stone inside the grotto towered over us, and thick ropes resembling holy ones used to guard sacred spaces wound around and between them. Deep inside, a step above the ground, was a structure resembling the main hall of a Shinto shrine.

The sunlight didn't reach here at all, but strangely enough, it wasn't super dark inside. I spotted the reason for that soon enough. Several pale balls of light dimly illuminated the interior of the space. Some kind of magic was my guess.

A sacred dwelling for the divine. Those words described this place perfectly. But there was nothing inside the main hall. Just a vast, empty room fit for a dragon's body.

"New Dragon King. This is the forbidden realm. It has been used as the Dragon King's abode for eons now. From today onward, it belongs to you and you alone. As you can see, however, there is not much in here!"

"Indeed. Only the buffoons who love to put on airs take a liking to this place. Yuki, you had best not become one of them."

I smiled ruefully at Lefi's usual sharp tongue, then turned to the elder dragon.

"So what are these 'dragon annals' you mentioned?"

"They are deeper inside. Over there."

Rhodanus pointed to the deepest part of the main hall with a tilt of his head. When I headed that way, what had seemed to be an empty space actually turned out to contain a timeworn stone monument. A stela, to be specific. It

was twice as tall as me and had ideographic inscriptions on it—probably a list of names in the dragon language.

"This is..."

"Indeed. The dragon annals, engraved with the names of all the Dragon Kings."

In total, there were over a hundred names carved into it. Considering how long-lived dragons were, I could only imagine how many years this historical record must've spanned.

"Can I ask you something? When did the first Dragon King live?"

"The title changed hands quickly from the one you defeated and the one before him, but a Dragon King generally reigns for four to five thousand years. So, at a minimum, I would say the oldest Dragon King, the founder, ruled some six hundred thousand years ago."

Holy motherfrickin' balls. That's... That's insane. The humanoid species probably hadn't even been farming yet around then.

Actually, that made me realize that in the eyes of dragons, Lefi was young even though she'd been alive for over a millennium now. I literally couldn't wrap my head around that scale of time.

"Hey, Lefi, are you considered a young'un among dragons?"

"Hmm? Well, relatively speaking, I suppose I may be young. The term 'Ancient Dragon' does not refer to dragons alive since ancient times. Rather, it is used to classify dragons who possess power equal to that of the mightiest dragons of eld. Thus, I have been an Ancient Dragon since birth."

Oh. Ohhh. Come to think of it, she never actually called the old dragons here Ancient Dragons whenever she talked about them. It was always "codgers," "coots," "hags," "elders," and whatnot to describe them. Clearly, I'd misunderstood the nuance, but now I knew that "Ancient Dragon" referred to power and not age. It was fascinating.

"Right, then, new Dragon King. This is where your name will be inscribed in the dragon annals. Go on, now." "Ummm, what exactly am I supposed to do? Just carve my name into it?" It would *not* be pretty if that was what I had to do...

"Heh heh. No, there is no need for that. The stela is a magical medium to record our history. It can be used only by a Dragon King. All you must do is pour your magic into it. When you do, it will take in your information and automatically engrave your name."

A "magical medium" had to be the same as a magical item. So it was that easy, was it? Neat.

I placed my hand on the blank space all the way at the bottom of the list of names. That was where my name would appear.

Nerves, unusual for me, crept in when I felt the "weight" emanating from the stela. Despite them, I called forth my magic. The stone monument reacted immediately and began scrawling my name, the ideograms wriggling into the surface.

"Yuki Maou" was what showed up.

Wait. Wait a sec. It recorded my last name as "Maou."

"Huh? Huuuh?"

I froze in shock, staring at the name recorded in the list of Dragon Kings.

"Kah ha ha!!! Yuki Maou! Yuki Maou! How highly must you think yourself as a demon lord for it to note you as such?! Will you introduce yourself as 'Yuki Maou' from here on?!"

Lefi laughed hysterically when she saw the engraved name.

"D-Dude, no, you know it's not like that. I mean, yeah, sure, I like being a demon lord, but come on... H-Hey, Rhodanus, can I do anything about this?"

"No. Once it has been inscribed, it cannot be changed."

Whaaat? Is this for real? I had a feeling that'd be his answer, but seriously? Boooo.

"Keh keh. Do not fret. I, for one, believe it suits you perfectly. A family name adds gravitas to your presence. I wonder if I should henceforth introduce myself

as 'Lefisios Maou.'"

"L-Look, I actually wanted to think of a proper last name for you for that reason. Besides, you're not even a demon lord."

"No, but I am a demon lord's wife. Hmm. 'Supreme Dragon Lefisios Maou'... I quite like the sound of it."

Contrary to my expectations, she actually *liked* the name. So much so that she was nodding vigorously and looked totally satisfied.

"Zaien...Maou. I like it."

En murmured those words, also looking pleased by the name. Up until now, she'd been obediently following along with us, holding our hands while in her human form. I really had to wonder why they liked the name so much. If I knew this was how things were gonna turn out, I should've just stuck with my last name from my old life.

Well, actually, never mind. My old name was no longer relevant. Here, I was just plain ol' Yuki. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Hmm. There was another like you in the past—another Dragon King for whom this very phenomenon occurred."

Rhodanus watched over us with a warm smile, clearly enjoying our little show. Then, he looked thoughtfully back at the stela.

"You mean the fact that their name was recorded without their input?"

"Yes. It can be seen in the middle of the list. This name here."

I slid my eyes to where he was pointing with a thick foreleg.

"Ummm, let's see... Ah, the one with three names? 'Larren Felgarda Humano'?"

"Indeed. This Dragon King, like yourself, was a humanoid."

"Whoa, really? A human, judging by the last name?"

Wow, a human became a Dragon King? That's...amazing.

"The sixty-seventh Dragon King, Larren Felgarda Humano. 'Humano' was what humans were called in antiquity. The tale goes that long, long ago, this human

opened his heart to a dragon, persevered through a world of war, and eventually became the Dragon King."

"Hmm... I have heard this story as well. From you old ones in my youth. If I remember correctly, he was the humans' earliest king, yes?"

"Their earliest king?"

She nodded in response and continued, recalling the details.

"Back then, humans were the weakest among all the species by far, always subject to oppression by others. Mana was even thicker in the atmosphere in those times, which made the monsters all the stronger. As the race with the weakest adaptability to mana, humans were on the brink of extinction."

Tale as old as time, huh? Wasn't like I didn't understand. In the current era, humans had significantly more power and influence than other species. I'd heard that they were still waging war against demons and therianthropes in certain places around the world. In comparison, they had a decent relationship with demi-humans, but even that wasn't free of scuffles.

That was why they were thought of as self-indulgent. But as a species, they were relatively weak.

Demi-humans, who had rich stores of magical energy and tough bodies. Therianthropes, who had animal characteristics and inherently powerful physical abilities. And demons, who had so many different subgroups and abilities that it was impossible to name a defining feature. Compared to these species, humans had no bodily characteristics worth mentioning, lacked a wealth of magic, and were the most inferior when it came to physical abilities. Exceptions like Nell existed, but they were exceptions through and through.

Taking all that into account and adding to it their less-advanced technology and lower population in the past, the difference between humans' abilities and other species' must have been incredibly striking. The reason humans had been at war with other species for so long could probably be traced back to that point.

"Indeed. Yet the humans persevered and avoided extinction. Through ingenuity, a lone human unified their species under a single banner. Through

armed force, that human combated threats and built a peaceful land. And always by this human's side was a dragon. They pledged to live their lives together. In hindsight, they were the same as you two, eh?"

Hmm. I wonder if he reincarnated into this world too. Considering that I'd come from another world, it was entirely possible the same thing had happened before. Heck, there might've been someone like that out there right now. Although I had no clue if they were from Earth, so perhaps the "distance" between worlds wasn't huge.

There'd been a folklore concept called "kamikakushi" back in my old life in Japan. It'd meant "to be spirited away by a god." It wouldn't be inconceivable, then, for a few of the mysterious disappearances on Earth to have been a result of reincarnation or transmigration. Especially because I now knew for a fact that Earth wasn't the only world in existence.

"All right, so I get that an amazing human like him existed, but what does he have to do with this stela?"

"To phrase it another way, only two who are not of dragonkind have etched their names into our long, long history as Dragon Kings. The dragon annals were originally created for us dragons. Therefore, when the name of one from another race is engraved, the race name is also engraved. This monument was built a long time ago, however, so even we do not know the particulars."

"Ohhh, I see. So this is more like a description of the race than a family name?"

"Not necessarily. You can keep it as a family name as well. 'Tis your choice.

Ah. It just struck me that you can read the dragon language too. I take it this is because of your Polyglot ability?"

"Hmm... Yeah, probably."

Rhodanus was right. I could read dragon language no problem. I hadn't really thought about it until now, but I'd had Polyglot as a special ability ever since I'd been reincarnated. Without it, I probably would've been screwed in a lot of ways. For example, the first time I met Lefi, there was a good chance she would've straight up killed me if it hadn't been for Polyglot.

"Man, just goes to show how ya really can't underestimate the importance of language. I'm glad from the bottom of my heart that I can talk to you like this. Without words, I'd never get to whisper my love to you!"

"Y-You imbecile! Where did this suddenly come from?! Can you not cease making such statements when we are in the outside world?"

"Oh, so I can say them when we're at home? Cool beans."

*"…"* 

Cheeks slightly flushed, Lefi lightly whacked me on the shoulder. She didn't say a word, though. Probably out of embarrassment. *Cute*.

"Master...can I call myself 'Zaien Maou' from now on?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, sure, why not? But that would kinda make you a demon lord too, En. You good with that?"

"Yes... That sounds cool, so I'll be a demon lord now too. Just like you, Master."

"O-Oh, yeah? All right, then let's be demon lords together."

"Yes."

I couldn't help but wonder what it'd be like for us both to be demon lords, but since En looked so happy, that was good enough for me.

"Heh heh heh. I can see how much you all care for each other."

Rhodanus beamed at us cheerfully.



After leaving the forbidden realm, our next stop was the Hamlet's huge plaza.

"Oho. So this individual of human lineage is the new Dragon King, eh?"

"And a demon lord, to boot. His life will be quite long."

"Agreed. I thought I'd seen much and more in this world in all my years, but this is quite the unusual occurrence too."

A ton of dragons scrutinized me intently like I was some sort of oddity. A few peered at me from up close while others examined me from afar. Looking at

them like this, I realized that it was easy to differentiate between each dragon. The young from the old. Male from female. The luster of their scales, the sizes of their bodies, the lengths of their fangs, the shapes of their horns—all these features and more allowed me to tell the difference between one dragon and the next.

But in my eyes, Lefi was still the most beautiful of all the dragons. I couldn't sense even a hint of the divinity in them that she exuded in her dragon form. Although I *definitely* felt their overwhelming strength.

"Uhhh, hello. I'm Yuki, the 312th Dragon King. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I greeted them with a somewhat stiff, awkward smile on account of the immense pressure they were giving off.

"Yes, well met, new Dragon King. I suppose your ascension marks the changing of the times, doesn't it?"

"With Lefisios as your mate, can we expect tranquility under your reign for millennia?"

"The birth of a new legend, eh? It will be interesting to see."

Dragons remarked one after another.

"A new legend, huh? Not sure about that, considering I don't hold a candle to any of you in the power department."

"No, no. You most certainly can. You have more than earned the title after skillfully handling the untamable shrew that is Lefisios. None of us are capable of defying the Supreme Dragon over there."

"Indeed. On a few occasions, her rampages here partially destroyed our settlement."

"If you lot insist on blathering needlessly about such things, do not be surprised when you find yourselves turned into piles of ash."

Displeased, Lefi harrumphed in annoyance. A few of the younger dragons recoiled in fear, while the older ones cackled hysterically.

"Goodness, terror makes my bones quake. We would not be able to put up a

fight against her should she riot again, so perhaps this time, she really will destroy the village."

"Ka ka ka! I do remember the last incident very well. 'Twas the first time in my long life I sustained such grievous wounds. Truly an outrageous hoyden she is."

"Right, then. Yuki, I believe your business here is finished. Let us be off without a moment's delay. I would much rather return to the dungeon than spend a second longer in the company of these dotards."

Rhodanus chuckled wryly when he saw Lefi sulking because of the other dragons' teasing. Then, in an attempt to mediate, he chimed in.

"Calm yourself, Lefisios. I bid you to stay the night at the very least. After all, you arrived here intending to do just that, yes?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Plus, I do wanna chat with you guys some more. About Lefi's past and stuff."

"Yes...I want to hear more about Lady Lefifi."

Lefi spoke up after that, even less pleased now that me and En had said we agreed.

"Hmph! It seems I have no choice in the matter. But I will not allow a lengthy sojourn!"

Once we decided to stay the night, the dragons went into an excited frenzy about preparing a welcome feast for us, making comments like "Tis time to celebrate!" and "We must host a banquet!" and "This calls for spirits!" Then came a little caveat from Lefi...

"Heed me well, Yuki. This is what the old dragons are like. They are nothing but a herd of ancient drunks."

"Ha ha ha..."

I could only respond with an awkward laugh to her deeply exasperated expression.

At the moment, the dragons—no, the *elderly* dragons, specifically, were sloshed out of their minds. The amount of alcohol they'd drunk was insane.

Like, beyond insane. Because it was liquor for a bunch of dragons to drink, naturally, a stupidly huge amount of it had been prepared. The fumes alone practically had me tipsy.

For starters, one "cup" for a dragon was about three full normal-sized bathtubs. Absolutely freaking bonkers. I'd thought that size would've been pretty damn big for them too, but nope. They downed that shit like it was nothing *and* asked for refills, which I found mind-boggling. From my perspective, it was less a feast and more an excuse for them to drink.

By the way, it turned out that the dragons made this particular spirit from scratch. Since they lived so dang long, they'd let it ferment for a millennium or two, making it the best alcohol in the world by a huge margin. They had good reason to be proud of their product. Also, because they used magic in most of the brewing process, the stuff was said to be rich in magical energy, so it half served as a kind of mana potion.

"Well, Dragon King? What think you of the dragon firewater we make in this hamlet? Know you that 'tis considered a luxury item akin to sacred wine in the world outside?"

Ranba, one of the chief elders, chatted with me. Because of his rugged, rocklike scales, he could easily be mistaken for an actual rocky mountain at first glance. Incidentally, he was also waaay stronger than me, with a level in the 600s.

"Yeah, I can see that. It's super delicious. In fact, it's so good, I wanna take it home as a souvenir."

"Most excellent. Take as much as you'd like when you depart."

Ranba tossed back the cup of alcohol he held skillfully in one forepaw and rumbled good-naturedly with laughter.

It was common sense in this world that any food or drink full of magical energy was delicious, but this spirit in particular was incredible beyond compare. Mellow with a hint of sweetness, it went down surprisingly smooth despite the high alcohol content. I didn't doubt his claim of it being a luxury item in the world outside the Dragon Hamlet. It'd fetch a hell of a price if put on the market.

But there was an important note to make here. Even if you were treated to a dragon-sized cup full of the stuff, there was literally no way to drink it all. Thanks to my demon lord body, I could handle my liquor really well, but physically speaking, I just couldn't swallow every last drop out of the cup that was big enough to hold me.

"Lefi, you gotta help me drink this. I'm begging you."

"Hmm, yes, I believe that is a sound notion. We shall drink it together. Although there is no need to force yourself to finish it. This is, after all, a welcome banquet for you, imperfect as it is. Rhodanus. The two of us will imbibe a cup of firewater together, so this one is for you to drink."

"Oh? Are you certain?"

"With this body, I can only drink as much as my husband. I cannot possibly consume all of this myself, so I shall give to you my cup."

"Ah, I see. If you insist, then I shall gladly partake."

Lefi pushed her untouched cup toward Rhodanus, who looked ridiculously happy about her offer.

This brought back a memory of when she'd told me about how dragons were heavy drinkers. She sure was right, huh?

Then, like she'd suddenly had a great idea, Lefi grinned and cheerfully plopped herself into my lap as I sat cross-legged. She relaxed completely into me, her back resting against my chest. The warmth of her skin against mine felt soothing.

"H-Hey, what the heck?"

"I was simply in the mood. That is all. Is this not to your liking?"

My darling bride stared up at me with an alluring smile.

Of course I didn't hate it. So I just smiled ruefully back at her and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind, hugging her lightly.



"You know, you're unexpectedly good at getting me to spoil you."

Nell didn't mind cuddling when it was just the two of us, but she'd never do it in front of others because it embarrassed her. And as for Lew, she preferred to joke around and have fun rather than be a part of any PDA. Compared to them, Lefi was super proactive with physical intimacy. She didn't give a single hoot about who might be watching and just went for it whenever she felt like it, even if she *did* tend to get shy whenever I initiated contact. As the Supreme Dragon, she had the freedom to do whatever she wanted, and I was well aware of it on those occasions.

"Pishposh. I know very well that *you* enjoy being pampered. Thus, I ascertain my husband's feelings and act accordingly."

"Ha ha! You're right, you're right. It feels great being spoiled by all of you."

"It...does? Then I can spoil you lots too, Master?"

From next to us, En turned inquisitively toward me. Instead of the alcohol, she'd been given something that looked like amazake, a sweet fermented drink made from rice, which she'd been sipping on adorably. Incidentally, her cup was a normal size since I'd taken it out of Inventory for her to use.

Ah, shoot. I should've just used my own cup from the start. Cup size hadn't even occurred to me when the dragons had told us to wait while they prepared the feast. So by the time they'd set the humongous cups in front of us, it'd been too late.

"You sure can, En. Feel free to coddle me whenever the mood strikes you. Same goes for you, I assume, Lefi?"

"Indeed. You may pamper me to your heart's content as well. I have no qualms walloping him should his attentions become overly repulsive, but I shall allow you to spoil me as much as you desire."

"Mrs. Lefi, don't you think you're being a bit unreasonable?"

"Okay... Yay."

En wasted no time. She put her cup down and turned her body sideways to lay her head in Lefi's—and by extension my—lap. Despite her expressionless

face, it was easy to tell how happy she was. What a cutie.

"You have changed a great deal since we last set eyes upon you, Lefisios. To think the day would come when you took a mate. What a fascinating world we live in."

Another dragon by the name of Veradanus spoke as he stared at us, intrigued. Agewise, he was considered smack-dab in the middle range—according to dragonkind's perception of time, at least—of the dragons living in the Hamlet at sixteen hundred years old.

At any rate, all the dragons Lefi knew kept saying the same thing about her having changed. I'd honestly assumed she'd been like this since the day I'd met her, but now I wondered if she'd been a lot more on edge back in the day.

"Indeed it is a fascinating world. I suggest you all cease sequestering yourselves here and venture into the world outside so that you may see it for yourselves."

"Heh heh. I shall consider it."

"Hey, I wanna know something. Was Lefi really such a sourpuss in the old days?"

Veradanus nodded in response to my question, a nostalgic look on his face.

"She was, yes. Possessed of great power since birth, she was expected to become the next Dragon King by the strongest old ones among us. But your wife did not enjoy being shackled. From what I remember, she would cause mayhem quite often."

"Veradanus. Reveal any more unnecessary information and I will tear your mouth open as far as your ears."

"Oh, dear. This is where I stop, for fear of your wife's wrath."

"Uhhh, Mrs. Lefi? Preeetty sure I said I wanted to stay the night 'cause I wanna hear more stories about your past."

"If you wish to learn more about me, then I shall tell you myself. There is no need to listen to these fools prattle on."

Veradanus cackled with laughter at Lefi's refusal to change her attitude.

"Gah ha ha! You have my sympathies, Dragon King!"

I neither confirmed nor denied his words. Instead, I smiled vaguely at him and took a sip of the dragon firewater from my cup.

For a while after that, I went around introducing myself and drinking with the big-drinking dragons. Sometimes they astonished me with their stories and other times, they made me laugh. That was how I spent the banquet.

"Dragon King. There is something I would like to ask."

"Sure, lay it on me."

Rhodanus, the oldest dragon in the Hamlet, spoke to me. When I replied, his alcohol-flushed face grew a bit serious—well, as far as I could tell, anyway, seeing as I still wasn't good at determining a dragon's change in expression—as he continued.

"Henceforth, should a young dragon run amok in the world outside, might you parley with them?"

"Huh? Parley?"

"Yes. Within your power, of course. You need not push yourself. Simply inform them that they should not cause trouble for those living outside our borders. I believe they will listen since you are the Dragon King."

Lefi turned to face Rhodanus. She was in a good mood and had been gently stroking En's head, with the little girl having fallen asleep at some point. Now, though, her gaze was sharp.

"Do not make such a selfish request. The lot of you should deal with such bothersome matters yourselves. I most certainly will not allow my husband to clean up messes of your making."

"Tis precisely as you say. Therefore, Dragon King, I do not mind if you ignore these old bones' drivel."

Lefi looked like she wanted to say more, but I patted her shoulder, silently telling her to stop, and responded to him myself.

"Why don't you start by telling me what you mean. We can go from there."

"You have my gratitude."

Rhodanus bowed his head a little, then began his explanation.

"Now, then. Where shall I begin? Ah, let me tell you first of the problem plaguing our village. A smidgen of discord exists between us elderly Ancient Dragons and the young ones who have not yet attained that rank."

"Discord?"

"Indeed. Above all else, we graybeards seek tranquility in our days, whereas the youth seek change. The discord grew from this disparity. They are dissatisfied with the way we do things here, which is why they rebel against us. Not all of the young ones, of course, but...those who are unable to endure our way of life inevitably depart."

"Ah. I think I get it."

I understood what he was saying. Stuff like this wasn't limited to just dragonkind. Naturally, there were exceptions to the rule, but on a fundamental level, the old wished for peace while the young wished for excitement.

There just so happened to be a big, decisive difference here, though: unlike other species, dragons got stronger just by aging. The long-lived variety of creatures in this world became stronger because their bodies adapted to mana more and more in proportion to how long they'd been alive. All of the dragon elders I'd met so far had been Ancient Dragons, and when I'd asked Lefi why, that'd turned out to be the reason. Just like how I'd race evolved from Archdemon to Demon Lord, they'd been members of other dragon races before they'd grown accustomed to mana and evolved into Ancient Dragons.

