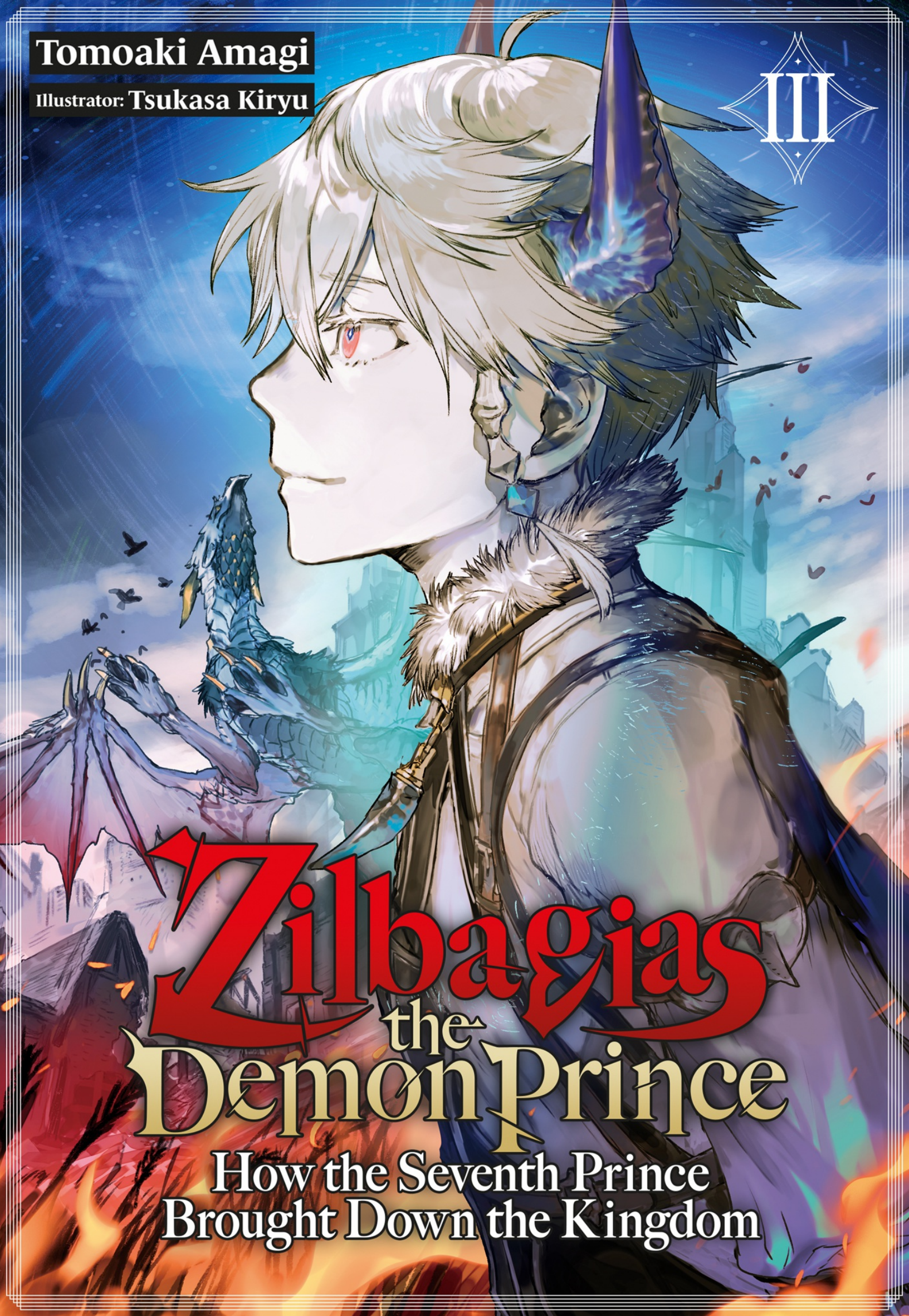


Tomoaki Amagi

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu

III



Zilbagias the Demon Prince

How the Seventh Prince
Brought Down the Kingdom

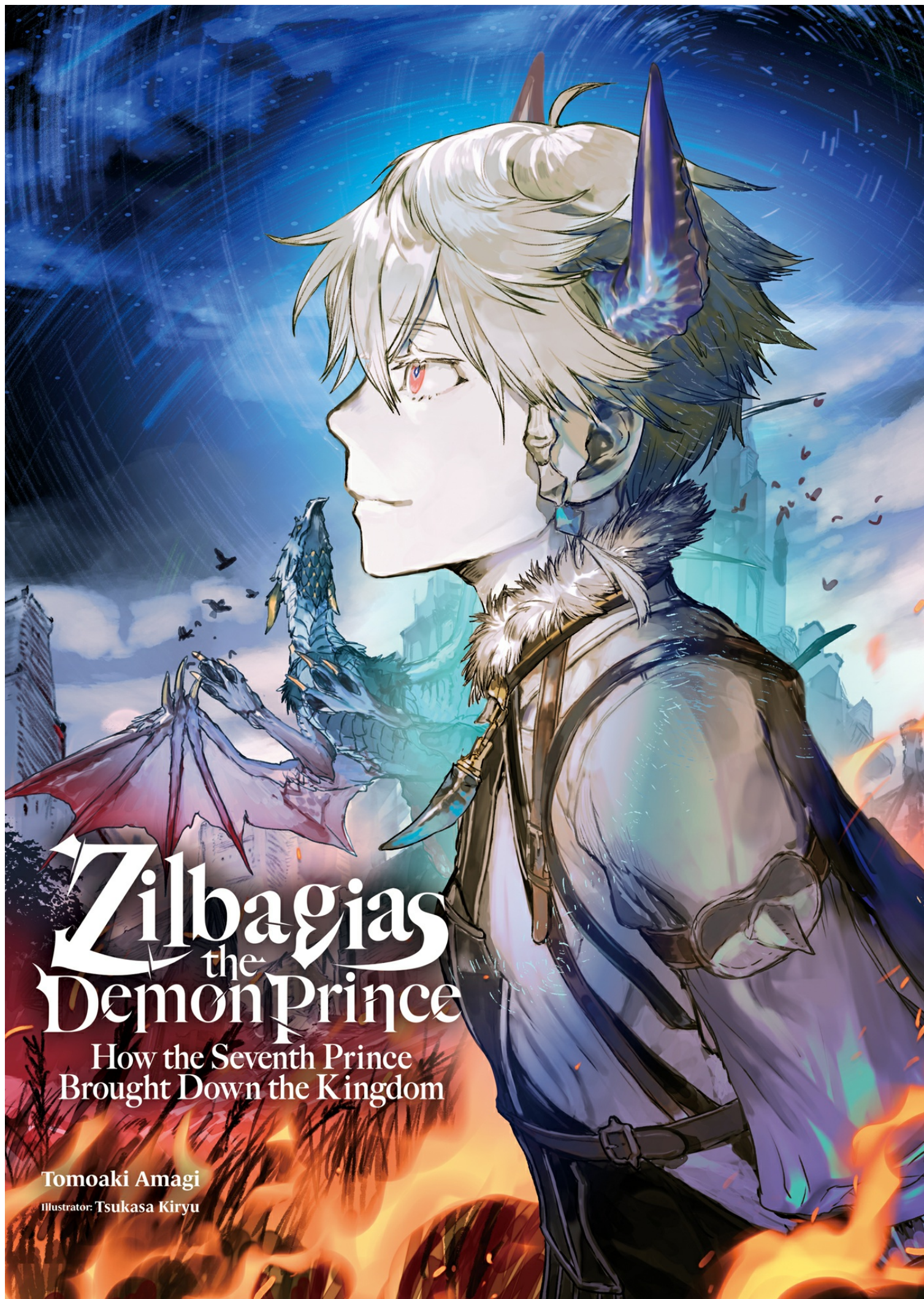
Tomoaki Amagi

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu

The background illustration depicts a young man with light-colored hair and red eyes, shown in profile. He has large, dark, pointed horns on his head and is wearing a dark, fur-trimmed coat. He is looking towards a city in flames. In the background, a blue dragon with yellow spikes is visible, along with falling red petals or leaves. The bottom of the image is filled with bright orange and yellow flames.