The main reason Lefi was so overwhelmingly, monstrously strong even among dragonkind was because she was the only one who'd been *born* as an Ancient Dragon. This meant her body possessed an inherently high affinity to mana, which had allowed her to spend her whole life endlessly adjusting to mana, resulting in her current power level.

In short, the power to run this settlement rested solidly in the hands of the elderly, who were the strongest among them. So between the young, whose attention was focused outward, and the old, whose was focused inward, it was

the latter who determined dragonkind's way of life here. It wasn't like the old dragons were forcing anyone to do anything, but yeah, the youth *would* feel dissatisfied.

Then the problem might be less that they're dragons and more that they're a long-lived species.

"Twould not be a concern if they were logical like Lefisios, as we could then rest assured they would not cause trouble after leaving the village. We do not wish to fetter anyone. All are free to live their lives as they please. Alas, many young ones departed on this occasion, and I must admit that a few of them concern me gravely. Especially those who were close to Gyuohga and hold similar disparaging views toward other species."

A faction aligned with that damned dragon, huh? They could definitely end up being a problem. Going from a world where they couldn't effect change to one they could shape however they wanted? It was easy to imagine them getting drunk off that kind of power and going crazy. Rhodanus was very much onto something.

"And the reason you guys can't drag their asses back yourselves is because of the threat to all of dragonkind, right? The one you mentioned this afternoon?"

"Correct. If we were to leave the Hamlet to bring them back, 'tis likely war would break out. Civilizations perish so easily when dragons rampage. We cannot control our strength, you see. In truth, this is exactly why several cultures have already been destroyed. Power such as ours should not be wielded so carelessly."

Yeah, okay, he makes a hell of a point. It brought to mind how hard it'd been for Lefi to control her strength at first. She sure had broken a lot of plates. She still did sometimes, actually.

So if dragons who couldn't make allowances for their power went wild, none of the humanoid races stood a chance against them. And an Ancient Dragon was pretty much a biological weapon. It would be a piece of cake for just one to create a land of death.

"All right, I understand what you're getting at. But let me make something clear. I'm a lot—and I mean a *lot*—weaker than all of you. So I'm sorry, but I

have no intention of putting my life on the line for others."

I wasn't some saint or a hero like Nell who fought for the sake of others. I put my life on the line for my sake and my sake alone, meaning I had less than zero desire to toss it away for a bunch of randos I barely knew. Besides, just because I was the Dragon King didn't mean that every single dragon would obey me unconditionally. Thus, I had to say thanks but no thanks to taking on such a dangerous role.

"I fully comprehend your position. The fact of the matter is that many of the youth who left are ill-tempered. For that reason, I proffer to you this."

So saying, Rhodanus suddenly created a rift in space and pulled something out of his version of an Inventory to give to me.

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"Is this...a spear?"
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He'd handed over an all-black spear-like weapon made of a single unknown material. It looked so plain that at first glance it could be mistaken for a staff. I thought the material might be some kind of metal, but it lacked the shine unique to metal. Texturally, it felt like smooth wood. That being the case, maybe it was bone?

"Constructed from a god's bone, 'tis known as the God Spear. Do you recall the human Dragon King I mentioned, Larren Felgarda? Evidently, this was his weapon. Every time it is wielded, the heavens weep, the ground trembles, and the ocean parts, or so the legend goes amongst dragonkind."

God Spear: ???

Quality: ???

I activated Analysis, but it showed me jack squat. All I understood was that this spear had some kind of bizarre aura.

"Lefi, do you know anything about this? Anything at all?"

"I do not. Even my Analysis ability cannot penetrate it. Yuki, this spear... It is a weapon of tremendous power."

Her expression was grim as she replied to me.

Does this basically mean that no one currently alive in this world understands what it is? A god's spear, huh? The name was starting to feel very authentic.

"Using that spear, the human Dragon King Larren brought the dragons under his rule and restored law and order to the world. We cannot use it, but you should be able to do so well enough. Treat it well, for it is one of dragonkind's hidden treasures."

"Wait, are you *sure* I should have it, then? I mean, I'm grateful and all, but like..."

Actually, maybe I wasn't so grateful after all. 'Cause, like, come on. This spear was scary AF. I felt like I'd be cursed if I wielded it carelessly.

"Yes. Larren left behind a message to accompany it: 'Should someone wise of human lineage once more become the Dragon King, make sure to give them this spear.' Therefore, it belongs to you."

While I appreciated the former Dragon King thinking of his future successor, honestly, I wasn't even sure *how* to deal with this thing. As I stared at the spear in my hands with a stiff expression, I abruptly realized that En was watching me. She was clearly sulking at the sight of me holding another weapon. So for the time being, I hastily put it away in Inventory.

"Well, okay, I guess. It wasn't like I wanted to be the Dragon King, but no getting around the fact that I'm the current one, is there? I'll try to keep that in mind as best I can. Just don't expect too much of me, all right? I feel like I've said this a bunch already, but I really need to stress that I'm nowhere near as powerful as you dragons. We on the same page with that?"

"Tis more than enough that you will make an effort. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for listening to my words, Dragon King."

Rhodanus bowed his head deeply at me.



The next day.

"You are leaving already? Outsiders are always so impatient."

"Stay. A leisurely three years should be enough for now."

I chuckled ruefully in response to the dragons' grumbles. Their sense of time was super warped because they had such long lives.

"I appreciate the sentiment a lot, but humanoids aren't nearly as patient as you guys. Don't worry, though. I'll visit again eventually. I mean, you'll still be here considering how long you guys live."

Rhodanus nodded in agreement at my remark.

"Yes, do come again. You are this hamlet's current leader. We will always welcome you and yours."

"Hmm. Perhaps we shall make another journey here around the time you old fogies are near death's door."

"Heh heh heh. Very well. We will not mind even then. I am sure the dragons will be pleased to see the Supreme Dragon and the Dragon King whensoever you should choose to visit."

Rhodanus wasn't at all fazed by Lefi's crabbiness. The way he acted toward her brought to mind the Spirit Emperor and made me realize there were quite a few individuals in this world who could get away with treating her like a kid. It was my latest reminder of how incredibly, unchangingly awesome this world actually was.

"All right, we're off, then. Thanks for taking care of us, folks."

"I hope your gazes have focused more on the outside world by the time we come again."

"Bye...bye."

"We will be waiting."

And so, the dragons sent us off as we left the Dragon Hamlet behind.

"Okay, I think I figured out how dragonkind feels about the Dragon King. To them, the word 'king' has a different connotation than it does to humanoid species. The Dragon King is less an actual ruler and more just a symbol, right?" "Hmm. I am not well-versed in mankind's myriad cultures, but you have the right of it. For us dragons, the Dragon King is not quite a ruler."

Though the Dragon King was an indispensable existence, whoever took on the role didn't decide everything. Instead, the position was more emblematic than anything. Despite a king technically standing atop a group of people, the Dragon King wasn't influential the way the human and demon kings I'd met were.

On second thought, maybe that wasn't strictly the case. Even with someone like me becoming the Dragon King, the dragons hadn't rebelled. In fact, they'd listened to what I had to say. Based on their behavior, it was safe to assume that the role did come with a certain measure of power. So while the Dragon King was a leader of sorts to them, the position wasn't the be-all and end-all either.

By staying in their village, I had keenly felt the deep maturity of dragon society. Mankind didn't even come close in that regard. It had to have been a result of the millennia upon millennia they lived for, their species surviving because of the thousands of years of care and attention they devoted to themselves.

Members of a fully mature society had more leeway to live their lives calmly every day, meaning there were fewer struggles in which they risked their lives. And fewer struggles naturally led to more agreeable personalities. An increase in such temperate dispositions in turn meant less competition, making the society even more moderate.

I could definitely see that way of life inspiring some measure of boredom. Having experienced the Dragon Hamlet for myself, it made it easier to understand both what Lefi had meant by calling it a "stagnant place" and why so many of the youth had left. Still, though, I didn't feel like it'd be wrong to say that dragonkind's society was the most developed in this world.

"But that didn't stop you from flipping out seeing as you hated it whenever they told you to become the Dragon King, right?"

"Naturally. Why should I be forced to take up the mantle? Especially when the position comes with such a considerable degree of responsibility. It was intolerable that they kept trying to foist it off on me even though I had no

intention whatsoever to accept it."

Fair. Totally fair. I'd had time to adjust to the idea of becoming the Dragon King, but if I hadn't, I wouldn't have wanted to fill the position either.

"And another thing. Though you bonded with them well enough, I still despise that place. Further, I do not appreciate their underhanded attempt to have you clean up their mess simply because you are the Dragon King."

"Mm, yeah, that did happen, didn't it? I get what you're saying, but it's clear they thought long and hard about it before bringing the topic up with me. Plus, it's not like they're trying to dump the problem on me just because it's a pain in the ass for them. They don't have bad intentions in my opinion."

Even when previous Dragon Kings were killed, elderly Ancient Dragons hardly made any moves because they understood that any interference on their part to handle the situation would throw the world into chaos. The current pack of elders had probably taken into account the complications and damage that would occur both within the Dragon Hamlet and the world outside should they try to drag the difficult, hot-tempered young ones back. After all, Rhodanus had mentioned how dragon wars led to the destruction of entire civilizations because they couldn't control their own strength.

There was one other possibility too, which was that maybe they wanted them to accumulate more experience in other societies. By "them," I of course meant the young ones. Though the young dragons' presence could easily become a tremendous nuisance to other species, they would undoubtedly grow in many ways by living their lives in the world outside instead of just remaining cloistered in the insular Hamlet. But the old ones also knew the youths couldn't be left entirely to their own devices, which was probably why they'd asked for my help.

After talking about all this to Lefi, she stared at me with a slightly dissatisfied expression.

"Hmph. I see you are throwing your lot in completely with those codgers. Since you have taken such a shine to that infernal place, you may as well become one of the Hamlet's children yourself!"

"Jeez, when the heck did you become the mother of a spoiled brat? You sure freaking sound the part, if nothing else. And En, I'm not gonna become anyone's or anyplace's kid, so you can relax."

Chuckling wryly, I gently patted En's sheath as she telepathically communicated her worry to us.

"Bah. Have it your way, then. At any rate, you intend to test that spear's efficacy, yes? I shall keep watch, so do what you must. Make it quick, though, as I am keen to return home."

"Copy that."

We hadn't gone back to the dungeon yet. We were currently in the secluded region near the Dragon Hamlet.

The God Spear Rhodanus gave me... I had no idea what sort of power it contained. All I knew was that it was kinda scary, so I wanted to figure out what it was capable of before we got home. Since Lefi was with me right now, I figured she'd clean things up on the off chance shit really hit the fan.

When I took the God Spear out of Inventory, En anthropomorphized from her sword form in my other hand and growled low in her throat.

"Hmm... It does seem strong indeed. But En will ascertain whether the weapon is fit to be wielded by you."

"Please and thanks. You and En are probably better off doing the analyzing at times like this anyway."

First up, I'd try a regular old stabbing attack. I passed En's true sword body over to Lefi, made sure I had a solid grip on my new weapon, and gave it a thrust.

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"Yah!"
"..."
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But nothing happened.

"...Nothing's happening, huh?"

"Indeed. I felt no change in its magical energy either. Perhaps it is not meant to be brandished merely in the air?"

"You think I need a target? All right, in that case..."

Next, I stabbed a nearby tree with the spear, and its pointed end pierced it just like a normal spear would.

"...Nothing's happening, huh?"

"Nothing is happening."

To add insult to injury, because I didn't know how to use a spear, the thing had barely pierced the tree. A regular-ass knife would've probably had more attack power. Except I definitely felt the same kind of pressure radiating from it as I did from Lefi and the dragons, so it didn't make sense that nothing was happening.

While Lefi and I tilted our heads in puzzlement over the weapon, En muttered quietly.

"Master...use your magic."

"My magic? Like, on the spear?"

"Yes... It will display its ability if you do. I think."

En nodded firmly.

Ohhh. Maybe it works like a magical tool, then?

I did as I was told and started pouring my magic into the God Spear. The second I did, it started to transform.

"Whoa! What the hell?!"

It sucked up my magic like a muddy stream and rapidly grew longer and thicker before my eyes. The transformation was complete once it'd absorbed half my magic. And when it was complete, the spear looked totally different.

Before, it'd just been an unrefined bone spear, but now, it boasted a number of beautiful decorations like a tassel. The head, which had doubled if not tripled in size, was also wrapped in a thin layer of something that looked like a transparent blade. It now resembled a naginata more than a spear. This had to

be the God Spear's true form.

"H-Hey, Lefi, you sure there's nothing wrong with this thing? I'm pretty terrified just holding it..."

After pouring my magic into it, the spear had begun unleashing a tremendous amount of pressure. Even just having it in my hands had made me break out in a cold sweat.

"Yes, well... Whatever happens, I shall protect you, so try swinging it once."

"Uh, okay."

Scared, I wielded the totally transformed spear and lunged toward the tree with it like I'd done before. A massive gouge appeared instantly. No penetration or destruction, a part of the tree had simply vanished like it'd never been there in the first place, leaving behind a blade-shaped crater. I suspected a vacuum wave had burst forth from the blade's tip.

Upon closer inspection, the trail of annihilation was fifteen meters long, give or take.

"I... I only thrust it lightly."

Did that mean the destruction it caused would travel even farther if I stabbed with all my might? If I slashed at something with this spear, I felt like the immediate area would disappear without a trace.

"Well, that is terrifying indeed. I do believe it can pierce through my scales too."

"Whoa, seriously? Your scales?"

Did that mean there was nothing in this world that could defend against this spear? Also...I was pretty sure it had another power or two. I doubted it possessed a sense of self like En. But an inorganic, repulsive *something* conveyed itself to me from inside this spear, as if it were trying to swallow me whole. Though I had no clue at all what this something could be...

"It's...stronger than me. Grr."

En looked a little vexed. However, Lefi chided the girl with a more stern expression than usual.

"En, heed me well. You must not strive to be like it, for this is assuredly not true strength. Yuki, I suggest you use this spear sparingly, if at all."

"Yeah. Agreed. The only time I will is if you're not there and my life is in danger. Otherwise, it's staying the heck in Inventory."

This spear was crazy powerful, that was for damn sure. *Dangerously* powerful, even. The moment I'd swung it, a famous saying from Earth had suddenly popped into my head: "When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back." It wasn't the kind of weapon someone should wield carelessly.

"Yes, do that. Curse that Rhodanus for giving you such an outrageous item."

"If I actually used this thing however I wanted, I might be able to fight on equal footing with dragons. Which is a frightening thought in and of itself."

Its former owner, the humans' earliest king, had probably achieved great things *because* he'd wielded it exactly as he'd pleased. That wasn't something I felt like I could do, though. But it wasn't like I was in a desperate situation that warranted its use, so there was that. And besides, I already had En, so any other weapon was just a bonus.

In any case, even though I hadn't verified all of its abilities, I had learned without a shadow of a doubt that this weapon wasn't something to mess with, so I quickly put it back into Inventory.

"Haah... Boy, am I glad I tested it out here and now. Who knows what kinda damage I would've caused if I'd used it without knowing anything about it."

"I can well imagine a scenario in which you would have unwittingly cleaved the pets in half because you were not aware of its offensive range."

"For real. All right, now that the test's over, how 'bout we go home? I'm suddenly feeling super drained, so I've got a real hankering to just slip into the bath and stay there for a good, long time."

"Yes... The waterfall hot spring is very nice."

"Indeed it is. We have Nell to thank for it, yes?"

"Yup, yup. Sure is easy to get excited about bath time when we've got a tub that big, huh?"

"I...love taking baths. It's so much fun when Iluna and the others go in with me. Oh, I'll help you and Lady Lefifi wash up, Master."

"Kah ha! Will you now, En? I am quite looking forward to it. And in return, I shall assist you as well."

While chatting away, we activated our dungeon return devices.

## **Side Story 2: The Dungeon around That Time**

Around the time Yuki, Lefi, and En were receiving their grand welcome from the dragons in the Hamlet, Lew and Leila were eating lunch in the dungeon's real throne room.

"Gosh, it's so rare for just the two of us to eat lunch together. Though I can't say it feels particularly new."

"Perhaps it's because we're together practically twenty-four seven, hm? I'm almost positive that among my entire circle of friends, I've spent the most time with you at this point."

The two girls left behind in the dungeon, Iluna and Shii, had already finished eating and run off outside to play with the wraith triplets, which explained why these two were alone now.

"Same goes for me. Then again, there weren't any other girls my age in the village. There were a few boys, but they were all potential marriage candidates, so it wasn't exactly fun since I felt confined by that. Ugh, just thinking about it makes me sad for some reason."

Leila laughed lightly in response to Lew's slightly dejected expression as she recalled her past.

"Tee hee. Except you have Master Demon Lord now, hm? Whenever you're with him, you look very happy, Lew. It's like you're enjoying yourself tremendously, you know?"

"I... I feel bad for everyone in the village for saying this, but I'm really, really glad I chose not to live my life following their rules. Otherwise, all I'd know is fear."

"I completely agree. If not for my encounter with the unknown existence that is this labyrinth, I would likely have continued wandering the world, perhaps eventually dying an early death."

"I know it's sorta late to be asking you this after so long, Leila, but what

exactly is your goal as a scholar? I mean, I already know you're just satisfying your intellectual curiosity, but I also know that academics generally like to figure out something or other, so I was wondering if that applied to you too."

Leila was completely unfazed by Lew's question that probed at what could be considered the heart of her existence. It was something she had never revealed to anyone except her teacher back home who had taught her so much, but even so, she didn't hesitate to discuss her intention.

"I want to uncover one of the world's truths."

"'The world's truths'? What do you mean?"

"For example, 'Why were humanoid species born?' 'What exactly is magical power?' 'How was the world made?' I want to discover the answers to fundamental questions like these—questions that lay untouched, as they were considered forbidden because they were thought to be the realm of the divine. Although I have the feeling I'll be attacked by religious figures someday for saying such a thing."

The ovine young woman usually possessed a mature, intellectual aura. But seeing her eyes sparkle and watching her speak so enthusiastically made her seem just like the little girls when they were excited. Charmed by the sight, Lew couldn't help chuckling softly.

"I don't really think you need to worry about that while you're here in the dungeon. Out of all of us, Nell's the only one with a connection to religion, and her god seems relatively open-minded. But wow, I had no idea you were thinking about things on such a grand scale, Leila."

"To be honest, living here makes me optimistic about answering those questions. Through the power of the labyrinth, Master Demon Lord can create new domains and new life. Depending on your perspective, his ability could then be considered a god's work."

"Now that you mention it, he is the one who brought Shii, Rei, Rui, Roh, and the pets to life. Not to mention the meadow area with its blue sky. That wouldn't exist without him either. In hindsight, it really is a wondrous thing, huh? Urk. I know I'm not anywhere on your level, but I'm kinda curious about it now too. This must be the intellectual curiosity you feel, right?"

"Ooh, how marvelous! Lew, you just opened a scholarly path for yourself!" Lew smiled wryly at Leila's words.

"Ha ha ha... But I'm not smart, so it's impossible for me to be like you, Leila. At best, all I can think is, 'I really wonder where his power comes from.'"

"Let me make one thing clear. You're quite good at learning, so I've never once thought you weren't smart. Regardless, as long as you cherish this inquisitive feeling, I'm certain every day will become even more enjoyable for you."

"You know what? You're right. I think I'll try harder to appreciate every day's new discoveries and curiosities from now on. Speaking of smarts, my lord always says things like 'I don't have much in the brains department, so there's that' when it comes to himself, but I'd say he's actually quite clever and studious. Don't you think so too?"

"I very much agree. In my opinion, he's extremely quick-witted. As far as his knowledge goes, I'd wager it's on par with the students of higher learning in my hometown. I do also remember him mentioning that he learned a great many things in his old life."

"Yes! That! Speaking of that! I always thought so much about him was mysterious, but gosh, I was really surprised when he said, 'Huh? Oh, yeah, truth is, I'm not from this world.' And he said it so casually too! It was one heck of a shock, to be honest."

Lefi had evidently known about Yuki's old life long before they'd learned of it. At some point, he'd decided there was no need to hide the truth from everyone here and explained everything to the dungeon's adults. How he'd been born in another world and already died once there, which was how he'd ended up in this world. How most of the unfamiliar tools and items in this world also existed in similar forms in his old one. And how his wealth of knowledge was because of his studies in his previous life.

Yuki's revelations had spurred Leila's curiosity even more, so he'd been deluged by questions from her and the others in the adult gang, who simply cared for him. He had expected their reactions, though, and answered all their questions with a smile.

"Yes, indeed. It seems the world as we know it was really only a small part of it. If not for my time here, I never would have even suspected that other worlds exist."

"It really is mind-boggling. Makes me wonder what 'reality' actually means. Every time I think about it, I realize all over again what an incredible place we wound up in."

"I suspect there's no place as unique as this one in our world."

Their pleasant chat was interrupted by the sound of the only door connecting outside opening. Iluna and Shii raced inside though they should have still been playing.

"Oh? What's the matter, gir— Whoa! Iluna, you're soaking wet!"

"Oh, dear. Did you perhaps fall into the river?"

"Uh-huh. Iluna falled in the river."

"I made a huuuge splash too! So I figured I should change."

Slightly embarrassed, Iluna giggled as she spoke.

"So that's what happened... Well, I'm just glad it was nothing serious. Iluna, are you hurt anywhere? Um, let's see. The variety of potions my lord prepared should be here som—"

"Don't worry about it! Shii healed me with a 'Pain, pain, go away!"

"It's a little hard, but I's can do it!"

"Ah, that's right. You can use restorative magic, can't you, Shii? All of you girls really are amazing. Here, a towel for you."

"Tee hee, I couldn't agree more, Lew. I'm leaving a change of clothes here, all right?"

Iluna took off her wet clothes, wiped herself down with the towel Lew had handed her, and cheerfully changed into the clothes Leila had brought.

"Thank you, Miss Leila, Miss Lew! Achoo! Okay, we're gonna go play again!"

"See you's later!"

"Okey dokey! Be careful!"

"Enjoy yourselves, hm?"

And so, the two girls went back outside to play. Unfortunately, however, a chill had already settled in Iluna's body by then.

## **Chapter 4: Parents**

"We're hooome."

Lefi and I spoke in unison.

"We...are home."

That was En.

"Ah! Welcome back!"

"Welcome back, my lord, my lady!"

When we returned to the dungeon, Shii was the first to notice us. She tottered over to us while holding laundry she'd been helping with. Lew called out to us after she did, continuing to fold the clean clothes. The wraith triplets were in the real throne room too, and they floated happily around us.

"Wait. Where's Iluna?"

She was usually the first to fly at me when I came home, and considering that Shii and the wraith sisters were here, I seriously doubted she was playing outside by herself. A slightly worried expression clouded Shii's face at my question.

"Um, so, Iluna falled in the river when we was playing."

The river... The river, huh? The one I created in the meadow area a while back.

"Hmm. Was she injured?"

Lew spoke this time, answering Lefi's question.

"Apparently, she only got a bit scratched up, so Shii used her Heal spell to patch her up. But she's been under the weather since she caught a chill from getting wet. Right now, she's staying at the inn."

"Mm, gotcha."

Turned out Iluna'd caught a cold.



"A potion...probably isn't a good idea, huh?"

Leila and I were currently working together in the kitchen to make something easy for Iluna to eat. She shook her head in reply.

"Correct. It would be fine for her to take it as medicine in the event of a serious illness, but this is simply a minor cold, so it's best to let her body heal on its own. There are records stating that relying on potions for illness only results in the body weakening."

Is that right? I wasn't all that well-read, but that line of reasoning made sense. Using only potions from a young age would mean the body couldn't develop a proper immune response.

"Yeah, I get it. So when exactly did she catch this cold? Yesterday?"

"Hmm, let me think. I'm almost positive she had a fever the night before last, but we only realized it was a cold yesterday. Master Demon Lord, the rice gruel is finished, so please take it to her."

"Ooh. Looks good."

Leila used a ladle to scoop the gruel into a bowl. She topped it with chopped scallion, an egg, and tiny meatballs.

"Man, I'm *really* grateful you're here, Leila. I know it's not hard to make rice porridge, but that looks incredibly tasty."

"Tee hee. I feel quite motivated when I cook since everyone devours my meals so happily. If you don't mind my asking, Master Demon Lord, what, precisely, are you making? Juice, perhaps?"

"Yup. It's good for colds."

Salt, lemon juice, and sugar. A simple sports drink heated up and poured into a thermos.

"Aha! I see, I see. Might you tell me the reason for that later?"

"Can do."

I smiled ruefully at her ever-curious attitude, then tucked the thermos under

my arm, put the bowl on a tray, and left the kitchen to head for the door connecting the real throne room to the outside. Since Iluna was sleeping in the inn, I turned the knob to make that building my destination and stepped inside. Then, I slid the shoji screen open, where I saw Iluna lying in her futon while Lefi checked on her. My wife reacted to the sound by turning to face in my direction.

"Is she..."

"Yes, she is sleeping at the moment."

Lefi spoke very softly. I sat down next to her, putting the thermos and tray on the tatami floor. When I placed a hand on Iluna's forehead, I found it to be kinda hot. But just like Leila'd said, the cold wasn't anything serious. I was confident she'd be back to her usual self in a few days.

My wife murmured quietly as I measured Iluna's fever.

"A cold, eh? Due to my constitution, I have never once experienced such an illness. Is it painful?"

"It can be. Your throat hurts and it gets hard to breathe with a runny nose. Sometimes, your head hurts and you feel chilled to the bone too. It's hard to stay awake, so you wanna sleep, but your body feels so heavy that it's tough to fall asleep. Stuff like that."

"Th-That sounds atrocious. Is it truly inadvisable to use a potion?"

"Well, her fever isn't that high, and her symptoms don't seem that bad either. I think she's just feeling a bit tired."

"I-I see..."

I continued speaking while warmed by the sight of Lefi sighing in relief.

"Lefi, you can head back. Go get some food. I'll join you all in a bit—after I make sure Iluna eats and is resting comfortably."

"Mm, understood. I shall warm your plate again later, so do your utmost to care for her."

"Will do. Thanks."

After I watched her go back to the real throne room from the corner of my eye, I gently shook the golden-haired little girl awake.

"Iluna."

"Ngh..."

Iluna slowly opened her eyes.

"Huh? Yukiki? Is this...a dream?"

Her expression slightly dazed, she spoke with an unusually hoarse voice.

"Ha ha. Nah, it's not a dream. I came back a little while ago. I heard you fell into the river and caught a cold?"

"Yup! I was looking for a pretty rock and then splash! I fell in."

"That river is shallow and the current is calm too, so I don't mind if you play in it, but be careful next time, okay? Wouldn't want you hitting your head or anything, now would we?"

"Yeah... I'm sorry."

"Seems like you get it, so no worries. Anyway, I brought you some food. Think you can eat?"

"Feed me, Yukiki."

"As you wish, my lady."

She sluggishly sat up in her futon, acting more spoiled than usual. I chuckled and picked up the bowl.

Just like that, I fed her for a while after. The more she ate, the more she beamed delightedly for some reason.

"Hee hee hee..."

"Hmm? Wanna let me in on the secret?"

"Weeell, I'm really, reeeally happy. 'Cause everyone's worried about me."

"Of course we are. We're a family, and you're an important part of it."

"Yup. And that's why I'm happy. Shii healed me lots 'cause she was so worried about me. The wraith sisters have visited me here tons since they can't catch

colds."

"Oh, yeah? That's great."

It made sense that the triplets couldn't get sick. Y'know, considering the lack of flesh-and-blood bodies.

More importantly, though, it was clear that Iluna could communicate with them too. I was able to understand them to a degree because they were my dungeon summons, but...

"And, and, there's Miss Leila too. She's been making me special food, wiping me down, and helping me change. Miss Lew is doing all the chores so Miss Leila can take good care of me. So it makes me suuuper happy to see everyone doing so much for me. I'm bursting with the need to thank them all!"

"That so? Then you'll just have to get better quick and show them how thankful you are, huh?"

"Yup! I'll do lots for them!"



Iluna grinned happily and continued.

"But this is all thanks to you, Yukiki."

"Huh? Whaddya mean?"

She nodded vigorously.

"Cause you care about all of us. You work hard for us every day, which means we can feel safe here. That makes us wanna be nice to others too. So thank you a million, billion times to you too, Yukiki!"

I couldn't say anything because of the unexpected surge of emotions tightening my chest. Instead, I patted her head to gloss over the moment. I could feel the heat of her body, which was higher than usual, through the palm of my hand. I could feel her life.

All this time, I'd thought I was spending my days as these kids' guardian—as their foster parent. I'd never raised a child, and I didn't consider myself a good enough person to be able to teach them things. I was still an adult, though, so I'd always pretended to be a good parent. It wasn't like I was overconfident or anything either. Whenever a problem cropped up, I always talked to Lefi and the others and relied on them as needed.

But...had I really done my best as a substitute parent for them? Could I proudly tell Iluna's dead parents of my efforts?

"Yukiki? What's wrong?"

"Nah, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

I'm glad Iluna is out of it right now.

Making sure my voice didn't tremble, I deliberately brightened my tone and spoke.

"All righty, time to sleep now that you're done eating. If you don't get better soon, we can't play together! Right, Iluna?!"

"Yup! We'll play lots and lots!"

She gazed up at me with a luminous smile.



"Yukiki, it's mooorniiing!"

"Nnngh... Argh... I'm up, I'm up!"

My dream vanished as consciousness rapidly rose to the surface when I felt someone energetically shaking my shoulder. I raised myself up slowly to find Iluna peering down into my face. *Oh, right, I fell asleep in the inn.* Lefi and I had set up our futons in the room next to hers last night.

"How's your cold, Iluna? You feel okay when you woke up?"

"Yup! I think it's pretty much gone now!"

I pressed my hand to her forehead, and... Yup, her fever's gone way down.

"Does your throat hurt? What about your head?"

"Nope, all good! I've got lotsa energy! So as much as I love the food Miss Leila makes me when I'm sick, I wanna eat normal stuff now!"

"Ha ha! Oh, yeah, you're definitely fine now if you've got that kind of appetite. Roger that, then. Whaddya say we make your favorite for dinner tonight?"

"Yay! Doria! I want doria! Oh, but Hamburg steak sounds good too!"

"Hmm. Maybe we can do both."

When Iluna raised her arms excitedly, I realized that she really had recovered from her cold. As I patted her on the head, the door connected to the real throne room opened and Lefi and Lew appeared.

I guess they woke up before me, huh? Lew I got because she always woke up early, but the fact that Lefi had too must've meant that the trip to the Dragon Hamlet had tired me out more than I'd thought. Also, Lefi sure did have an inexhaustible supply of stamina.

"Mm, I see you are both awake. Iluna, how is your fever?"

"How are you feeling, Iluna?"

"I'm all better! Thank you for worrying about me!"

"Her temperature's back to normal, so I think she's probably fine now. Oh, but we can't have it coming back, Iluna, so you're gonna take it easy at home

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today, okay?"
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"Okaaay!"

Seeing Iluna back to her cheerful, energetic self, Lefi and Lew smiled, their relief clear.

"Very well. You may present yourself to the others, then."

"Shii was especially worried. I'm sure she'll be super happy when she sees you back to normal!"

"Okay, Lady Lefifi, Miss Lew!"

She tried to race away on her little feet, but Lefi stopped her.

"Hold, Iluna. You must first put your futon away."

"Oh, yes!"

"Yuki, you as well."

"Yes, ma'am. You got it, ma'am."

Next to me, I could hear Iluna mumbling, "Heave-ho, heave-ho," as she folded her futon up and put it away. I opened the window in the inn's engawa to give the room a little ventilation, then went to work on my own futon. All while smirking ever so slightly.

"Maaan, sure brings a tear to your eye, don't it? I know you know what I mean, Lew."

"You know, my lord, I think I do."

"Hmm? What, pray tell, are you both on about?"

"Who'd have thought the day would come when (Lady) Lefi told someone to put their futon away?"

"Wh-Why, you two..."

Lefi looked astonished when Lew and I chimed in unison.

"Oh, I know! It's 'cause you always roll around on your futon like a lazybones and never put it away, Lady Lefifi!"

"Gah! Iluna, you too?! Fine, then! I, too, am the wee ones' guardian! Thus,

henceforth, I shall endeavor to sleep early and awaken early! This, I swear!"

"I dunnooo. You suuure? You say that, but I feel like you'll keep being a night owl anyway."

"Hmph. Did I not just pledge to lead a pure, proper life? From today onward, should you find yourself seeking a companion to entertain you because you are unable to sleep, you shall while away the late hours of the night alone! Unfortunate for you, is it not?!"

"A 'pure, proper life,' huh? Then that means no candy either, right? Since it's not necessary for nutrition and all."

"W-Wait, Yuki. Hold. You must not misunderstand me. Confections are... It may be true that they are unnecessary as part of a nutritious diet. However! They soothe the exhaustions of the day and provide comfort to the soul, so they are, in fact, quite necessary! Moreover, I am certain the wee ones would be devastated by the loss of their sweets! As their guardians, we must refrain from doing anything that might sadden them!"

"Wow, what a long speech."

"Lady Lefi, you're really eloquent at times like these, huh?"

We finished putting the futons away while joking around, then walked through the door to the real throne room. Delicious aromas wafted inside. I saw that the table was already set with breakfast. Bacon and eggs on toast with a side of broccoli. Next to each plate was a cup of corn soup with steam rising from it. A very ordinary breakfast, but that was exactly why it looked so delicious.

"Oh, my. Good morning. Iluna, how are you feeling today?"

"Iluna! Is you okay now?"

"Is...your cold gone?"

"I'm all better! Thank you for worrying about me, everyone!"

"All right, folks, time to chow down. Iluna may be fine now, but she still needs to eat properly and get her nutrients."

Just as we sat down in our chairs at the table, said, "Bon appétit," and started

eating breakfast, one corner of the real throne room suddenly started warping.

"I'm hooome!"

Nell appeared from the disturbance in the space.

"Ah! It's Nellie! Welcome back!"

Iluna was the first to greet her. Everyone else followed immediately after.

"Welcome home, Nell! Does this mean they let you take off?"

We'd talked all the time using the Comm Orb: Revamped, and during one of those conversations, she'd told me that she might be able to come back soon. So...

Nell nodded in response to my question.

"For a little while, yeah! I can't stay long, though. I'll be leaving again the morning of the day after tomorrow. Iluna, Mr. Yuki told me you caught a cold, but based on how you look right now, can I assume you've recovered?"

"Yup! It's all gone!"

"I see, I see. That's great."

Lefi swallowed the bite of toast she'd been chewing on, then spoke to Nell.

"Nell, have you broken your fast yet?"

"No, not yet. I thought I'd help myself to leftovers if there were any. Oh, but don't worry. I can make myself something if there aren't."

"No, no. Yuki told me you may be returning soon, so we prepared enough for you as well. I bid you to sit and wait. From the looks of you, I can see you had a late night. The exhaustion is clear on your face."

"Ack... I have dark circles under my eyes, don't I? The truth is, work dragged on yesterday too. Thank you, Lefi."

Nell chuckled awkwardly as she scratched her cheek and replied to Lefi.

"Things are that busy for you?"

"Yup. The top brass is actually planning a large-scale expedition a bit down the road. The commander approved my leave this time so that I can restore my

spirits in preparation for it."

"Huuuh... In that case, we better make sure you're charged up!"

"Nellie, are you gonna have time to relax? If you are then I'll take care of you! Everyone was so worried about me this time, so I wanna thank them by doing what I can for them now!"

"Oh, really? I'd love that. I have high expectations, Miss Iluna, my esteemed host!"

"I won't let you down!"

With a laugh, Nell sat down. The day was off to a great start.



"Hmm... This room's starting to get a little crowded, huh?"

The real throne room, aka the heart of my dungeon. It functioned as both a living room and a bedroom, so it was only natural that there was a bunch of stuff in it. Since I never hesitated to spend DP on anything we needed or wanted, the items had just steadily accumulated inside, leading to the current disorganized state of the place. I'd say the spot that made the messiest impression was the shelving in a corner of the room that held our toys and daily necessities.

Though I said "toys," honestly, they didn't belong to the little-girl gang. Their excess of energy meant they were very active, outdoorsy types, so they didn't actually play inside a whole lot. They pretty much only hung out in here whenever we played make-believe. Their days consisted of playing outside until the late afternoon when they exhausted themselves, then coming back to the dungeon to eat Leila's delicious food, after which they'd take a dip in the hot spring before conking out for the night. I was sure my kids would grow up big and healthy.

My thoughts got off track there, but long story short, the toys in the real throne room were mostly for adults. Othello, shogi, chess, The Game of Life, and basically any other major board game you could think of. Playing cards, hanafuda, UNO, and games like it too. You named it, I had it.

I'd stopped shoving any and everything into Inventory after that one time a while back when it'd gotten full, which meant this room had ended up storing a lot of these sorts of items. But at this point, yeaaah, I'd definitely dumped way too much stuff in here.

"My lord, why do you look so stressed?"

"Hey, Lew. Not stressed per se. Just thinking this room's getting a little too jumbled up, so I was wondering if we should toss stuff we don't need. Surprisingly, though, there actually isn't a lot I'd really call 'garbage.'"

"Ah, I see. You're right that there's a lot of stuff in here, but we use these toys pretty often, don't we?"

"Exactly. I thought about adding another shelf, but that might only add to the chaos..."

Especially since we already had three shelves.

"I think it's kinda inevitable that a large family like ours has a bunch of stuff, y'know? Although I guess it feels a little weird to worry about space when we have a huge castle out there."

"That's...a good point, actually."

Everyone used this room and only this room, after all.

Incidentally, soccer balls, baseball equipment, and badminton equipment were all in the storehouse I'd built next to the inn. It was easier to put them in there than in here since those were all outside activities. The little-girl gang probably knew what all was in there better than the adult gang did. Since those kiddos were so responsible, they maintained everything inside really well. We knew they did because of how neat the interior was anytime one of us adults opened the storehouse. They did it all without our help too.

Maybe the fact that they were all using it together worked out in everyone's favor. It was a pain in the ass cleaning up if you were the only one using it, but if you used something with other people, it inspired you to take care of it properly. I felt this everywhere in my everyday life.

Anyway, while Lew and I chatted, Lefi and Nell made their way over too.

"Ooh, what's this? Are you organizing things?"

"Hmm. This area has indeed become quite disorderly with the increase in goods. Yet I do not see anything that needs to be discarded..."

"Yeah, that's actually exactly what the two of us were just discussing. Oh, hey, we definitely don't need this."

"Huh?! N-No, um, I'd appreciate it if you kept that for me..."

Nell made that remark while staring at the toy sword I was holding up.

"Look, I know you love weapons, but you do know this is a toy sword, right?"

"B-But you made it, Mr. Yuki. Plus, you could say I'm partial to the craftsmanship..."

"Well... All right, I guess I won't toss it."

She'd hung up all the weapons I'd given her so far on the walls of her room in the castle. Did her wanting to keep the toy sword here mean she liked it *that* much? Even I could objectively state that it looked pretty dang cool because I'd been particularly obsessed with getting its shape right when I'd made it. Never mind that it was a totally nonlethal "weapon."

"Then can I throw this out?"

"What?! No! You can't! It would be such a waste to trash the statue of Lord Rir! It should be a family heirloom for generations to come!"

Next up was Lew and her frantic defense of the Ultra Bot, Model Fluffrir: Figurine Version when I picked it up. I'd made that too.

"Uuugh... Fine, then just put it away in your room in the castle. Same goes for you, Nell."

"But I barely go there once a month! I'd much rather display it where I can see it."

"Yes, she's right! I want to grin like an idiot while looking at the things I like where I can see them!"

"Well, gosh, you two. I sure am convinced now. Not."

Truth be told, despite my sassiness, I didn't use my room in the castle either.

All I could do was sigh at their stubbornness.

"Seriously, though, people. At this rate, nothing's gonna get cleaned up."

"Th-Then, my lord, you throw something away! What about this toolbox? It's taking up so much space here. I personally think it might be the biggest nuisance out of everything!"

"H-Hey, hold on. That has a bunch of tools, which means it isn't garbage! It's not a toy either!"

"But it is a toy for *you*. So how you view it does not differ overly much from how they view their possessions."

"Exactly, Mr. Yuki! I mean, no one other than you uses it!"

"Geh. I-I guess that's true, but..."

Lefi was getting really fed up with us.

"Good grief, you all are a right pain in the... You are all adults. If you cannot even organize your things, the wee ones will make a mockery of you."

"Grr... I can't even argue back since you're not all that materialistic. Which sucks when you're normally so, so...you know, you!"

"I-I don't think you should be casting stones when you hoard so many sweets in your candy box, Lady Lefi! I'm pretty sure that takes up a lot of space too!"

"Th-They're right! If you're going to be mad at us, you should dispose of your candy box too!"

"I-I will not stand for this from you lot! Besides, my box of confections is a special case and irrelevant to the matter at hand!"

Lefi looked astonished. She'd expected me to revolt, but definitely not the other two.

The four of us continued this fruitless discussion for a while. When it ended, we all glanced at each other and chuckled sheepishly.

"So, uh... All right, then, folks. We all agree that everything here is necessary?"

"Y-Yes, we do. Which means a certain measure of chaos is unavoidable."

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"Um, I-I concur."
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"S-Same, my lord."

We'd finally come to a resolution, but then Leila sauntered in, grinning cheerfully while holding a giant bag.

"I see you're all in quite a bind, hm?"

"L-Leila? What's with the bag?"

"Listen up, everyone. The most important thing you need at times like these is resolve. And away we go!"

"Gaaah! Wait! Stop!"

She took matters into her own hands and started throwing one thing after another into the bag, deeming them unnecessary. Whenever we tried to claim that we actually needed whatever she was getting rid of, she put a quick stop to it with her sharp tongue. Of course, the truly important stuff escaped her judgment, but every time she said, "Well, then. You don't need this, do you?" it amounted to a merciless death sentence. The only thing we could do was accept it meekly.

Not a single one of us was a match for Leila...





"I am Cyborg Ninja Yuki. Beep boop... I definitely sense the presence of Little-Girl Ninjas here. But where are they?"

I struck a ninja-like pose and continued making robot noises as I wandered the living room alone. Lefi looked exasperated while Nell and Lew watched in amusement.

We were currently playing ninja make-believe—well, honestly, it was hide-and-seek. But since the living room wasn't all that big, I'd already spotted them hiding. It would've been boring as heck finding them in the first few seconds of play, though, so I deliberately prowled around the space, pretending not to see them.

"I see... So, Little-Girl Ninjas, you are going to make this difficult, are you? Unfortunately for you, detecting your presence is a simple enough matter through ninjutsu! Mind's Eye, activate! It sees through all of creation and lays everything bare... Aha! There you are, Aqua Ninja Shii!"

"Ohhh nooo! You finded me!"

She'd created a blind spot using a cushion and hidden behind it. Now, she crawled out from back there, all smiles.

"Aqua Ninja. As you have been discovered by the Cyborg Ninja, you shall now be subject to my brainwashing ninjutsu and fall under my command. Take this!"

I pretended to send mind waves at her, and Shii clutched her head in pain, moaning dramatically. What a cutie.

"Mrrrgh. Aqua Ninja not give in... Nooo! Can't fight it!"

"Haaah. Mind control complete! Now then, Aqua Ninja, my subordinate. Tell me everything you know about your fellow Little-Girl Ninjas!"

"Uuurk... A-Aqua Ninja know...where Kuh-tah-nuh Ninja En hiding... She under...the table..."

"Superb! Excellent information, Aqua Ninja. Mwa ha ha! Resign yourself to the inevitable, Katana Ninja Zaien! I shall expose your hiding place soon enough." Despite what I said, I already knew because of the hem of her clothes peeking out. But I pretended otherwise and looked under different tables first, checking them out one by one.

"Here? Nope, not here. What about here? No, not here either. Then she must be...here! I found you, Katana Ninja!"

"Grr... Defeated."

With a seemingly disappointed expression, Katana Ninja Zaien cheerfully clambered out from underneath my workbench.

"Mwa ha ha! Hiding spots are nothing in the face of my power! All right, Aqua Ninja Shii. We shall use the brainwashing ninjutsu in tandem and bring the Katana Ninja into the fold!"

"EnEn, I sorry, okay?! 'Cause Aqua Ninja can't fight back right now!"

"Amya...mya mya mya!"

When we used our mind-control technique on her, En spun around on the spot, making weird sounds like she'd been brainwashed. *Another cutie*.

"What exactly is this 'ninjutsu' he keeps harping on about?"

"Yeah, I don't know what my lord means by 'ninja' either."

"According to what I understood from Mr. Yuki's explanation, they were essentially spies who used outrageous movements and spells."

"Hey, can the peanut gallery pipe down?"

I couldn't really fault them for their confusion, though, since what I'd taught my peeps here fit the Western concept of a ninja more than the traditional Japanese idea of one. Why had I done that? Hell if I knew.

"Welcome, my new follower, Katana Ninja Zaien! Now that you, too, have been brainwashed, you have no choice but to reveal to us the location of our next targets."

"Hrm... Mrrrr, they're hiding in—"

Things suddenly took a turn just as the Katana Ninja was about to tell us where the remaining Little-Girl Ninjas were hiding.

"Now, Ninja Sisters! Launch the s'prise attack!"

"Dwah?! S-Surprise attack?! Nuuuooo!!!"

Specter Ninjas Rei, Rui, and Roh rushed me from above, and I collapsed to the ground. While they beat me up, Vampire Ninja Iluna slipped out of her hiding place and undid the brainwashing on my minions.

"Open your eyes, Aqua Ninja, Katana Ninja! Now's our chance to hide again!"

"Ah! Mind control gone! Thanks, Vampire Ninja!"

"I won't...forget this debt."

Then, they ran away as fast as their little legs could carry them and hid once more. I stood up slowly afterward.

"Grr... I will not lose, Little-Girl Ninjas! Do you hear me?! I! Will! Not! Lose! For I am the Cyborg Ninja, the embodiment of vengeance itself! I shall rise up no matter how often I am defeated!"

"They truly never tire of repeating the same activity, eh?"

"I think they can go for another three rounds at this rate."

"Ha ha ha! Oh, come on. They're having fun, so isn't it all right?"

Just like they said, this was actually our second run of the game. 'Cause kids sure enjoyed doing the same thing over and over again, y'know?

"Since it has come to this, my only option is to unveil my secret weapon! Come, Wife Ninjas! All right, Lefi. You take it from here."

"Graaawr! Feast your eyes upon the Wife Ninjas!"

"Wait, do ninjas roar like that?"

"She sounds like a monster, doesn't she?"

"I guess Lefi is like a monster. A good-for-nothing monster."

"Very well. I will now betray Cyborg Ninja Yuki and defect to the Little-Girl Ninjas' faction. Prepare yourself, Yuki!"

"Mwa ha ha! Have it your way! Show me what you are capable of, Monster Ninja Lefi! This marks the start of the Great Ninja War! Underlings, it is time for

battle!"

"Ooh, yay! This means no more hiding, right?! It's time for war?! Okay, Yukiki, you and your army better get ready!"

"We fighting! Ready! Get ready!"

"Now...is the time to show a ninja's true character."

Iluna, Shii, and En reappeared on the scene, more enthusiastic than ever. Next to them, the Specter Ninja Sisters used the dolls they were possessing to excitedly demonstrate their fighting spirit.

"Ack! I guess this means we're in my lord's camp, huh? So be it! Wolf Ninja Lew is off to war! Hero Ninja Nell, you're fighting alongside us!"

"Huh? Oh, r-right! Hero Ninja, reporting for duty! With the power of a hero, I'll guide us to victory!"

"Ooh! Nell, you're getting better and better at this! But why don't you try making your signature pose a little more dramatic."

"Lew, please don't critique me so calmly. It embarrasses me."

Thus, the Great Ninja War erupted here. And just like always, the fighting came to an end when Leila called out, "Everyone, it's time to eat, so please finish up soon, hm?"



I'd had a thought. Hold on. I haven't been acting much like a demon lord lately. That was my thought.

The castle's defenses were going to waste considering the lack of dungeon intruders. Same went for the ridiculous number of traps I'd set up in my overzealous excitement to counter them. Now and then, I went after monsters within the dungeon's territory, but they were less invaders and more wildlife that just happened to live there. That was no counterattack; it was plain old hunting.

Really, the only demon lordish thing I'd done lately was steadily increase the domain under my control. Kinda sad, to be honest. Anyway, just because I didn't *feel* like a demon lord didn't mean I actively *sought* danger.

Frankly speaking, I was grateful for the peace. My current lifestyle wasn't bad at all since I had no desire whatsoever for my family's safety to be threatened, especially when it came to the little girls. If anything, I could brazenly shout from the top of the world that I led a fulfilling, happy life every day.

But there was also no denying the strange sense of desolation plaguing me. It was like, how could I *not* feel that way? For one thing, the throne room I'd built in the castle was now just another passageway. For another, all the other places in the castle probably hadn't seen a visitor either—not since I myself had been in them designing their interiors. Although maybe the little girls played there.

Things were looking bad for me at this rate. Okay, not *bad* bad, but I definitely wanted to do more demon lord-like things. Then, with my thoughts tumbling in this direction, I suddenly had an idea. I had the perfect partner right here in my house who would allow me to act like a proper demon lord.

"So, you came after all."

Within the throne room of my demon lord castle. I slowly got up from my seat on the throne when confronted by the invader.

"I've been waiting for you, Hero, bearer of the holy sword."

"I'm here at last, Mr. Yu— I mean, Demon Lord! Your heinous reign... Um, how did the line go again?"

"'Your heinous reign, which plunged the world into chaos and fear.'"

"Oh, that's right. Ahem. Demon Lord! Your heinous reign, which plunged the world into chaos and fear, ends today! Here and now, I shall stem the tide of your inhumanity!"

With a *shink*, she unsheathed the beautifully engraved sword hanging from her hip.

Speaking of her sword, it wasn't her real one but a fake I'd made called "Holy Sword Shine Bright." It shone brightly when the user poured their magic into it. The blade was made of plastic, so it wasn't lethal at all. You could probably get the most out of it by using it as a flashlight instead.

"Mwa ha ha! Challenge accepted, Hero. All those who stand in the way of my rule will find themselves turned to rust on the edge of my blade!"

Cackling maniacally, I created a fissure in the air and drew a black greatsword with an eerie pattern out of it. This, too, was a fake weapon. Instead of my beloved one, Zaien, I was using another of my creations, which I'd named "Hell Sword Float High." I'd used one of the Floating Rocks I'd found on the sky island Lefi and I had visited a while back, so infusing magic into it had made it super floaty. The blade was made of sponge, so it wasn't lethal at all.

Its only function was as my toy. And since my little girls had no interest in weapons, no one else would be using it either. En's race as a Magic Blade meant other weapons in the same category made her curious, but she was also proud to be my main weapon, so she'd just develop a sense of rivalry with them. She certainly didn't want them for herself.

Anyway. While we fought our great battle for the fate of the world, I heard an incredibly exasperated voice nearby.

"What, pray tell, are you two doing?"

Lefi'd dropped in without us realizing.

"Oh, hello, Lefi. Mr. Yuki said he wanted to 'do something more demon lordlike,' so I'm helping by granting his wish."

"Nell...are you not tired? There is no need for you to keep company with this imbecile. Go rest."

"Heh heh. It's fine, I promise. Being with him like this soothes me too. In fact, I'd go so far as to say this *is* restful."

"I-I see... As long as it does not bother you, I shall not quibble any further."

Nell beamed, while Lefi's expression could only be described as a grimace.



"Hey, Lefi, you wanna join the great battle that decides the fate of the world too? I'm cool with that. You can be the demon lord's wicked henchwoman. Your trademark catchphrase is a shrieking cackle, something like, 'Hee hee hee! Hee hee!'"

"What *is* that sound? I find it vaguely repulsive, thus I will not do it. A shriek from *me*? Perish the thought."

Oh, okay, then. I still think it fits a demon lord's evil henchwoman perfectly, though.

"In any case, Yuki. Can you truly satisfy your desire to 'be more of a demon lord' through such pretend play?"

"Hell to the yes."

""

Lefi walked away, her lips pursed in annoyance like she was biting back words she really wanted to say. Why did she even come here in the first place?

"What happens next, Mr. Yuki?"

"Oh, right. I explode and die, and you watch on, wounds covering your entire body. After that, you say, 'Demon Lord...you were strong. But let me tell you something. There has never been a single instance when evil flourished until the very end, and there never will be...' With that parting shot, you limp out of here, pressing down on one shoulder."

"Huh? Y-You explode? O-Okay, got it."

And that was how I spent that day with Nell. I had an absolute blast.

Then, early the next morning.

"All right, Mr. Yuki, it's time for me to go."

"Roger. Be careful. If anything happens, call me right away or come straight here. And for cripes' sake, don't fight until you're on the verge of death like you did in the demon world."

"Tee hee. I understand. I have a very good reason to come back to life even if I die. If things do reach a dire state, I'll do everything in my power to survive."

"Mm. Good enough for me. I know you mentioned a large-scale expedition coming up, and that's gotta be dangerous, so promise me you'll be careful."

"Yes, yes. I promise. Honestly, Mr. Yuki, you're such a worrywart."

Nell said that with a laugh, then exchanged a few words with Lefi, Lew, and Leila, who'd come with me to see her off. When she was finished with them, she hugged me tight and left the dungeon.

It sure would been nice if she could've stayed a little longer, but this was something she'd chosen for herself. Me saying anything in the face of her resolve would've been completely tactless. Which was why I'd decided to support her from the shadows until the day she could finally live in our home once and for all after fulfilling her goals. Heck, even if she couldn't do that, I'd still be there backing her up.

"Yuki. You will support her, for you are the central pillar sustaining her spirit. Though we can stay by her side as her dear friends, we cannot become her reason to live."

"Yeah. I was literally just thinking I'd do my best to prop her up too."

"In exchange, we'll support you, my lord! That way, each one of us will become a pillar, so by leaning on each other, we'll become a house!"

"Lew... While I appreciate the fine sentiment in your words, it would be remiss of me to ignore an important point. By definition, pillars that lean against one another slant. In short, it creates a house on the brink of collapse."

"Jeez, Lefi, cut her some slack, would ya? We all know what she meant."

"Tee hee hee. Then I'll aim to become a pillar that supports you all and prevents you from toppling over, hm?"

We headed back to the real throne room as we continued teasing the redfaced Lew.

Later on, I would end up with a starring role in Nell's expedition.



"Oh, hey, Shii. What's up?"

She drew close with her usual sunny smile.

"Tee hee hee! Look, I copy you and Lady Lefifi! 'Lefi... I love you.' 'Y-Yes... I love you as well.'"

"Pbft!"

I did a spit take.

"M-M-Miss Shii. Wh-When did you learn how to mimic our voices?"

"Not long 'go! You wanna know trick to Lady Lefifi voice? Make her sound a little embarrassed! 'Cause she a shy girl!"

Yeah, so, I'd ended up looking around for Lefi since Shii's fake voice had sounded so eerily like the real thing that I'd deadass thought she was here. My guess was that she copied our voices by tweaking her vocal cords to match ours.

Does this mean vocal mimicry is unique to slimes? If so... Well, I honestly didn't know how mine had sounded, but the way she'd done Lefi's just now was spot-on. Tone, inflection, and everything else too. It was the type of feat that would be impossible to pull off without super close observation. In other words, Shii really did watch us closely.

"Oh, oh, I has Mrs. Nellie and Miss LewLew voices too! Wanna hear?"

"Uh, n-no, I think I'm good."

Th-This is crazy... I know I didn't act that way with them in front of the little ones. I'm pretty sure I didn't, at least! S-So where the heck did she learn to say those things?

"Miss Shii, I would greatly, deeply appreciate it if you'd seal away your ability to copy people's voices. Do you think you can stop?"

"Huuuh? But I soundses just like you guys, right?"

"Which is exactly why I want you to stop."

Her vocal mimicry had hit me directly in the heart. I needed her to cease fire since her attacks were too effective against me.

"Hmm. Even though Lady Lefifi and Mrs. Nellie asks me to sometimes? Oh, Miss LewLew don't ask a lot, but when she do, she tell me to say 'I love you' a whole bunch!"

"Come again?"

"Um, um, sometimes they asks me to copy Master's voice. It make them very happy, so I thought it make you happy too!"

What the heck have they been making her do without me knowing? Though I guess I should give Lew some pampering later. I could tell she felt a sense of inferiority compared to Lefi and Nell, but I needed her to be more confident in herself.

With those thoughts running through my mind, I chuckled awkwardly and patted Shii's head.

"All things considered, you did a great job copying our voices, Shii. I bet if you became a voice actor, you'd rule the world with all the experience you'd gain."

"Voice ack-tur? Is job?"

"Yup, it is. You breathe life into things with your voice. Voice actors are amazing, y'know."

"Wooow! You thinks I can become voice ack-tur too?"

"I sure do. But you have to practice a ton first."

"Okay! I practice tons!"

Shii grinned happily. So cute.

Unlike my old life, jobs like voice acting didn't exist in this world. But, well, there were other ways to leverage working with your voice, like puppetry and storytelling with pictures. It was easy to imagine. The wraith triplets could help us put on a huge spectacle with puppets. Oh, yeah, I definitely wanted to see that.

And then, I suddenly had an idea.

"Hey, Shii. I have a request to make as part of your training. Can you say, 'Well, dahlin', my name's Lefisios, but you can call me the Supreme Dragon!' in

Lefi's voice?"

"Well, dahlin', my name's Lefisios, but you can call me the Supreme Dragon!"

"Pfft! Gah ha... Nice, Shii. Bravo. That sounded just like her. Okay, next, try this. 'Ohhh myyy, even the Supreme Dragon ain't no match for you, sugar.'"

"Ohhh myyy, even the Supreme Dragon ain't no match for you, sugar."

"Nh— Bwa ha! Yes, perfect. You're a very talented performer, Actor Shii. Your ability to copy voices will definitely make people smile. Oh yeah, how 'bout you say this next? 'I'm sooo sorry, honey. I plumb don't know how to react at times like this!'"

"What are you doing, Yuki?"

I flinched violently at the cold voice suddenly coming from behind me. Then, I slowly, painstakingly turned around like a broken wind-up toy grinding to life.

"You are having a grand time, eh?"

There stood my wife, the Supreme Dragon, her gaze so icy it'd reached a temperature of absolute zero.

"How... How long have you been standing there?"

"Since the moment you asked Shii to fulfill your foolish requests."

"C-Calm down, Lefi. Just calm down. Take a deep breath and calm down."

"What nonsense are you spewing? I am perfectly calm. In fact, I must say I feel quite cheerful."

"Oh, okay. Cool. But do you mind if I say one thing? I'm not entirely sure a cheerful person would be clenching their fists like that. Just my opinion, though."

"Hmph. I believe that is called a difference of opinion. In truth, I am in incredibly high spirits. Ah, you must be curious why. The answer is simple. I am merely imagining the joy I shall feel after transforming the map of your face."

"Crap! I knew it! You wanna punch me, don't you?!"

In a flash, I busted out my wings and flew straight up.

"You will not escape!!!"

She produced her gorgeous set of wings and chased after me, hot on my tail.

"You've been way too violent lately, you know that, woman?! I don't think it's a good idea to solve every damn thing with your fists!"

"Well, you should thank yourself for growing so much stronger, eh?! Which is why I see no reason to hold back on your account when I jab you!"

"Eek! I'm against domestic violence! I'm opposed to it!"

"Such drivel! If my husband acts foolishly, then I respond with a jab! What is that word you like to use again?! Ah, yes! 'Communication'! This is simply how a healthy family communicates!"

"There's something seriously warped with the way you think of family!

Besides, isn't this basically the pot calling the kettle black since you guys made

Shii copy my voice too?!"

"Dwaaah?! W-Was it Shii?! Did she tell you?! Grr! I have no choice now but to beat you until that memory is lost!"

"Dude, that's insane! Do you even hear yourself right now?!"

"Master and Lady Lefifi flirt today too!"

Shii's happy voice reached our ears, but neither of us had the time or headspace to reply to her. As for what happened after that, well...it probably wasn't too hard to guess.



"Oh, my lord, I've been meaning to ask. What was your name in your old life?"

One day, Lew asked me that question. Lefi had known the truth about me since the beginning, but I'd only told Lew and the others a little while ago.

"Huh? Ah, I was Yuki back then too. This is how it was written."

I wrote down the kanji for my name on a piece of paper. Just my given name, though. My family name didn't matter.

"Wooow... Despite how easy it is to say, it's quite complicated to write, huh?"

"Whoa, I never thought about it like that. I think you're onto something. By the way, my old country used three different types of writing systems, so here's the other ways to write it too."

So saying, I wrote my name in hiragana and katakana.

"Three different alphabets? I'm surprised you don't get them all jumbled up in your head."

"Three, you say? How did that come about, if you don't mind my asking."

Leila had been listening to our conversation from next to us and was now joining in, her interest piqued.

"Well, I'm not an expert or anything, so I can't really give you all the details, but it started with kanji—this one, the most complicated system. This was the only one that was used at first. As you can see, though, it's kinda difficult, which is why the simpler systems were designed and began to spread. Turned out that they were much easier for ordinary people to memorize, so they got adopted quickly."

"I see. The transformation of writing with the passage of time, hm? Then might I assume correctly that your country existed for many, many years, Master Demon Lord?"

"Yup. If you trace its history back to the beginning, you can count Lefi's lifetime a few times over. Of course, its form changed plenty of times along the way, but I'd say that the core of the country stayed the same. Although it wasn't a continental state. Instead, it was an island nation surrounded by the sea, so the changes were confined within its borders."

"Hearing you talk about it like this really makes me realize what an amazing world it must've been, my lord... You mentioned that magic didn't exist in any form, right? But mankind still achieved so much progress. Didn't you say a lot of the devices here resemble the ones from there too?"

"From our perspective, it sounds very much like a fairy tale. It's a bit hard to believe such a world exists."

"Ha ha! Well, I can tell you for sure that my old world was way less harsh. We had wildlife, but none of it was as dangerous as the monsters here. Unlike this

world, we didn't have powerful creatures where just one could destroy an entire country."

"Why do you look at me so, Yuki?"

"No reason."

I shrugged in response to Lefi's remark. Although my dearest wife was an extreme case, the fact remained that this world had any number of living beings strong enough to crush a nation populated by humanoid races. Dragons, the Spirit Emperor I'd met before, and the monsters inhabiting the Demonic Forest all fit that bill.

For example, the incredibly disgusting thing I'd murdered the *fugg* out of not too long ago—the one that'd cremated my sanity stat with the tentacles growing out of its face. What the hell'd it been called again? "Infected beast" or something? If it'd reached Nell's country, the Kingdom of Alisia, the possibility of it leaving the place in ruins definitely wouldn't've been zero. And even if it hadn't completely destroyed the Kingdom, chances were good it would've killed thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of humans. That was how strong it'd been. So strong, in fact, that I'd needed to ask Lefi for help.

Even if an attack like that only happened once a decade, it would be unbearable to have a country in danger of being destroyed every ten years. Long story short, the things that lived in this world were way too powerful. That made the humanoid species here much stronger than the people back on Earth had been, but unfortunately, there were limits to their strength.

"Then from my perspective, since I came from a world without magic, I was suuuper stoked the moment I found out I could use magic here."

"Hmm, yes, I do indeed recall your reaction when I first taught you how to use it. You were deeply moved by the experience, eh? How nostalgic."

A slight smile curved Lefi's lips as she thought back to the early days after we'd met.

"Oh yeaaah, you taught me how to use fire magic and I ended up singeing my hair."

"Gah ha! Yes, yes, that is what happened. You have not been able to use fire

well since then. Does this hold true even now?"

I shrugged as I gave my reply.

"Pretty much. I still can't form anything bigger than a match-sized flame. Having said that, though, I got pretty good at summoning fire spirits thanks to mastering spirit magic, so in that sense, I can use fire magic."

"Wow. I had no idea, my lord."

"Speaking of, I always wondered why you hardly ever use fire magic despite your overall command of elemental magic. Now I know the reason. Fascinating indeed."

"Seriously. You should have seen Lefi's laziness back then. It would've driven you up the wall!"

"I-It matters not anymore, for I have become adept at assisting you all!"

"True, true. Now, you're a fine example of a wife I can brag about."

After a pause, she let out an annoyed "Hmph!" When I grinned shamelessly at her, she huffed and pointedly turned her face away from me. *Adorable wench*.

Just then, Lew spoke. The look in her eyes was deadly serious, and there was a hint of fear in her attitude.

"My... My lord."

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Um, do you ever, you know...feel like you want to return to your old world?"

"Huh? Not at all, actually."

After freezing in shock for a few seconds at my quick, nonchalant response, Lew continued.

"Ummm... Can I ask why?"

"Sure. It's 'cause you guys aren't there. If someone asked me which world I like better, I wouldn't even have to think twice about my answer."

"Ack..."

I pulled her into my arms while I spoke and she looked down, her face

flaming. I was all but certain she was embarrassed that she was being seen right now.

"So don't worry about that, okay? I don't have any attachments to my old life. Besides, even if I did, it's not like there's a way for me to go back. At least, I don't *know* of any."

I was already dead on Earth, after all. And if I succeeded in coming back to life, I was damn sure the gossip rags and TV shows would have a freaking field day.

"I won't deny that my previous life was a thing, but you can just think of it as another Yuki. In fact, that's what I do."

"Okay. Got it. What matters is that you'll stay here with us forever. I feel kinda relieved now."

"Assuming you guys don't get tired of me first, right?"

When I grinned cheekily, she smiled back up at me.

"Tee hee hee. Don't worry, my lord! That'll never happen! Not in a million years! Right, Lady Lefi?"

"I wonder. I cannot keep such a promise if he overdoes it with the imbecility."

"You say that, but you're the most devoted to him out of all of us, my lady, and we know that for a fact. Which means you'll stay with him until the very end no matter what. Of course, I'm gonna do the same thing."

"Heh. I very much concur with Lew."

Unable to come up with a retort, Lefi remained silent in the face of their words. And that was how us grown-ups spent the afternoon.



"All right, I think that should do it over here."

Whenever I had free time, I spent it working on the interior design of my castle. Now was one of those occasions. Despite things progressing smoothly compared to before, there were still a bunch of buildings I had yet to touch. Some of them felt like places I would never use, but I tinkered with them

regardless because by this point, interior design had basically become a hobby for me. Any man could tell you they liked putting together *Bundam* models or Tiny 4WD, and what I was doing was pretty much the same thing.

Well, okay, maybe it's a little different? Eh, same song, different verse and all that.

Anyway, while I was hard at work, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a trio peeking at me from the shadows of the castle. The wraith triplets. Floating in the air, the girls whispered secretly to each other, their heads huddled together.

Too bad for them that I already knew their game. Odds were extremely good that they were discussing what kind of prank to play on me. *But you're too naive, wraith sisters. It was game over for you three the second I spotted you, so I'm straight chillin'*. Right now, I felt like a giant boulder rooted quietly in the midst of a huge, raging river. No one could shake m—

"Hey! Whoa! Th-That scared the bejesus outta me..."

Before I knew it, the wraith sisters had suddenly popped right in my face at point-blank range and made gestures the equivalent of "Boo!" Then, they'd peered at me to see my reaction. As it turned out, the three of them I'd seen chatting outside the castle had been the work of the middle sister, Rui, and her illusion magic. She'd deliberately shown me that so the real versions of the trio could sneak up on me and scare me.

Grr... Well done, my wraith daughters. Every day, your skill at attacking the gaps in a person's awareness improves.

"All right, kiddos, that's a point for you."

All three reacted in their own way when I conceded defeat. The oldest, Rei, beamed at me like she was saying, "Tee hee hee! We're amazing, huh!" The middle one, Rui, puffed out her chest proudly as if to say, "Easy peasy! That's what you get for falling into our trap!" And the youngest, Roh, smiled in a way that didn't give away what she was thinking, but she spun happily around me. *Yup, adorable*.

Feeling relaxed by their merriment, I suddenly found that they were tugging

on both my hands. "Master, we want you to play with us too" was what I guessed they were trying to tell me.

"Hmm... You know what? Yeah, let's play together."

I grinned cheekily.

"Aha. Target spotted."

In front of us was Lew, who seemed to be in a good mood as she was hanging the laundry out to dry.

"Rei, use your telekinesis to make it look like the wind blew the bath towel away and have it fly to the designated point. Rui, Roh, get your illusion and mind magics ready."

"Hee hee hee... My lord told me I'm incredibly cute and he can't live without me... Goodness gracious, he really is such a charmer."

She sounded so happy that I wouldn't have been surprised if she suddenly broke into song as she wiggled her hips and smiled sappily.

What had her acting like this was that, well...we'd slept in the inn last night, just the two of us. She was clearly over the moon about it.

"Wh-What? You got somethin' to say to me? Huh? Do ya?"

I put up a front toward the wraith triplets, who were staring up at me with identical expressions. Then, I cleared my throat to smooth over the awkward moment and gave them their orders.

"All right, let's move. Commence the operation."

When I gave them the go-ahead, Rei immediately activated her telekinesis and brought the bath towel toward us, making it look like it was fluttering in the wind.

"Ack! Stop right there, Mr. Bath Towel!"

Her guard completely lowered, Lew casually went to pick up the fallen bath towel—and then tumbled into the pit right under it.

"Huh? Gaaaaah?!"

Of course, I couldn't have made a hole in the ground in such a short time, meaning there wasn't *actually* a hole in the ground. Rui was using her illusion magic to create a massive phantom hole, and Roh was using her mind magic on Lew to create the sensation that she was falling into it. But since Lew didn't know any of that, she probably thought she *had* fallen in.

I made sure Roh went easy on the mind magic, though, because too much risked seriously freaking Lew out. The wraith sisters knew from my lectures that once a prank caused real harm, it stopped being a prank, so they were careful not to cross that line.

Unsurprisingly, it took less than five seconds for the magic to dissolve since the spell was light. When it did, Lew appeared on all fours on the ground, practically hyperventilating.

"Bwa ha ha! You totally fell for it, huh, Lew?!"

"M-M-My lord?! You're the one who came up with this?!"

"Got it in one."

"'Got it in one'?! That's your reaction?! Darn you, my lord! You should know very well that when you team up with the wraith girls, the pranks get way more savage!"



Yes, yes, thank you for the wonderful compliment. Shower me with more.

"Heh heh heh. Were you surprised?"

"Do you even need to ask?! I demand an apology *and* compensation! Specifically, um...I demand that we sleep together again tonight!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, sure. We can do that."

"Hee hee hee... You mean it? Then I'll generously overlook your prank!"

Upon hearing my words, Lew blushed a little. A lovely smile bloomed on her face as she gazed up at me too.

Yo...cut it out, wraith girls. Don't give me that look. It's not like I planned on this happening either.

It was onward and upward for me after I pulled myself together.

"Found our second target."

We members of the Prank Squad had determined our next target to be Leila. She was currently in the kitchen, skillfully cooking, her knife making a pleasing sound as it rapped against the cutting board. Heh heh heh, can't wait to see the kind of panicked expression she makes, especially seeing as she's always so calm and collected! Oh, but it'd be dangerous if we attacked her when she was using a knife and near fire, so we'd get her at a safer time.

"Now, Rei! Do it!"

I gave the green light once Leila took a break from cutting vegetables and had set the knife aside. Rei activated her telekinetic power to make one of the rags on the counter fall—but Leila caught it in midair without even looking at it, put it back on the counter, and picked up where she'd left off with her cooking like nothing had even happened.

Wh-What?! She... She caught it?!

"Grr! R-Rei, one more time!"

Rei's telekinesis kicked off pretty much all our pranks, so if her magic didn't work, we couldn't proceed to the next phase of the operation. She obeyed my

instruction and activated her power once more. This time, she made a wooden cup fall along with the cloth. Before they could hit the floor, though, Leila caught them both—one in each hand—then put them back on the counter and went back to cooking, completely unfazed.

Wha— What the hell's going on?! Don't tell me she's using the Force or something! The Force is strong with the maid and the maid is strong with the Force... Then this means...the Force isn't just a fairy tale. Unfortunately for you, Jedi Maid, there's one thing you don't understand: we of the Empire will ultimately prevail!

"I-If this is how it is, then we interfere directly. Rei, flip Leila's skirt up. While she's distracted, we carry out our plan!"

Heh. Heh heh heh. Even Leila'll get all flustered if her skirt's about to end up over her head. Come! Let me witness the moment her cheeks flame with embarrassment!

"Now! Flip her skirt up now!"

"Hey! Yukiki, you can't ask ReiRei and her sisters to flip up Miss Leila's skirt!"

I whipped around to find Iluna pointing her finger accusingly at me as the four of us stood there peeking into the kitchen. When the heck did she even get here?

"Dum— Iluna, shh! You're too loud! The target will notice us!"

"That's wrong! Don't you know you're not s'posed to flip a girl's skirt up, Yukiki?"

"N-No, this is all just a big misunderstanding. We just wanted to prank Leila
\_"

"Tee hee hee. Yes, I see. So you wanted to play a prank on me, hm?"

"Yeah, exact— Hold on, Leila. Y-You've got it all wrong, okay? It's not what you think. Geh! Hey! That's not fair, you guys!"

Leila's smile filled her face like usual. But this time, it was ice-cold. A single glance at it was enough to tell the wraith sisters that things here had gone sideways, so they split. Dipped at lightning speed. There were no better words

to describe their practiced, superb escape.

Except that meant I was left behind facing Iluna, who had her arms folded and looked a little mad, and Leila, who looked sad.

"I simply cannot believe you were so intent on your mischief even though I was working so diligently. How lamentable, Master Demon Lord."

"Um, M-Miss Leila? I hate to ask this, but would you not emphasize the word 'mischief' like that? I feel like you'll create even more misunderstandings if you do, so please..."

"Stop making excuses, Yukiki! Look, you made Miss Leila cry!"

"I-I'm sorry, okay? It's just that I got real excited thinking about a galactic war and— Hey, wait a second. You're actually messing with me, aren't you, Leila?! You're enjoying this, goddammit!"

"What a curious question. I wonder what makes you think that."

Leila's tearful expression did a complete one-eighty the second Iluna started tearing into me. Now, she looked amused.

Th-This little... She played me like a damn fiddle! What kind of maid makes fun of her master?!

"Yukiki, you gotta stop changing the subject just 'cause you don't like being yelled at! I'm gonna tattle on you to Lady Lefifi and Miss Lew!"

"No. W-Wait, please, Miss Iluna. Anything but that. I-I'm reflecting deeply on my actions, so—"

"Are you gonna say sorry to her, then?"

"I'm sorry."

Leila's smile couldn't have been more blinding at the sight of me being ripped a new one by a little girl.



I rose from my throne and spoke.

"Subjects. Let us enjoy hanami today."

"Everyone, Yuki is saying something."

"Oh, yes, my lord, what is it? We're all ears."

"Oh yeah? Then maybe you can stop talking to me like you're humoring a kid? How about that?"

I cleared my throat before continuing.

"Hanami. Hana. Mi. I figured it'd be nice to do an activity like that every once in a while. Especially now, when the sakura tree growing in the inn garden is in full bloom."

"No, that is not the problem. The problem is that we do not know what this 'hanami' you keep going on about refers to."

Mm, I see.

"Okay, so, hanami is, like, basically a sort of picnic. You know that pretty tree near the inn? The one that started blooming with pink flowers not too long ago? We spread a picnic blanket under it and eat stuff."

"Then would it not be simpler to call it a picnic in the first place? Is there truly a need to make such a distinction?"

"Ugh. You just don't get it, do you? We can have picnics whenever, but we can only enjoy hanami in the spring. Well, I guess that's not strictly true, considering spring doesn't exist in here."

If I felt like it, I could've probably made flowers bloom all year round here using the dungeon's power. If anything, the fact that the tree in the inn's garden was blooming at all was kind of a mystery in and of itself.

"Yukiki, are we gonna have a picnic?! Then I wanna be in charge of the onigiri!"

"I rip the lettuce!"

"Hmm... What can I do?"

The second they heard the word "picnic," the little-girl gang perked up and started chattering excitedly.

"All right, then why don't we all help prepare for the picnic? En, you can cut

the broccoli. Oh, but be careful not to cut the cutting board too."

En handled all kinds of blades really well—like, expert-level well—since her true form was a katana. Which meant that she ended up slicing through a cutting board whenever she helped in the kitchen. She didn't even need to use the super sharp adamantite kitchen knife I'd made one day in an enthusiastic flurry. She could do it with a regular knife you could find anywhere.

I have no shame in admitting that she's got me beat in terms of swordsmanship, so it probably wouldn't be wrong to call her a sword master at this point.

"Yes, yes, fine. Besides, it is not as if I dislike picnics. However...this means Nell will not be participating in this one either, eh? I know there is nothing we can do about it, yet I still feel sorry for her."

"I agree, my lady. My lord, next time Nell's here, can we do this 'hanami' thing with her too? Or another picnic?"

In response to Lefi and Lew's comments, I tsk-tsked and wagged my finger with a grin.

"Mwa ha ha. Lemme tell y'all a little secret. I already talked to Nell about it, and she said, and I quote, 'I'll definitely be there.' So fear not, peeps. She'll be joining us."

"But did she not say she was incredibly busy?"

"She most certainly did. That's exactly why I chose the day after tomorrow for our hanami, since it fits her schedule."

When it was time for her to go back to work, she'd be taking the Super Express Fluffrir Service as far as the royal capital. Thanks to the door connected to the nearest human settlement, the frontier town of Alfiro, it'd take less than half a day to get from here to the capital. Although riding the Super Express Fluffrir Service was leagues more taxing than boarding a normal stagecoach. At least according to Nell.

So it showed how much she wanted to join us for hanami, considering her willingness to accept my fenrir train. Plus, the fact that she'd been more vocal lately about the things she wanted to do made me really happy.

"I want Nellie to eat lots of tasty things since she's working so hard!"

"Well said, Citizen Iluna. I propose, then, that we prepare a delectable meal to celebrate her arrival. For starters, I'll get some meat simmering today!"

"Oh, that must mean beef stew, hm? I'm suddenly itching to put my skills to use."

"Mm, I see this has lit a fire under Leila. I suddenly find myself quite looking forward to the meal."

"Um, this is basically a picnic, right? Will we actually be able to get beef stew to where we're having it?"

"Heh heh. How naive, Lew. You should know by now that nothing is impossible for a demon lord as powerful as—"

"There's no need to be concerned, Lew. We'll simply use the metal pot Master Demon Lord purchased a short while ago. That should make it easy to carry soups and such."

"Miss Leila, I was building up to introducing exactly that item..."

"Oh dear. My apologies."

Leila replied to me with her usual sunny smile while not looking particularly apologetic.

Perhaps it is simply my imagination, Miss Leila, but I must inform you that I'm concerned by your lackluster treatment of me as of late. Eh, no biggie, I guess.

"In that case, shall I venture into the Demonic Forest and hunt the monsters living deep within? It has been some time since my last outing."

"Ooh! That'd be perfect, Lefi. But just as a reminder, only bring back things we can actually *eat*, okay?"

"I-I am well aware!"

The last time she'd been this confident about a hunt, Lefi'd come back with a monster with toxic flesh, which we obviously couldn't have even *thought* about eating. Sure, it'd been a monster I couldn't've beaten even with three of me, so it'd for sure been a super-high-quality ingredient, but did it still count as an

ingredient if it wasn't edible?

"I'll make tamagoyaki and...something else! I've gotten really good at making tamagoyaki lately!"

"For real? I had no idea. Can't wait to try it, Lew."

"Hee hee hee. I do my best every day so I can be the perfect wife for you, my lord!"

She plopped one hand on her waist and thrust out the other, her fingers making a peace sign. *Cute*.

Having said that, I knew she'd been hard at work learning how to cook under Leila's tutelage. I really was looking forward to seeing how much she'd improved.

And that was how we set about getting things ready for the hanami party.



"Wow! Fantastic! It really is blooming so beautifully!"

Nell, who'd returned not too long ago, cried out in wonder at the sight of the sakura trees in full bloom.

"It pink!"

"Very...pretty."

"Huh? Were there always so many trees here?"

"Oho. A very keen observation, Miss Iluna. The truth is that I added more of these sakura trees specifically for our hanami party."

I'd done some major expansion on the inn's garden so I could plant several new sakura trees and create the perfect spot for the hanami. *Mwa ha ha! For a demon lord uses his full strength no matter what!* Besides, if you were serious about hanami, the best thing to do was start with growing the trees. 'Cause going all in was just how a demon lord did things.

"Come, now, you lot. Help us set up."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"I'm...excited for food."

Nell, Iluna, and Shii all responded in unison to Lefi's words, while En, who loved to eat, commented excitedly.

"My lord, please grab the picnic blanket on that side!"

"Okey dokey."

When I went to grab the opposite end of the picnic blanket, Rei, the oldest of the wraith triplets, grinned and used her telekinesis to snap it from Lew's hands, making it flap through the air like the wind was doing it.

"Oh nooo! It's flying away! Whatever will I do?!"

Lew gestured expectantly toward Rei with her arms outstretched after she'd finished playing her prank. The little wraith girl and I exchanged glances.

"Um, I'd like to try that again, my lord. I request a do-over to correct my failure just now."

"Hmm. Hmmmm. I dunno. Whatcha think, Rei?"

Floating next to me, Rei looked like she wanted to say, "Weeell, I guess I could. But only one more time, okay?" Then, she activated her telekinetic power again to make the picnic blanket flutter through the air like the wind was doing it.

"Here goes... Stop right there, little one. Why are you in such a rush? Aren't we having fun?"

"Minus points for being boring. No lunch for you today either."

"No way! Don't you think that's kinda harsh?!"

While we joked around, Lefi chimed in to scold us.

"Enough tomfoolery. Spread it out at once."

"Hurry... I'm hungry."

En spoke impatiently from behind Lefi.

"Ack. Right, yup, sorry. You heard 'em, Lew. Quit screwing around and hold it properly."

"I don't appreciate you making this *my* fault, my lord. She's angry at *both* of us, thank you very much."

Just then, Leila appeared in the inn, holding a giant bento box. Seemed she'd put the finishing touches on the meal.

"Oh, Miss Leila! I'll help you carry it!"

"My, my. Thank you so much. Make sure not to shake it, hm?"

"Yup, I know!"

Iluna took the big box from Leila and practically skipped her way over to us on her little feet. She put it down on top of the picnic blanket Lew and I had laid down.

"Hup! There we go!"

"I carry water bottle! Hup!"

Following Iluna's lead, Shii carried the large thermos over and set it down. The girls then took off their shoes and stepped onto the picnic blanket. Iluna rolled back and forth, and Shii copied her with a huge grin.

"You all better come here quick! If you don't, we'll fall asleep just like that!"

"Unlawful ah-kyu-pay-shin!"

"Well, that won't do! That won't do at all! I suppose I'll have to engage in a bit of unlawful occupation myself to encourage the others to move posthaste! Bwa ha ha!!!"

"Eek!" they squealed in tandem.

After moving the bento and thermos far away from us on the blanket so I didn't accidentally kick them, I did a fake dive near the girls and tumbled onto the fabric.

"Ha ha ha! I think I'll do the same!"

"Me too, then!"

"Ngh! Ha ha! Cut it out, you guys!"

Laughing, Nell and Lew tried to jump on me, and I tried my best to restrain

them. The feeling of their soft bodies against mine was amazing.

"Good grief... I expect such behavior from the wee ones, but not you lot as well."

"Lady Lefi, are you aware that your tail is twitching? In truth, you wish to join them, hm?"

"F-Fool! Of course I do not!"

Her cheeks pink, Lefi vehemently denied Leila's teasing words.

"Nh... Hungry. Hurry."

Incidentally, En was the only one who hadn't given in to our antics, totally unwavering in her demand for food. *Sorry. That's my bad.* 

After that, it only took a minute for us to set everything up.

"Bon appétit."

We pressed our hands together and chimed in unison, then each of us grabbed chopsticks, a spoon, or whatever utensil we preferred.

"Mmm, it smells really good! This beef stew looks so yummy!"

"Yukiki and Lady Lefifi worked hard on that! She fought a super strong monster that only she could beat up, and Yukiki cut out the tasty parts from it to make the stew!"

"W-Wow. I had no idea. Now it feels like *very* high-class fare. So high-class that I'm not sure even royalty could eat it..."

For some strange reason, Nell smiled awkwardly as she commented. That was when Lew jumped into the conversation.

"Nell, look at this! I made this tamagoyaki!"

"Oh, really? Let me try a bite... Mmm! Delicious! Lew, it's so good!"

"Hey, I want a taste too... Oh, wow, she's right. This really is delicious."

I could taste the dashi, but it was the perfect amount—not overpowering at all. Super tasty indeed.

"Hee hee hee. I'm really happy to hear you both compliment it! I'm gonna

keep practicing from here on out, and one day, I'll be just as good at cooking as Leila is. Just you wait!"

"In that case, I'll have to pass on all the techniques I know, hm? Cooking resembles sorcery in that if you can understand the theory, you can put it into practice right away. I'd be more than happy to teach you, Lew, should you find yourself interested. Although I'll need you to study the theories intensely. I believe it should take around two years or so?"

"Actually, I think I'll leave the elaborate recipes to Leila after all! I'll do my best to be able to cook the easy ones! Because I hate studying!"

"Well, dang. You sure broke quick, huh? And you 'fessed up out loud."

While I chuckled listening to their exchange, Shii asked En a question.

"EnEn, that yummy?"

"Yes...very yummy. Wonderful. Shii, you should eat lots too."

"Okaaay! Mmm, so much yummy things. I's happy!"

"Happy, happy! We sing the sooong of happineeess when we're happyyy!"

"The song of happiness! The song Iluna sing when she super happy!"

Slightly off-key, En and Shii sang the song together. The wraith sisters, who'd climbed up one of the sakura trees to play, spun around in delight as they listened. Can there be a more adorable sight? I think not.

"Ha ha ha! What a fun song. Did you come up with it yourself, Iluna?"

Nell seemed to think it was cute too.

"Yup! Um, um, Yukiki always tells us we should say it out loud when we feel happy and are having fun 'cause then we'll be even happier and have more fun! So I try really hard to say it out loud!"

"Aww, that sounds lovely. I'll have to do the same whenever I'm feeling good. In fact, I think I'll start right now. I'm incredibly happy that I get to be here eating with you all like this."

"Right back atcha! We're happy you're with us too!"

I pulled Nell into a hug as she sat next to me.

"Ack... Tee hee hee."

"Hmph! I'm a little jealous, but I'll let it slide since you aren't usually here, Nell! I'll hug Lady Lefi instead! Ahhh, so soft and nice-smelling."

"In that case, I shall embrace Leila. Hmm, yes, you are quite buoyant. What a pleasant sensation."

"Hee hee hee. Why, thank you very much."

"Joy, joy! We sing the sooong of joooy when we're full of joooy!"

"The song of joy! It the same as song of happiness, but it make you feel joy when you sing!"

"Aha ha ha ha!"

Our laughter came from the bottom of our hearts. Honestly, we didn't do a whole lot of looking at the cherry blossoms. Even so, our hanami party went on.



"What will be the outcome of this treachery, I wonder. You are prepared to see this through to the end, then? Do you fully comprehend the implications of your actions?"

"Hmph. I act precisely *because* I do. Now, let me ask you this: do *you* truly understand? That if I am to proceed at my full might, you will have no way out?"

"Well, I see there is no reasoning with you! Fine! Have it your way, Lefi! We settle this once and for all today...with this!"

Then, I dramatically gripped it—a badminton racket. Lefi pointed her own aggressively at me in response.

"Gird your loins! For today, I shall destroy you!"

"You think so, huh?! Then I dearly hope you'll entertain me to my heart's content! Here I go! Eat dirt thanks to my Homicidal Missile Serve!"

I'd spent DP on purpose to create a court, and now, from one end of it, I blasted my demon lord's Homicidal Missile Serve across the net. My serve probably would have been the world's fastest back on Earth, but Lefi returned it

easily thanks to her ridiculously high physical capabilities.

"You call this 'homicidal'? Absurd! 'Tis my turn now! Behold, the Supreme Dragon's Shock Wave!"

The birdie zoomed at me with the speed of a bullet. But I could still see it.

"A mere trifle! Demon Lord's God Breath!"

I smacked it back to her while changing its trajectory using wind magic.

"Ngh! So that is what you choose to volley! Then take this! Supreme Dragon's Phantom Dart!"

Somehow, my archnemesis's racket caught up with the birdie, and she swung her arm as hard as she could to hit back. Then, suddenly, the number of birdies increased to more than ten.

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

I suspected she'd used something similar to Rui's illusion magic. I couldn't figure out which one was the real one, so my racket sliced through the air—and the birdie dropped to the ground stupidly far outside the court.

""

"I-I simply overexerted myself! Hit the next one! And be quick about it!"

My archnemesis blushed a little and rambled when I stared silently at her in shock.

"You know, I feel as if every time Mr. Yuki and Lefi play games like that, they become something else entirely... Though I'm surprised to learn how athletic she is. It's a bit unexpected."

"Lady Lefifi has great eyesight and is super fast, so she's a tough opponent!"

"Lady Lefifi so good at essercise!"

"Yes...very good."

"My lord's better at using his head, while Lady Lefi's better at using her body."

The peanut gallery chattered away as they relaxed on top of the picnic

blanket.

Just like they said, Lefi was quite the powerful contender when it came to sports since she could exhibit her physical abilities as the Supreme Dragon. Based on my experience facing off against her, whenever she first started playing a sport, I'd win the earlier matches. The more she played, though, the more I'd start to lose.

But that didn't mean I'd just lie down and take being on the losing end. Sure, wild boars were strong, but as long as you knew that the only thing they could do was rush you, you could figure out a way to beat 'em.

Keh keh keh! I know all your tells!

I picked up the birdie Lefi had launched outside the court's bounds and positioned myself to serve. Though my archnemesis was a klutz, unfortunately for me, she possessed both overwhelming physical abilities *and* terrifying eagle eyes. For example, if I barely glanced somewhere on Lefi's side of the court, she'd react immediately and focus her attention on that exact spot.

"I've got you now!"

"Nwah?!"

My archnemesis responded a bit too slowly when I slammed my Homicidal Missile Serve to the opposite end of where she was concentrating. Her racket just barely brushed against the birdie. It flew back my way unsteadily, which gave me the perfect opportunity.

"You're finished, Lefiii!!! Demon Lord's Hellfire!!!"

"Nuuuooo?!"

I smashed the birdie and it slammed into one corner of her side of the court, spinning crazily before finally coming to a stop.

"Haah... Is this all my archnemesis's true strength amounts to? What a disappointment."

"Grr... F-Fine! If you insist on taunting me thusly, I shall demonstrate to you my ultimate secret technique—one I newly mastered!"

Lefi suddenly charged toward the picnic blanket. She picked up one of the

sake bottles and walked back over while chugging its contents.

"Pwah! Keh keh keh. With this, you can no longer stop me..."

"N-No way... Drunken Badminton?!"

"Hmph. So, you have figured it out, have you? Let us see how well you can keep pace with me now."

My archnemesis grinned evilly after placing the empty bottle out of the way at the edge of the court. Never mind that the relationship between drinking and badminton was still a mystery to me.

"You would do well to tremble in fear. You, the strongest foe I have ever encountered! For I now have the power to vanquish you soundly!"

Lefi tossed the birdie up and swung her racket so hard that I could feel the wind pressure from all the way on my side of the court. And—she whiffed.

"Ouch!"

The falling birdie smacked her on the head.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you just normal drunk right now?"

"N-No! I am not!"

"Phew! I sure worked up a good sweat. Maybe I'll have the loser pour me drinks, eh?"

"Grr... I-I have no choice but to acquiesce. Know this, though. I will surely win next time."

Smirking, I thrust my cup in Lefi's direction, and despite looking aggravated, my archnemesis nevertheless obediently filled it.

"Yeah, sure, if you say so. Now, I bid thee come closer."

"Hmph. If I must."

While her words said one thing, her expression, which wasn't entirely displeased, said another as she leaned against me.

"Oh my. You look happy, Mr. Yuki. Lovey-dovey as ever, I see."

"Mwa ha ha. You jelly? That's so cute. Then I shall allow you to rest against my other side. Come."

"Ah! Tee hee hee. Don't mind if I do!"

When I patted my free side opposite Lefi's, Nell scooted over happily and leaned against me.

"Mrgh! Wh-What about me, my lord?!"

"You may sit on my lap."

"Your lap?! Heh heh heh. Woo-hoo!"

Lew used my lap as a pillow and tumbled down onto the blanket.

Surrounded by my three wives as I drank liquor. Enveloped by the sensation of their soft bodies and sweet scents. I felt out-of-this-world good. Superb, even. Absolutely freaking sublime. *Is this heaven?* 

By the way, the little-girl gang was currently bonding and playing with my pets. At the moment, they were pretending to be horseback riding. My pets had gotten used to being their play companions, so they were happy to keep them company.

Thus, the ones left behind here were my wives and Leila, who was presently...sipping on the booze we'd brought, her ever-present smile on her lips. She actually enjoyed drinking a fair bit.

"Leila, you should come here too!"

"Tee hee hee... Pardon my intrusion, then."

A mischievous look crossed Leila's face at Lew's invitation, and she approached us. Then, she promptly wrapped her arms around me from behind, resting against me in an impromptu hug. Her, uh, womanly bounties pressing against my back felt very nice indeed.

"Hey! No fair, Leila!"

"I-I concur! And Yuki, do away with that slobbering expression!"

"Th-The incredible power of Leila's bosom..."

I grinned shamelessly when the three of them erupted immediately, their

outrage clear as day. With a free hand, I reached behind me and patted Leila on the head.

"Sorry, ladies, but I have a confession to make. The truth is, Leila and I have been gettin' nice and cozy in secret, away from your prying eyes."

"Oh dear. Now everyone knows about our intimate relationship, Master Demon Lord. He treats me *very* well, and I couldn't be happier."

"Hmph! Well...I do not mind if it is Leila. Though honestly, you imbeciles should have told us directly instead of sneaking about."

"'It's about time' is what we'd like to say, right, Lady Lefi?"

"Frankly, I can absolutely see why you'd fall for her since Leila is lovely and dependable."

"Um, dearest wives of mine? It was just a joke. I'm not really sure how I feel about the way you all just accepted it."

When I smiled ruefully at the trio for falling for the prank, Leila looked kinda sad for some reason.

"Yes, it's as he says. A mere jest. That night was simply an indiscretion. Everything we shared, all of it fleeting..."

"Huh? Miss Leila?"

"Master Demon Lord was gracious enough to love me deeply, but...I swear to forget it ever happened."

"Huh?! Miss Leila?!"

Why the heck are you spouting lines straight out of a soap opera?!

"Y-Yuki! As a man, you must take responsibility for your actions! I do not intend to raise you to be such a good-for-nothing reprobate!"

And I certainly don't intend to be raised by you, ma'am.

"M-Mr. Yuki! That's horrible! I-I'll apologize to her with you, so..."

Okay, but, like, what would be the point of doing that?

"Ack! If I think about it really hard, Leila, the world's best maid, also becoming

my lord's wife leaves me with nothing to win at since I'm a maid too! Th-This will seriously jeopardize my identity, you know!"

You need to calm down a little, miss.

"W-Wait, guys. It's a joke. I told you, it's a joke. I swear I didn't do anything."

"Yes, of course... Nothing happened with Master Demon Lord. Nothing at all."

"Miss Leila, kindly shut your trap."

"Such a tone is unforgivable, Yuki! You must reflect on your actions!"

"My lord, you can't behave like that! It's not good!"

"Mr. Yuki... I'm devastated."

"Hold on, okay? I get it. My bad. I screwed up. So everyone just calm down for a second and listen to me. Please. I'm begging you."

Leila giggled quietly at the sight of the trio alternating between anger and sadness while I just sat there confused as hell. She looked like she was enjoying herself tremendously. Well, well, well. Looks like you picked up a few tricks too, eh? And another thing, Miss Leila. I know your ass is drunk as a skunk. Bet good money on that.



After all the horsing around they'd done in the afternoon, the little-girl gang had run out of energy and fallen asleep inside. Most of the adult gang was sleeping deeply too, having passed out from all the alcohol in their systems. Lefi and I were the only ones still awake.

"Ugh. You've gotten pretty good at making smart moves too, Lefi."

"Heh heh heh. I, too, am forever improving."

We were battling it out in a board game, which had become an almost everyday routine for us. Today, it was shogi. Lately, Lefi had been getting a lot better at a lot of the ones we played, meaning more tough matches for me. It made sense, though, since we faced off against each other like this every day. It would've been weirder if she *wasn't* getting better.

"Hmm... I acknowledge that you've gotten better. I do. But! I'm still far

superior!"

When I aggressively moved one of my pieces, she groaned deep in her throat.

"Then... Then I shall do this."

"Mwa ha ha! Too bad for you, 'cause that's check."

"Grr. I admit defeat! I cannot believe I lost! I thought I surely had it this time."

"Heh heh. Yes, your win rate is going up, but it's far too soon for me to lose so easily."

Having said that, I'd won this match by the skin of my teeth too. *Maybe I* should get Leila to play me so I can get some intensive training under my belt. She would definitely give me good advice.

"Well, then. I believe it is high time we take ourselves to bed as well. If we awaken too late, we will find ourselves victims of the wee lass bombs."

"Ha ha ha! Ain't that the truth."

The "wee lass bombs" Lefi'd referred to was how the little-girl gang woke us up when we overslept: by jumping onto us under Leila's command. With their energy always being recovered by morning after a good night's sleep, they became very much capable of their extreme wake-up call.

Chuckling, Lefi and I started clearing the shogi board. We put all the pieces in the box, and as I placed everything back on the shelves holding our various toys, I spoke to the girl next to me.

"Hey, Lefi."

"Hmm?"

"Wanna make a baby?"

She blushed fiercely when she heard my words and stared shyly up at me.

"If you wish it...then I am not opposed. I shall bear you however many children you desire."

Overwhelmed with love for Lefi by her grand declaration, I clasped her head to my chest. She didn't resist at all, letting her body relax into mine as she wrapped her arms around my waist. She felt so incredibly soft. Just smelling her

sweet scent put me at ease—a reaction that had become a conditioned reflex by now.

"But I must ask...what caused your thoughts on the matter to shift? Until now, you have not been, shall we say, much inclined to engage in the deed."

Glued to the silver-haired girl, I spoke with my gaze on the sleeping little girls.

"You know, Lefi, I honestly feel like I'm a complete waste of space."

She listened quietly to my words.

"I'm self-centered and only interested in the things I like. Out of everyone here, I think I'm the furthest from being described as 'worthy.' Definitely not a man who's fit to be someone's parent."

"Well, from my perspective, you are performing admirably as the master of this place."

She grasped one of my hands with hers and threaded our fingers together, like she was worried about me. I huffed out a laugh to show her I was fine and continued.

"I love spending my days goofing around with you and everyone else here, but I never could've seen myself making a baby and teaching it anything. I couldn't see myself taking responsibility for my own child's life, much less raising it. But lately...I've started feeling a little more confident."

"Oh?"

"I learned that if I'm genuine with the way I say and do things, the kids'll understand that. That if I treat them with love and affection, they'll respond in kind. Ya know, it's kinda embarrassing to say all this out loud, especially the love part."

"Kah ha. Well, I understand what you wish to convey."

A small smile played on Lefi's lips.

"Plus, though I'm a hopeless case on my own, the fact is that I'm not alone. You can just make up for all the ways I'm lacking. And I'll make up for the ways you're lacking. Then, if we're still missing things together, we can have Nell, Lew, and the others fill in the rest of the gaps. We have the kind of family here

who can do that."

"Indeed. We are here for you and you are here for us. That is what it means to be a family."

I nodded in response to her words.

"Yeah. And when I thought about it like that, I started thinking maybe I can do it. Which is why I want to have a baby with you. I want proof that I lived in this world together with you. What do you think?"

When I asked her that, she stared deep into my eyes and answered.

"Yuki. I love you from the depths of my heart. If it means staying by your side, I would make an enemy of the entire world and annihilate it. Since that is the case, there is no reason for me to refuse your suggestion. The mere thought of leaving behind proof of our bond... I do not have the words to express my joy."

Even as tears slipped from the corners of her eyes, a smile wreathed the silver-haired girl's face. An incredibly, stunningly beautiful smile revealing her innermost feelings.

"Ah... Then does that mean I've been making you wait all this time? I'm sorry if I have."

"Kah ha! There is no need for such a thing, for I understand your concerns well. After all, raising a child is not an easy task. Even so, as long as I have you and everyone else here, I believe the future is bright, considering our lives so far. As long as I am with you, I can overcome anything. This is what I believe."

"Yeah. Me too."

I dropped my forehead against hers with a thump. Her hot breath tickled my cheek. Her eyes remained damp from the tears. Both of my hands gripped hers, our fingers intertwined, as the silver-haired girl and I gazed at each other for some time. In this world where only Lefi and I existed, I slowly lowered my face and pressed my lips against hers.



"Goood morning, Yukiki and Lady Lefifi! Wake up, you sleepyhead lovebirds!"

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"Wake up!"

"Breakfast...is ready."

Three cheery young voices bounced into my ears.

"Ngh... Mm... Okay, okay, I'm up."

"Urk... Hrm... Hold. I shall awaken..."
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Groaning at the weight pressing down on me, I raised myself up and immediately took note of Lefi next to me. We'd shared a futon, and just like me, she sat up, rubbing her eyes.

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"…"
""
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We both looked at each other. I scratched my cheek while she fiddled with the ends of her hair.

"Gosh, do you know how long we've been looking for you? Your futons were in the room like always, but you two weren't in them. Ooh, I know! Are you playing the newlywed game?"

Iluna gazed at us curiously. In response, I cleared my throat and stood up.

"Right, okay, breakfast. We'll head there now. Uh, actually, we'll be there after we take a bath. You can tell everyone to start eating without us."

"Okaaay! Bath time for you and Lady Lefifi! Oh, and you're not allowed to go back to sleep!"

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"Sleeping in feel good, huh?!"
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"I...think taking a bath feels better than sleeping in."

"Ah! This is what 'different strokes for different folks' means, right?!"

"Different strokes!"

"Different...strokes."

Chattering excitedly, the three little girls left the inn. When they did, I turned to Lefi and spoke.

"Lefi, we should, uh, bathe. We left the shoji open last night, so the room isn't

gonna smell musty, but we probably reek of sweat."

"Y-Yes, I concur. If we are to visit the living room in this state, I have a feeling Nell and Lew will make many a sly comment."

"Yeah. Lew especially since her nose is so sensitive. She'd figure us out in a single sniff. Oh, hey, how about we just wash each other? I'd be more than happy to scrub every peak and valley clean, y'know."

"Fool."

Lefi looked slightly embarrassed by my shameless grin and smacked me on the shoulder. Then, the two of us headed to the inn's hot spring, walking a little bit closer to each other than usual.

"My lord, you're absolutely covered in Lady Lefi's scent."

I almost let out a yelp at Lew's sudden comment. But I controlled myself and replied.

"O-Oh, really? I think it's the same as usual, though?"

"No. No, it isn't, my lord. Her scent is much stronger than usual today! *And* I smell *you* on *her*! Something happened yesterday without our knowledge, didn't it?!"

Lew pointed at us accusingly, like she was saying, "I see right through you!"

H-How did she know?! Lefi and I practically scrubbed our skin off in the bath to avoid this exact scenario, so how?!

Upon hearing Lew's words, Nell walked over to us and started sniffing.

"Hmm... It's true. Lefi's odor is emanating quite powerfully from you today, Mr. Yuki. The two of you went by yourselves to the inn last night... Makes one wonder why."

Never mind Lew with her keen sense of smell, but Nell too now?! I've heard that women have sensitive noses, but I didn't know they were this sensitive! What a terrifying and awesome power women have. It's no wonder cheating men get busted so easily. But! These ladies are the world's strongest wives, so ain't no way I'll ever cheat!

Those stupid thoughts ran through my head while the two of them glared hard at me. I tried to think of something to say that would help me talk my way out of this sticky situation.

"Look, all Lefi and I did last night was sleep together. You don't have anything to be suspicious about. Anyway, more importantly, Ser Nell! Shouldn't you be getting ready to head back to work?! Time's a-wastin'! Of course, we couldn't be happier if you wanna stick around, but you have to be back at the royal capital by nightfall or else you'll get in trouble, right?"

"Ack! Th-That's right! Oh, darn. I need to hurry and gather all my belongings."

With that, she started rushing around in a corner of the real throne room, collecting her clothes and whatnot for the trip.

"Lew, didn't Leila ask for your help earlier? You sure you should be hanging out in here?"

"Mrgh! Well, I...suppose I should get back to work."

Squinting at us suspiciously again and again, Lew headed to the kitchen where Leila was. Leaving me and Lefi alone. For a while, we just stood there silently. Then, Lefi piped up out of the blue.

"Ah. Yuki, I just remembered."

"Sup?"

"I realize I am at fault for not asking you this sooner despite being your wife, but, um...it is necessary for men to exorcise their I-lust periodically, yes? In which case, have you been restraining yourself all this time?"

Lefi plowed through her embarrassment to ask me that question, her tone and expression both apologetic.

"Uhhh..." Finding it ridiculously hard to answer her, I scratched the back of my neck while thinking of a reply. "W-Well, you're not wrong, but...it was more important for me to spend every day with all of you, and that was fulfilling enough. Which meant my libido wasn't a huge priority, so it wasn't that hard to ignore— Wait. How the heck did you even get me to say all this out loud?"

I felt like the words coming out of my mouth were incredibly dumb after I'd

already given her question a serious, genuine answer. I couldn't help chuckling wryly once I'd realized.

"Heh. 'Fulfilling,' eh? I see, I see."

Lefi leaned close to me with a small smile. Wanting to feel her warmth against my skin, I wrapped one arm around her slender body and pulled her into my chest. Immediately, Lew popped out of the kitchen and jabbed a finger in our direction with a shriek.

"I knew it! I *knew* something was fishy! You're always suuuper close, but I knew something was different about your closeness today! Lady Lefi, we will be discussing this later at the Council of Wives!"

"Ahem... S-Soon enough. Nell is busy today, so we must postpone it until another time."

Lefi blushed prettily as she replied to Lew. Seeing that, Lew stomped over to Nell and deliberately whispered into her ear. Though we could all hear her.

"Take a look at this, Nell! The Lady Lefi we know is unusually meek today! Something *definitely* happened!"

"Hmm... That just means we'll have to get to the bottom of it with a proper interrogation! I do have work scheduled for tomorrow, but as long as I reduce the amount of time I need to sleep at the capital tonight, I can stay here a bit longer! Lefi, you will tell us everything!"

"Urk... W-Wait! Just wait, you two! Y-Yuki, do not just stand there and watch! Say something!"

"Godspeed."

"'Godspeed'?!"

I'd learned by now that sticking my nose where it didn't belong at times like this would only result in disaster. Thus, I sent her off with a smile as she raged, Lew and Nell dragging her off by the arms.



Lefi had been staring at her titles for no particular reason when she made that sound.

"What is it, Lady Lefi?"

Lew was the one who asked her that. Up until a short time ago, she'd been commenting excitedly along the lines of "M-My lord never showed any interest in a woman's body, so it's hard to believe that he finally..." and "Oh, wow. That sounds really nice," or "Th-Then does that mean you e-enjoyed yourself?!"

Incidentally, Yuki and Nell were no longer there. They had mounted Rir and ridden off to get her back to the royal capital. Yuki would most likely return the following afternoon.

As for the young hero girl, she wasn't to be taken lightly. Though she had a busy schedule, she had stayed in the dungeon until the very last second, prying as much out of Lefi as she could. Moreover, she was likely canoodling with her husband on top of Rir even now. And that clever wolf's pained expression would certainly be conveying the thought, "Please, can't you take that elsewhere?"

"Lew. I shall be visiting the meadow— No, I will go to the Forest instead. I shall return shortly."

"Huh? Wow, it's pretty unusual for you to go out on your own, Lady Lefi. But roger that!"

Lefi waved at Lew, who stared at her with a puzzled expression, then turned the knob on the door in the real throne room and stepped outside.

A clear blue sky stretched over the expanse of the Demonic Forest. A breeze ruffled her hair, and she heard the cries of some monster. Then, she opened her eyes.

"I...cannot do it."

The girl had walked through the door connecting the meadow area to the grotto outside and exited into the Forest right outside the mouth of the cave. She stood there alone now and murmured to herself.

She couldn't return to her dragon form. Only parts of her body could. For example, she could produce her wings as usual. If she focused solely on an arm, she could dissolve the anthropomorphization technique, and though it was human sized, her arm returned to the scaly dragon arm she was familiar with.

But it was different for her whole body. As hard as she tried to undo the transformation magic and return to her original dragon form, she could not. There was some sort of sensation of resistance—a recoil response—every time she tried to dispel the magic.

"It is possible that...I am no longer of dragonkind."

"Humanized Dragon." That was the new title that had been added to her data.

**Humanized Dragon:** One born as a dragon who became a human. A being who grasps their own nature, understands their own way of life, and transcends the boundaries of species.

Just like with "Conqueror of Dragonkind," Lefi suspected that this new title, too, was one that she alone possessed.

Perhaps deep in her heart, she had come to view this form, which should have been a temporary one, as her true self. Perhaps she had unknowingly decided that she wasn't a dragon woman but a human one. Perhaps this was a manifestation of her heart's desire.

"Even though I have spent less than two years out of a thousand living as a human? Heh. Heh heh, good grief. To think I was a woman possessed of such strong sentiments. Heh heh heh..."

She chuckled softly, pleased by the thought. Despite the strangeness of the feeling, she acknowledged her joy over the matter. Lefi knew that her husband cared not a whit about species, but for some reason, it made her happy that she had become a race close to that of everyone else she cared for, including her spouse. If she spent the remainder of her years in this human form, she suspected she would eventually be unable to recall her dragon form.

"But this news is not all glad tidings."

One thing made her apprehensive: the fact that she couldn't draw on a hundred percent of her power without being in her original dragon form. Even with this body, the monsters in the Demonic Forest were no match for her. The strongest monsters here inhabited the part of the Forest which Yuki called the western area. She could best up to ten of them in a single match.

However, even more powerful creatures than them existed in this world. One example close to her would be Fluffrir, the pet doted on by the family. When he was at home, he was simply a wolf with a nervous temperament who had become so after having been incessantly forced to do the bidding of her family's free-spirited members. But he was, in fact, a fenrir. The species he belonged to had unlimited potential, so the reality was something else entirely.

The one she'd fought in the past, though only three hundred years old at the time as she recalled, had possessed a tenacity to keep pace with her, who had become the Supreme Dragon by then. In terms of power, she had been overwhelmingly on top. Yet their battle to the death had lasted three days and three nights. If she were to confront a fenrir that strong with this body, she wondered how long she could last in a fight.

Then there were her fellow dragons. She could probably eke out a win against one of the elders in this form, but two against one would be too difficult.

Not to mention the Spirit Emperor who had visited them here some time ago. The Calamity-level being. With a life span that far outstripped hers, he possessed proven abilities and veteran techniques. In all likelihood, she would lose against him as she was now.

Of course, Lefi was well aware that the chance of her having to fight any of them was low as long as she continued to live her normal life here. Extremely low, even. But not zero. A long life meant the possibility of such dangers descending upon them once or twice.

"Perhaps I should train a bit on how to exert power with this body."

Her husband. Her family here. And her own children who might someday be born. For the first time in her millennium of existence, the girl sought power. And it was solely for their sakes.



I'd noticed something strange recently.

"Jeez, Lefi, it's too hot for this."

"Pishposh. I was here first. Your body is the one that is sweltering."

Yukiki and Lady Lefifi were even closer than before. They'd always been super close. It was easy to see how much fun they were having playing together every day. But lately, they'd been even closer, and you could tell right away that something was different.

Like right now. Even though they argued with each other and said mean things, they were practically glued together. They'd been leaning on each other the whooole time, sticking to each other more than usual. It feels like they're all over each other.

The change in their relationship made me really curious, so I stared hard at them, trying to understand what'd happened. But they must've realized I was watching them because they pulled apart in a rush before going their separate ways.

Hmm... It wasn't like them being lovebirds was anything new. But they were even *more* lovebirdy now than before.

"Lovey-Dovey Thunder!"

"So...electrifying."

Looked like Shii and En felt the same way I did.

"I wonder why they're suddenly so lovey-dovey now."

When I tilted my head 'cause I was thinking, Shii immediately raised her hand with a whoosh.

"Me! I know! Lovey-Dovey Thunder hit them! That why!"

"I...think Lovey-Dovey Thunder is Cupid the Sorcerer's special move. It makes the targets so crazy about each other that they can't act normal for a while."

"Wow! So powerful move!"

"Then...while they're incapacitated, Cupid the Sorcerer transforms. He

becomes three times bigger and three times more powerful. Very strong."

"Trans-fur-mation is boss basic!"

"Hmm. I asked Miss Leila what's going on with them, but she just smiled mysteriously at me and refused to answer."

As usual, the two of them chattered on about whatever they wanted to, and as usual, it didn't bother me, so I just kept thinking about the problem.

"Miss Leila strongest in world! I think she can beat Cupid Sorcerer too!"

"Yup... Master said, 'Leila's the strongest in the Hidden Leaf.' Which leaf is he talking about? That one?"

"Who know? 'Cause Master a weirdo too! But I think he want to say Miss Leila super strong."

Yukiki was the kind of weirdo who sometimes said things none of us knew or understood. We had no idea what the Hidden Leaf was, but just like Shii said, he must've meant that Miss Leila was super strong. No one in our family was a match for her.

"Yup... Leila's super strong. I'm sure she can win first place in the Tenkaichi Budokai too."

"You right! I think she go, 'Haaaah!!!' and win with beam attack!"

Gosh, these two really are such free spirits. Look away for just a second and their conversation goes all over the place. I think—no, I'm sure it's 'cause of Yukiki. Not only is he a weirdo, but he's even more of a free spirit than them. Also, I really don't think Miss Leila can shoot a beam. Though she can probably win the Budokai if she uses magic.

I knew what people like Miss Leila were called. She was the secret boss. Yukiki was the main boss, but if you wanted to reach the true ending, you needed to defeat Miss Leila, the secret boss.

"Gah! We gotta stop wasting time on that! We're talking about Yukiki and Lady Lefifi right now!"

The two of them tilted their heads curiously when I said that.

"Why not leave 'lone? They happy as lovebirds, so no problem."

"Yes... It would be bad if they hated each other, but they don't, so it's fine. In fact, it's *good* that they're lovebirds."

"You know what? You're both right!"

Why hadn't I realized that sooner? I got really happy whenever I saw them getting along, so it was actually a really good thing that they were so cuddly with each other. There was no problem, and I didn't need to worry about it.

"Hey, hey! No more thinkin'! We go ousside now! Ousside!"

"Hmm...what should we play today?"

"Hmm! Hmmmm! Let's play...pretend ball!"

"You...mean kick a ball or throw it?"

"Nooope! We pretend to be balls! Round and round we go!"

"Got...it. Then I'll be a basketball."

"Then I volleyball! Iluna, you?"

"I'll be a... I know! A rugby ball!"

"Ooh! Daring! You gonna score lotsa points!"

"Yes...very creative."

"Hee hee hee. I tried to think of something good!"

With that mystery solved, we ran outside to play while chatting.

I really am so happy being together with everyone. We have so much fun. Studying, playing every day until we're super-duper tired, eating tasty food, taking hot baths, and sleeping without a care in the world. Spending every day with Yukiki and everyone else I love so much.

I knew. I knew that I was blessed to be so happy.

"Hey, Yukiki."

"What's up?"

Now that it was evening, he'd come to call us back inside. We held hands as

we walked.

"Thank you for everything!"

He didn't say anything in response. Just patted my head gently. The warmth of his hand made me incredibly happy, and I couldn't help but beam at him.



This happened on a random day.

"Tee hee hee! It's been sooo long since it was just the three of us!"

Holding hands with me and Lefi, Iluna spoke as she smiled happily.

"Huh. You're right. When was the last time with just us three?"

"Hmm... I do recall we went on a stroll quite some time ago."

"Oh snap. When we took Rir with us into the Forest, right? Sure brings back memories. Iluna, didn't you end up running out of energy and falling asleep at the very end there?"

"Yup! You piggybacked me, Yukiki!"

Right. I did that too. Has it really been almost two years since then?

Lefi and Iluna were with me right now. It was just the three of us. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened to create this situation. Just, in a rare turn of events, only the three of us had been in the living room earlier, so I'd asked if they wanted to go on a walk because I was bored.

And just like last time, we were taking a stroll through the Demonic Forest. It was hot all year round here, and today was no exception as the sun beat down on the ground. This environment with its infinite summer was one reason such a rich ecosystem existed in the Forest.

"Gosh, it's always sooo hot here! Very different from how cool it is in the meadow."

"That's 'cause I mess with the meadow's climate to make it easy on us. Speaking of, though, maybe I should change up the season there. It's been the same for a while now."

"Ooh! I can't wait!"

"Yes, I believe that will be quite pleasant."

I nodded in response to their quick agreement.

"All righty, guess I'll do that after we get back. Hmm, what to choose... Iluna, what kinda weather do you like?"

"Um, um! I like snow! It's pretty and sparkly and fun 'cause I can play lots in it! Oh, but snow forever means no blue skies, and I don't like that. But, but I like when it rains, and I like when it's cloudy too, so actually, I like all kindsa weather!"

Oho, Iluna's already demonstrating elegant tastes at this age? Why am I not surprised?

"Then how about winter first? I don't want any of you getting sick from the drastic change in temperature, so I'll gradually lower it over the course of a week, then I'll make it snow for a week. I should probably buy winter clothes for everyone, huh?"

"A body becomes susceptible to illness at sudden changes in weather, so while I do not mind you enjoying the altered climate, Iluna, you must remain vigilant of your health."

"Yes, ma'am! I'll tell Shii and the others too! But wait. I'm the one who needs to be the most careful, huh? 'Cause I got sick and made everyone fuss over me..."

"Ha ha! It really wasn't a big deal, so don't even worry about it and just focus on having fun. Besides, the other kids are a little different from us. I'm not totally sure if the concept of catching a cold actually applies to them."

Frankly speaking, aside from Iluna, everyone in the little-girl gang—Shii, En, and the wraith sisters—had some mysterious biologies, meaning there was no way to know how much of our common knowledge applied to them. There was a chance of them feeling unwell if their health had anything to do with magic, but if I thought about it, I lacked any knowledge on that front. It'd probably be a good idea to ask Leila about colds and such in this world. For future reference and stuff.

"Hey, hey, Yukiki, Lady Lefifi. What kind of weather do you like?"

"Hmm. For me, it's gotta be a sunny day with blue skies that's not too hot but not too cold. I love the sunlight, but it gets tough being out all day when it's as hot as it is here in the Demonic Forest."

"I am fine with anything so long as I am comfortable. If I must choose, I enjoy the kind of weather that is easy to fly in. So I do not much care for rain."

"Yeah, I feel ya. I don't wanna fly when it's raining either."

Plus, it's cold and you can't see jack squat. Bet it'd be super easy to catch a cold too.

Iluna stared enviously up at us.

"You two are soooo lucky. I want wings too..."

"Hey, Lefi. Is there some kind of magic that lets you fly?"

"There is indeed. In fact, our wings are fundamentally different from the ones possessed by races like the winged because they are constructed from magical energy. In other words, we are utilizing 'flight magic.' So, Iluna, if you learn how to use it, you can fly as well."

"Huh?! Really?! You mean it?! I can fly with you two?!"

Lefi ruffled the excited little girl's golden hair and continued with a laugh.

"Kah ha! Yes, it is possible. But the magic is a tad difficult, so you cannot learn it at the moment. I advise you to study under Leila henceforth. Once you have thoroughly acquainted yourself with the usage of magical energy, I shall teach you myself."

"Yaaay! I'll do my best to learn! When I do, let's take a walk in the sky together, okay?!"

"Of course. It would be my pleasure."

"Oh, hey, I have a great idea. Iluna, you wanna visit the sky island together after you learn how to fly? It's over there. Can you see it?"

I pointed out the sky island Lefi and I had gone to on our date, the same one that occasionally drifted near the Demonic Forest.

"I can! Gosh, I'm suuuper-duper excited! I've decided that starting today, I'm

gonna study lots and lots so I can fly!"

"I know you can do it, Iluna. You always do your best no matter what. I wouldn't even be surprised if you pick it up in a flash."

"Tee hee hee! Hooray! I'm gonna work hard!"

She pumped her arms up high, still holding our hands. So cute.

I couldn't deny that my favoritism was showing a little in saying this, but this little girl genuinely excelled in the magical arts. Part of it probably had to do with the Spirit Emperor having taught her how to control spirits back when they'd visited her village since the ability to handle spirits was directly connected with the ability to handle magical energy. And though there wasn't anything we could do about her low reserves of the stuff seeing as that was only because she was so young, I had a feeling it would be a breeze for her to learn how to use magic itself. So, naturally, I was super pumped for the day we could fly together too.

"Precisely. Like me, you are a superior specimen, Iluna. I am certain you will master the necessary skills soon enough so long as you give it your utmost effort."

"Goodness me. Have I just heard something strange or are my ears deceiving me? While I firmly believe that Iluna is much more clever than I, I don't recall ever losing to *you* in a battle of wits. So imagine my confusion now."

"Hmm, hmm, lt would seem my husband cannot recognize the truth as such. How terribly disappointing, and pitiful to boot."

"Yes, we really must answer the question of who, exactly, is the pitiful one here, Madam Lefi. I pray for the day my beloved wife can open her eyes to reality."

As we started arguing like we usually did, I noticed Iluna staring happily up at us.

"Huh? What's the matter, Iluna?"

"Oh, nothing! Just thinking how you've always been close since the beginning, but now, you're even closer! Super lovey-dovey lovebirds too!"

Her words stunned me and Lefi into silence for a moment. Beaming, Iluna kept talking.

"Make sure you stay lovey-dovey forever and ever, okay?!"

"Uh...okay."

"Y-Yes, as you wish..."

That was all we could say in response.

# **Epilogue: Their Time Together**

"Hey, Lefi. I-I'm curious about something... If we end up having a kid, what's their race gonna be?"

Lefi, who'd been relaxing in the real throne room, flushed a little in response to my question but still answered me.

"Mgh! Ummm... Well, I suspect the child will take after one of us more than they will the other. Either dragon or demon lord... I know that it is strange for me to ask this now, but do you not find it quite an enigma for 'demon lord' to be a race?"

"Bruh, don't ask me. I don't have an answer either. Why not just think of it as part of the demon category in general? Especially since the basis of my race is 'archdemon' anyway."

"Ah, yes, that is correct. It slipped my mind. Setting aside the matter of the concept of demon lords, I believe you are correct about viewing you as a demon considering your physical characteristics. Oh, Yuki, I wish to touch your wings."

"Jeez, you're so..."

I sighed and smiled in exasperation before doing her bidding. She came over immediately after I took out my wings and started brushing her fingers across them. Her touch felt wonderful. Ticklish, warm, and cozy.

"I wonder why...it puts me in such a good mood every time you touch me."

"Y-You imbecile! Do not utter such embarrassing things!"

"Hmm? Oh, r-right. My bad."

The words had just tumbled out of my mouth unconsciously. Her red face and flustered comment made me realize as much, which in turn made me feel self-conscious as I apologized.

Silence reigned. Even so, Lefi continued stroking my wings. *Maaan, her wing fetish is seriously hard-core*.

After a while, my wife coughed pointedly and kept talking.

"Ahem... Returning to our earlier topic of discussion, in very rare cases, it is possible for a child to exhibit characteristics of both races. For example, a child born between us may have my horns and tail while possessing wings similar to yours."

Inch. Resting... I guess the reason mixing is rare has to do with the difference between dominant and recessive genes, huh? After all, despite the existence of mana, which was always picking a fight with science, the laws of science basically played out the same here as they did on Earth.

"I see. Then that means we can actually have a kid, right?"

"Kah ha. Indeed, that will not be a problem. Though I am using a transformational technique to change my form from dragon to human, at the moment, I am not much different from a human female. Were you truly worried about the possibility we could not?"

"W-Well, yeah, a little. We, you know, did the deed, but if we couldn't have kids for whatever reason, you might've ended up being hurt. And...I'd hate it if you felt that way. I didn't want you blaming yourself or something."

When I said that, she stopped touching my wings and, with a beautiful smile, took both of my hands into hers, twining our fingers together.

"Is that so? Do not fear, for that will not pose a problem. We may have to worry about whether or not I will be a good mother, but the fact remains that I can become a mother."

"You'll definitely be a good mom. I mean, how could someone as amazing as you *not*? I don't know any other woman who'd even come close to you. Maybe the ones in our dungeon, but that's about it."

"You are aware that I am awkward and lazy, yes?"

"Whoooa! Look at you being all self-aware, Mrs. Lefi."

"Compared to the others...well, I must admit defeat."

Lefi pouted a little, and I couldn't help laughing at her expression.

"Don't worry. I like those parts of you too."

"Hmph. Very well. Then I shall remain as I am."

"You say that, but I know you're gonna practice to get better."

"As you might already be aware, I find myself feeling nostalgic over the time I would laze about without a single thought in my head."

"You saying you prefer it that way?"

"I am not and well you know it, fool."

She pursed her lips in annoyance and poked my shoulder. She looked so dang adorable that, without thinking, I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in close. Even while she complained about it being too hot to do this, she didn't try to make me let go. Instead, she wrapped her arm around me too.

Okay, yeah, it is kinda hot. A person's body temperature was high, but that heat felt nice. It was more than just the touch of skin against skin. I could feel her emotions flowing through to me. An outsider might say I was just misunderstanding. They might laugh at me for being conceited. But I had no doubt that I felt things from her that couldn't be put into words. And I was sure my own thoughts were flowing through to her.

We spent some time clinging to each other like that. Then, I murmured quietly.

"If our kid has traits from both of us, then they might be born as a Supreme Lord."

"Heh heh. I can well imagine the child becoming ruler of the world. It is not impossible either, considering our abilities. Regardless, I am not particularly concerned as long as they are born healthy."

"Yeah, you're right. And for the name, I think it'd be nice to pick something that means 'health and happiness.' That sound good to you?"

"Oho, I like that very much. In your world, was it common for names to have meanings?"

"For the most part, yeah. It's not the same here?"

"The humanoid species take their names from great historical figures and powerful monsters to seek their blessings, whereas dragonkind generally relies

on sounds and feelings."

"Wow, I had no idea... You didn't have parents, right, Lefi? So who gave you your name?"

"The elders. Those born naturally from mated pairs are named by their parents, but those who are born spontaneously are named by the elders."

"Ohhh, okay, I see. Lefisios is a lovely name with a beautiful ring to it, so I gotta remember to thank them at some point, huh?"

"Why would you do that?"

"Whaddya mean, 'why'? It's 'cause that means I can say my wife's beautiful name again and again. Duh."

*"…"* 

The jumble of emotions on her face made it hard to figure out what was going through her head when she heard that. Whatever it was, though, she ended up deciding to grind her head into my side.

"Ha ha ha! Hey! Your horns hurt! Owww!"

"Insolent fool! You horrid womanizer!"

"My lady, 'tis an honor to be complimented thusly by my wife."

While the two of us were goofing around, the door opened with a *ka-chak* and the little-girl gang marched inside.

"Ah! Lady Lefifi is headbutting Yukiki! I wanna do it too!"

"Ooh! Me too!"

"Then...me too."

"Gah! Halt, you lot — Waaah?!"

"Mpf! Ha ha ha!"

When the three of them jumped on top of us, me and Lefi tumbled backward together.

"Good grief... That was very dangerous, young ladies."

"Tee hee hee! Sooorryyy!"

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"Sooorry!"
  "We...couldn't help it."
  "That's a good enough reason for me, so you're forgiven!"
 The four of us cracked up as Lefi shook her head in exasperation.
  "My lord, Lady Lefi, we could use some help, please!"
 Just then, Lew called out to us from the kitchen, where Leila had been
teaching her how to cook.
  "You got it! All right, kiddos, hang tight for a bit."
  "We can help too, Yukiki!"
  "Yup, we help, Master!"
  "Yes...me too. I want to eat tasty food now."
  "Oh yeah? Thanks a bunch. But listen. If we all go into the kitchen, it's gonna
get super cramped, which'll make it hard for us to move around, right? So I'll
call you if we really can't do without you, okay?"
  "It is as he says. You lot should play some more in the meantime."
  "Hmm, hmm. Okay! Looks like we got some free time. What do you wanna
do?"
  "Ummm... Pretend ball!"
  "The...one where we become round and play?"
  "Nope! This time, we gonna bounce up 'n' down like balls!"
  "Ooh! I like that!"
  "Yes...me too."
  Honestly, I was kinda curious about what, exactly, this game entailed. Lefi and
I grinned in amusement at each other, thinking the same thing, then headed
together to the kitchen.
 "Hey, Lefi."
  "Hmm?"
```

"I don't know if I've told you this, but I feel like I can do anything as long as I'm with you."

*"…"* 

She didn't say anything. Just made sure we were out of sight, then stood on her tiptoes and kissed me lightly on the cheek. Overjoyed, I hugged her tight.

# Special Story: The Little Girls' Adventure

```
One day in the dungeon.

"Oookaaay! Got everything ready!"

"Readyyy!"

"No...problems here."

"Time to go on an adventure!"

"Off we go!"

"Woo...hoo."
```

After Iluna, Shii, and En checked the contents of each of their rucksacks, they let out excited cheers. Next to them, the wraith sisters, already possessing their dolls, raised their fists high. And then, sent off with smiles by the adult gang, they twisted the knob of the door in a practiced fashion and left the real throne room behind.

Their destination? The meadow area. To play today's game of make-believe treasure hunting. Which was why they'd asked Leila to make them lunch boxes, and also why they were wearing adventurer-type outfits with backpacks. They were all set and prepared for anything.

Inside their rucksacks were a few bottles of Super Potion, also known as elixirs. Yuki, overprotective as always, had given them to the girls just in case something happened. No matter how badly they got hurt, the liquid would heal them in an instant. In short, each of the backpacks contained enough value to rival a country's national budget.

The sun shone brightly and a cool wind blew in the meadow area. With this environment as the backdrop, Iluna spoke in a slightly stricter tone than usual.

"Right, then, Troop Member Shii! Show us the treasure map and Yukiki's—I mean, the mysterious letter!"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n! Here!"

With a dramatic flourish, Shii raised a map and a letter high into the air. A few places on the map were marked with drawings, while the timeworn letter had this to say:

To my beloved younglings,

I am the ruler of this labyrinth, Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki.

On this occasion, I have concealed a great treasure that I call the Demon Lord's Hidden Treasure in the meadow area. It is yours. If you can find it, that is.

I bid you travel to the castle first, for everything begins there.

"Hmm, hmm! If we follow the instructions in this letter, we should go to the castle first, right? But the castle is so big, so where do we even start?"

"Iluna...look. Here, on the map."

En pointed to an illustration of what seemed to be a fountain on the map. The map itself depicted everything in the meadow area, but only the fountain was emphasized in the castle part.

"Hmm, hmm. I know this fountain... Aha! It's the one in the courtyard!"

"Yaaay! Then we go to courtyard first!"



Having determined their destination, the little girls walked from the meadow area to the castle grounds, heading toward the courtyard.

"Hmm... I know this is kinda off topic, but gosh, looking at the castle again like this, it really is sooo big, huh?! So weird to see it now when there used to be nothing there."

"Master always thinking 'bout all kind of ideas like this and make them!"

"Yes...the castle is very cool."

They played here every day, but they never got bored of it because of how massive their playground was despite being one they were familiar with. Since Yuki continued to build new structures, expand play areas, and add natural elements, the meadow area had transformed from a barren place to one where something existed no matter which direction they walked in.

The girls had actually gotten lost in the meadow area countless times due to its size and profusion of locations, but they always found their way home. Yuki had built buildings and places he'd anticipated the girls playing in, so he'd installed the special door capable of activating spatial magic in easy-to-find locations all over the place, which was how they were able to return to the real throne room from anywhere in the meadow. He made sure to take every precaution when their safety was concerned.

Incidentally, the castle had been named Castle Ruan Phionelle by Lefi, but frankly speaking, the place was hardly used, so no one except Yuki and Lefi even knew that the castle had a name. Everyone referred to it by various generic names like "the castle" and "the demon lord castle." All the mechanisms Yuki had installed to repel invaders lay completely unused. It basically only functioned as the little girls' playground at this point. But they loved it. They saw the castle as exciting, and it was their favorite place. A big, spacious, secret place with no one around.

Actually, it was a bit too open to be called a "secret place," but it was true in the sense that no one other than the residents of the dungeon knew about it, and it was always exciting to visit. Plus, there were a few secret hideouts scattered all over the meadow in addition to fully equipped zones one could stay in overnight. Yuki had deliberately constructed the latter in blind spots.

Thus, on some nights, after they'd eaten dinner and taken their baths, they would go to their secret bases to look at the starry sky and camp outside for the night.

Unlike Yuki, Lefi, and the rest of the adults who would rather play inside, the girls were outdoorsy types at heart, so they much preferred to play like this. As long as they remained within the dungeon's boundaries, Yuki could pinpoint the girls' locations using the Maps function. And more importantly, there were no enemies or invaders in the meadow area, so he gave them free run of the place.

"All right, we're at the fountain! Everyone, look for clues!"

At Captain Iluna's command, the girls scattered and started hunting for clues. They looked inside the fountain and around it. Under nearby trees and inside flower beds—until the youngest wraith sister, Roh, started bouncing in the air, summoning everyone.

"RohRoh, did you find something?!"

She nodded energetically in response to Iluna's question and pointed to a letter placed on the fountain's second level. So as to prevent it from being blown away, a stone had been placed on top of it. Roh tugged the letter out from under its paperweight and brought it to where everyone was. They gathered around her to read its contents. It contained only short sentences.

Follow the map west. Your landmark is a ruined building. The light will surely guide you. Watch your step.

"Which direction is west? Hmm, hmm... Does anybody have a compass?"

"Me... Here."

"Thanks, EnEn! Ummm... Based on what I can see on this map, the abandoned con-stuk-shin area is in the west!"

"Lots of broken bill-dings there!"

The abandoned construction site area. One of the stages Yuki had constructed for the water gun fight with the dungeon's residents a while ago. The same

place where he and Lefi had had their ultimate life-and-death showdown. Once the little girls knew where to go next, they started skipping exultantly toward it.

"An abandoned con-stuk-shin site is where buildings used to be made, right?"

"Yeah, yeah! I like it 'cause it compi-clated, but...why Master make abandoned place on purpose?"

"Right? I wonder too."

"Yes...it is a mystery."

They titled their heads in puzzlement because they didn't know why Yuki was so hung up on an abandoned construction site. If he'd been there, he probably would have bored them to tears with a long spiel about the fantasy appeal of one, but since he wasn't, the girls' question remained unanswered.

"Oookay, we're here! 'The light will surely guide you,' the note said. Can you girls see anything like that?"

"Hmm... I not sure, but I see light on over there?"

"In...the three-story collapsed building. That has to be it."

"You're right, I see it! Three floors, huh? Yukiki wrote, 'Watch your step.' Does that mean we gotta climb it to the top? He must have meant for us to be careful 'cause there's something up there."

"I think too!"

"I...think so too."

Everyone nodded firmly in agreement with Iluna's comment. It was metalevel logic, but logic nonetheless.

"All right, everybody, let's be careful on the climb— Ah, I should really be saying that to myself, though. Shii, you can just bounce back up even if you fall, and the wraith sisters can fly. And EnEn, I feel like you can land on your feet even if you fall."

"I fine even when I bounce!"

"If...I'm in danger, I'll go back to my sword form."

"Aww, that sounds nice. I can't do anything like that, so I'm a little jealous of

you all."

As the sole humanoid species, Iluna said those words in a somewhat sad tone. But the wraith triplets whirled around her to try to cheer her up. It was like they were trying to say, "We all feel the same way." In terms of species, wraiths were especially unique. Since they lacked physical bodies, the only way they could interact with matter was by possessing dolls. They were jealous of the others having real bodies, which was why they wanted to tell Iluna that they felt the same way about her and that everyone wished for something someone else had.

"I jealous you so smart, Iluna!"

"Yes...I agree. It's amazing to me how fast you think on your feet. I can't do that."

"Hmm... We all feel the same way, huh? Thanks, everyone! And sorry for forgetting something so simple!"

Iluna beamed happily and thanked them.

The little girls pulled themselves together and returned to their adventure. They picked their way up carefully through the crumbling floors—they weren't actually crumbling, though, because that would be dangerous, so Yuki had just set them up to *look* that way—and arrived at the top floor of the ruined three-story building.

Right away, they spotted it in front of them.

"An old stone monument!"

"Ooh! It cool!"

"It...looks like it's been here for decades."

A weathered stela with faded writing. Weathered in the sense that it was designed to appear that way, at least. In reality, it had only been a few days since its installation.

"Why the heck is a stela in an abandoned construction site?" No one asked this very important question. All that mattered was that they were having fun.

"Now, let's see what the next hint says... 'Find and follow the sparkle. On a hill

covered in the new green of spring, a door stands.' Hmm, 'find the sparkle'...

Since he made us come all the way up here, does that mean we can see it from here?"

"Ah! I know! Maybe time to use spyglasses?!"

"Oh...yes. Master said to take them with us."

The little girls remembered the spyglasses Yuki had given them during their preparations, and each opened her backpack accordingly.

"Aaall right, let's all look for the sparkle!"

They all looked through their spyglasses, searching for the sparkle off in the distance.

"'A hill covered in the new green of spring'... Could it be that open one with a good view?"

"We picnic there before!"

"Before...we were here?"

"That's right! This picnic happened before you and the wraith sisters appeared, EnEn! Hmm... Aha!"

"You finded something?"

The wraith sisters circled Iluna like they were echoing Shii's question.

"Yup! Look, see?! Over there! Something's sparkling, don't you think?!"

"Yes...I see it too. It looks like a magical floating light."

Through their spyglasses, the little girls spotted a low hill situated in the meadow area. A long time ago, before En and the wraith triplets had existed and when Shii had yet to attain her human form, the dungeon members had enjoyed a picnic there. Now, some sort of magical light floated atop it.

"No doubt! That it!"

"Yes...it's clearly marked on the map too. Let's go."

"Every time we solve a riddle, I get even more excited!"

"The...mysteries are calling us."

```
"Calling us!"

"There is always only one truth!"

"One!"

"We are...great detectives."

"We gotta suck on pipes and put on fake beards!"

"Huh? But I thought we uh-ven-chur-ers?"

"I'm...sure adventurers have beards too."

"Yeah! You're so right, EnEn!"
```

While crafting their mysterious theory, the girls left the abandoned construction site behind and headed to their next destination: the hill. Despite the vastness of the meadow area, it wasn't like they needed to trek for an hour. After a little while, they arrived at the low hill with a wonderful view. Just like with their other clues, they immediately commenced a search of the vicinity.

"Look, a door!"

On the other side of the hill, a cave-like structure that had not been there before could be seen, within which a long staircase descended. A stately door stood at the far end. It was the first time the girls had seen anything of the sort in the meadow where they played every day.

"When did Master make this?"

"It...wasn't here a little while ago."

"Yukiki sure does like making all kindsa things, huh? Let's charge in! Is what I want to say, but this is a good time to eat lunch, so let's do that first!"

Though they had departed in the morning, it was now already past noon because of all the detours the girls had taken to inspect this and that. It was the perfect time to eat lunch.

"Good idea!"

"I'm...excited to see what Leila made for us today."



Around the time the little girls were enjoying their adventure.

"Yuki, what are those?"

Lefi blurted that question out when she saw the clothes in Yuki's hands.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'what'? Isn't it obvious that they're for Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki?"

"Hmm... As far as I know, adventurers do not don such hair-raising attire."

"Yeah, so, the Great Demon Lord Adventurer already died and is currently in what we'd call an undead state. And that's why I chose this scary-looking stuff on purpose. Sick, right?"

Grinning, Yuki held the clothes up in front of his body and posed cheekily.

"Then let me ask you this. Will it make you happy if I say that yes, they are, as you put it, 'sick'?"

"Huh? Yeah, of course it will."

"…"

Lefi couldn't say anything to his quick response.

"Mr. Yuki actually *loves* wearing outfits like that, you know."

"That's because my lord pulls out all the stops when it comes to games."

"Exactly. Stuff like this is even more fun when you get the trappings right. You guys interested? I can totally get you stuff from the Undead Adventurer fashion line."

"Um, I-I think I'll pass."

"No surprise there, Nell, since you don't like scary things."

"While I can't deny that I'm a scaredy-cat, I believe there's a bigger issue at hand with these, Lew."

"Indeed. A normal adventurer outfit would be much more preferable."

"From your lips to my ears. Then I'll give you this adventuring set as a present!"

When he heard Lefi's exasperated comment, Yuki immediately opened

Inventory and withdrew outfits for the women with a dramatic flourish.

"Gah, you truly did prepare some for us? I should have maintained my silence..."

"Lefi, when are you going to stop underestimating Mr. Yuki? You should know by now that he'll most definitely have outfits for us in situations like this."

"What she said! Playing games like this with everyone is exactly what makes them fun. Now then, ladies, if you'd be so kind as to put these on, please."

"Yuki, did you not say you would stop wasting that thing you call 'DP' on useless items?"

Despite how fed up Lefi looked, Yuki replied confidently to her.

"It's fine! Fine, I tell you! I summoned the pets and hunted monsters left and right in the Demonic Forest to earn the DP I spent on these! And lemme tell ya, we all worked *real* hard since clothes like these are damn expensive!"

"I find myself feeling a tad sorry for them, used as they are by you for your ridiculous farces..."

"Look, they're under my command, so my orders are absolute! For I am the ruler of this world! Evil incarnate, Yuki the Devil!"

"Adventurer, lord of evil, and more. You're quite busy with your myriad roles, huh, Mr. Yuki? I bet you're the type who roots for the villains in stories."

"If we made a list of all my lord's titles and jobs, it'd probably be really long, huh?"

"Yeaaah, I actually really do like the villains. I think a cool villain makes a story shine way more than a hero protagonist. So I'd *love* to be a baddie like that."

"Should you aim for such wicked heights, the wee lasses will start mimicking you as well, so perhaps you should refrain."

"It might be too late for that, Lefi. Iluna and the others already equate demon lords to absolute justice. Though I myself can't deny that my concept of demon lords was completely warped after my time here."

"You have a point. My time with Yuki has led me to believe that demon lords

are quite the fools."

"Aha ha ha... Sorry, my lord, but I can't disagree with my lady."

"Nell, are you hearing this? My wives are so freaking cold. As another wife, I demand that you take responsibility for their insults and console me."

"Huh? Right, um... Th-There, there. I'm here for you, all right?"

"There it is! Nell's 'Spoil Him Super Sweetly' attack! By wrapping him up in her maternal instincts, she's sure to turn my lord into a good-for-nothing!"

"Nell, you pamper him overmuch. It is best to be stern with him."

"Mwa ha ha! What? You ladies feeling jealous? Well, too bad!"

"Hmm... Mr. Yuki, I feel as if I'm the one who took the most damage here."

As the adults went on and on with their silly conversation, Leila called out to them.

"Everyone, it's almost lunchtime."

"Geh. Curses. It is already so late in the day? I must hurry and help— Wait a moment. I just remembered that Leila prepared the food while we worked on the wee ones' lunch boxes this morning."

"Phew, good stuff. Lemme eat real quick so I can change into my outfit and wait for them as Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki."

"I just realized something. My lord, you think up all kinds of games, huh? Including today's make-believe treasure hunt for Iluna and the others."

Yuki shrugged in response to Lew's comment.

"Due to our unique environment, we rarely get the chance to venture outside the dungeon, right? The meadow area is huge, and the little-girl gang isn't alone, so I know they're generally fine, but doing the same thing every day would bore the crap out of them. Since I have the power to do a bunch of stuff, I figured I should do right by them as their guardian."

"Mr. Yuki... You always put great thought and effort into things like that, huh? No, that's not quite right. You've always put the little girls first. Since the very beginning, haven't you?"

"Weeell, I guess you could say that. And it goes especially for Iluna. I sure don't wanna make her parents worry in the afterlife, y'know? More importantly, we gotta eat!"

He sounded a bit embarrassed as he spoke. Giggling, the women glanced knowingly at each other and took their seats at the table. And then, they all started eating lunch.



"All done! Gosh, Miss Leila's cooking really is super delicious!"

"Yummy in my tummy! Yummy food make me happy!"

"Happy, happy! I want to make food like this one day too!"

Smiling, the wraith triplets nodded vehemently at the two girls' chatter. They too were full from eating the magical food made specifically for them. Yuki had come up with the idea, and Leila had brought it to fruition using magic.

Moving right after eating would cause their stomachs to hurt, so they rested for a while once they'd finished their lunch. They talked excitedly about all kinds of things and then cleaned up, energetic again and ready to resume their adventure.

"Okay! We're full, we're happy, and we're excited!"

"Ready to charge in!"

"Charging...complete with food. Iluna, give us the signal to charge."

"Huh? 'Signal'? Okay! Hmm. I know! My expedition team! Before our very eyes lies a mystery! An unknown treasure is calling our names! So charge forth with me!"

"Ooooh! So cool! Like Master!"

"Yes...he would sound just like that."

The wraith sisters smiled and nodded, indicating their agreement.

"Tee hee hee. Really? I tried to copy Yukiki."

While conversing, the little girls descended the long set of stairs heading underground. They tugged open the imposing door situated all the way inside

when they reached it. Contrary to its appearance, the door wasn't all that heavy, so the girls could open it easily by themselves.

```
"Wooow!"

"Amazing!"

"So...big."
```

Upon doing so, they found a temple. A vast, deep, majestic temple. Many pillars and sculptures were lined up, leading to an invitingly open door deep inside. They glimpsed a passageway beyond it.

Pale orbs of light likely created by magic floated in the space. The exquisite dimness created an eerie atmosphere. Overwhelmed by the sight, the girls froze upon entering and stared, enthralled.

By the way, Yuki had gone overboard when creating this temple because he'd been having too much fun doing it. Based on his faint memories of what he'd seen on TV, it'd ended up as a hodgepodge of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Incan, Mayan, Aztec, and other influences. However, since the place resembled the ruins of a civilization that didn't exist in this world, no one questioned its authenticity—or lack thereof.

An inkling of an idea had first come to him when he'd muttered to himself, "Boy, I sure would love underground ruins of some kind. Hanumaptra, *Oklahoma Jones...* Something cool along those lines." The whole adventure game had been born out of the idea not to let this creation go to waste, and he'd run with it from there.

```
"There has to be a treasure up ahead!"

"My heart poundin' hard!"

"A...treasure is waiting for us."
```

Exalted, the girls walked forward, with Iluna, who was in the lead, stepping onto one of the floor tiles. It sank under the weight of her foot. Immediately, a rumbling sound could be heard coming from behind them. They all turned around to see what was causing it.

```
"Ah! A-A huge boulder?!"
```

The ceiling behind them suddenly opened up, and a huge boulder tumbled out. Instead of rock, it was made of sponge.

"W-We gotta run for it!"

"Hurry...to the structure up there. The passageway narrows, so the boulder can't get through."

Seeing the boulder bearing down on them, the girls started running at full speed. Of course, they knew it wasn't the real thing. In fact, they had no doubt that their guardian would never put them in any danger. They also understood that they wouldn't be hurt even if the boulder crushed them. But they stuck to the spirit of their adventure and pretended like it was real by screaming as they fled. Technically speaking, their screams were shrieks of joy.

The wraith triplets reached the narrow part of the passageway first since they were flying swiftly through the air. When they did, they motioned urgently with their whole bodies, basically saying, "Hurry! Hurry!" The other three made it to the safe zone shortly after, whereupon the giant boulder hit the entryway not with a *crash* but with a *boof*, sealing them inside.

"Haah... This means we can't go back that way, huh?"

"We march forward!"

"The...only way is forward."

Naturally, they could easily push the sponge boulder out of the way and head back the way they'd come. But in any case, with the path blocked, they committed themselves to going forward.

"Now, where are— Huh? Is it just me or is the passageway getting smaller?"

"Ah! Th-The walls closin' in!"

"We...have to hurry through."

The path was definitely narrowing, albeit very slowly. The little girls decided they couldn't take it easy here either, so they raced ahead. But Yuki's tricks were nowhere near over.

Up ahead was a thin, zigzagging path set in an area with half the floor missing. If they peered beyond it, they could see an entire zone where they needed to

get across by using footholds situated here and there, knotted ropes, and a variety of athletic equipment—death traps, rather, that were set everywhere.

For the girls' safety, an incredibly soft, thick mat had been spread underneath the floor and ladders had been installed. That way, no matter how often they fell through the gaps, they could attempt to traverse the path again. As for the walls closing in on them, they were designed to stop at a specific point, essentially making them gimmicks to set the mood. Because setting the mood was *very* important.

```
"Boo... I messed up."

"Iluna, your hand!"

"Let's...work together."

"Ooh! ReiRei, thanks for using your telekinesis!"

"I...think Rei's power is the key to beating this stage."

"En right! Teh-li-kuh-nii-sus strong here!"

"Let's all work together to get past this!"
```

The little girls fell through the gaps countless times, but they nevertheless continued challenging themselves as they helped each other and proceeded ever forward. Adventurers with indomitable mindsets, they never let their failures discourage them, and they refused to yield to the oncoming obstacles. Actually, they were genuinely enjoying the obstacle course, so there was that. In any case, they steadily made their way toward the goal. And then...

```
"We made it! Is that the Demon Lord's Hidden Treasure?"

"Since it Master we talkin' 'bout, I think one more trap left!"

"Agreed..."
```

After slipping through the death traps, the girls arrived at a slightly open space surrounded by statues emanating solemn, divine auras. It seemed as though this was the final location. They could see no other entrances or exits. In the center of the room lay something that looked like a casket. Assuming there was something inside it, they drew closer—which ended up being the trigger.

"So you have come, adventurers..."

"Ah! This voice!"

"Could be?!"

"The...Great Demon Lord Adventurer, Yuki."

A terrifying voice echoed throughout the room. In the next instant, the casket opened with a *thunk* and a bandaged arm appeared.

"Ow! Shoulda made this wider. Ahem. I shall commend your skill in making it this far. Thusly, I am your final opponent, as well as he who shall judge whether you are worthy of the hidden treasure!"

Just as they'd anticipated, Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki presented himself.

"Okay, everyone! Get ready to fight!"

"Raaawr! Fight time!"

"Our...enemy is powerful. Don't underestimate him."

The wraith triplets followed the three girls' declarations by taking up aggressive fighting stances.

"Heh. Brave, aren't we? Then come, strike me as you wish! Only upon my defeat will I grant you the hidden treasure! Gwa ha ha ha!!!"

With that, the curtain rose on the fierce battle between Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki and the courageous little-girl adventurers.



"Honeys, we're home."

"We're hooome!"

Great Demon Lord Adventurer Yuki and the little-girl adventurers returned to the real throne room together as companions.

"Yes, welcome back. Hmm? What are those bracelets? I have never seen them before."

"Look! Look, Lady Lefifi! We got the treasure! They're pretty, right?"

"I has one too!"

"We...all match."

Each of the wraith triplets raised a doll arm to show off their matching bracelets too.

"Oh? I am happy for you. Moreover, it seems there are sorcerous circuits in them. Let me see... Ah, protection magic, is it? Make sure you look after them, lasses."

"Yup! We'll take reeeal good care of them! Ahhh, that was so much fun! Yukiki, those underground ruins were amazing! Super-duper cool!"

"Many thrill! Many danger! So much fun!"

"Yes... It packed a big punch."

"Ha ha! Yeah? Hearing you kiddos say that makes all my hard work worth it."

"Do you mean to say you created something new, Yuki?"

"Yeah, he did! We don't know when, but he made ruins underground!"

"Wow, underground? Mr. Yuki, you really do love crafting things, don't you?"

"Oh my, did you say ruins? I find myself dreadfully curious about their style."

"Uh-oh. Looks like that sparked Leila's curiosity, huh, my lord? Though I'd like to see them too!"

"I, you know, was just kinda in the mood to make them. I love how they turned out, so I guess you guys'll be the next to check 'em out. Dear new adventurers! My name is Yuki and I am the Great Demon Lord Adventurer! Riddle me this: will you be able to reach the Demon Lord's Hidden Treasure?!"

"As veteran adventurers, we'll be sure to teach you lots, okay?!"

"Ahem! We now expert uh-ven-chur-ers!"

"Let...me tell you about our adventure."

And so, the little girls' day ended as they regaled the adults with the fascinating tale of their adventure.



#### **Afterword**

Hello, this is Ryuyu! Thank you very much for buying volume 9!

Sooo...Lefi and Yuki's relationship sure leveled up, huh? Please allow me to expound on that a little.

Yuki possesses a huge inferiority complex, which has to do with himself being a so-called adult with a childish personality. That's why, despite marrying Lefi, Nell, and Lew, he's been anxious about having children of his own. As a result, even though he could do things like kiss and cuddle with them, he hesitated to take things further. For someone like him who can't be called a proper adult, having children, taking responsibility for their lives, and raising them right is a huge concern.

But in the end, Iluna turned out to be the reason he overcame that. Iluna is at the core of his life, and you could say the dungeon revolves around her. In short, she's Yuki's mental and spiritual support. He grows confident to some extent thanks to her words and thus manages to take the next step in his life.

As the author of this work, I believe that what's important to deepen a story is that the characters are human. And because they're human, each has within them anxieties and things they don't like about themself, but they strive every day to do something about those things. Therefore, I've been very deliberate in portraying Yuki as human. And I've done so not just in this volume but in writing his character as a whole. I can't help but wonder if I'm doing a good job... But, well, that's the never-ending battle that comes with being an author, y'know?

Finally, I'd like to end with acknowledgments. To my editor, who waited patiently for my incredibly late manuscript, to the one and only Daburyu, and to Note Tono for enriching this work even more! To everyone else involved, and to the readers who picked this up! Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.















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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in My Dungeon: Volume 9

by Ryuyu

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