Zilbagias the **Demon Prince**

**How the Seventh Prince
Brought Down the Kingdom**



Zilbagias the Demon Prince

How the Seventh Prince
Brought Down the Kingdom

Tomoaki Amagi

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu

Not a moment later,
something thunked to
the ground in the spot
where she once stood.
A demon's spear, pierced
through something else.
Something...no,
it was easy to tell at a
glance what it was.
But none of them
wanted to recognize it.

"No... No! Nooooo!"

Barbara da Rosa

Charlotte Vidwa

Hessel

Emergias Izanis

*"Pathetic men and
women of the Alliance!
It seems some of your lovely
peons wandered into our camp,
so I am returning him to you.
He was quite desperate to
make it back home."*



“Me too...! I am so glad we met!”

Layla's voice was trembling.

At that moment, I felt a drop hit my face...

Rain? In this clear, cloudless sky?

It took only a moment for me to notice the glistening trail running across Layla's face.

But the wind howling by us carried it away into the sky in an instant...like I was watching stardust floating past me.

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Prologue

A row of about fifty human soldiers lined up before me. There were very few young men among them. Although the majority of them were middle-aged or elderly, most of them seemed to be lacking experience. Honestly, they looked like a band of greenhorns. It was like they had the basics drilled into them and that was it. They were completely unaware of how it felt to hold a real weapon. Unaware of what it meant to stand on an actual battlefield. I guess the most appropriate term would be “militia.”

In my past life as a hero, I saw people like this all the time. They were usually some kingdom’s desperate attempt at scrounging up some semblance of military strength when they were on the cusp of folding at the hands of the demonic kingdom. Men with zero battle experience were suddenly conscripted into units and thrown out onto the front lines. Not only had I fought alongside men like this in the past, I had even led groups of them on more than one occasion. But no matter how high their morale may have been, it did not make up for their lack of training to ensure they returned home safely. In fact, very few made it back home.

The expressions they wore on their faces were also reminiscent of the ones I saw during my days as a hero. They all seemed restless. A kind of tension born from being pushed to the edge and realizing this was the end. It was something beyond just desperation. These were the faces of men who had picked up their swords with a determination to protect what was important to them.

However...there was no way there would be a band of human soldiers like that here. Not in the middle of the demonic kingdom, in the lands of the Rage family. And those simple, blue clothes they wore...

While trying to swallow the storm of emotions within me, I calmly asked, “So, you want me to kill them?”

The older demon woman in front of me wore a fearless grin.

“Ha. If you can,” she replied mockingly.

What the heck are you laughing about?! The woman bore similar features as Prati so I couldn't help but glare at her with scorn.

"Contain yourself! Your bloodlust is seeping through!" Ante spoke sharply.

Yeah? So what? The woman's brownish-red eyes had an eerie glow, as though they were peering into my heart. However, the anger I felt was perfectly normal for a demon prince.

"It seems you've underestimated me quite a bit. You boasted about this 'final trial,' but this is it?" I said with no attempt to hide my disdain, pointing at the band of humans with my chin. "No matter their numbers, small fry like this are nothing more than fodder. This is a waste of time and resources. If this is just for your amusement, at least pick something a bit more tasteful."

Those were my true feelings. I chose to walk the path of taboos while avoiding needless sacrifices. Regardless, this "trial" seemed to hold no value. A bunch of weaklings lacking magic couldn't lay a finger on me. What would I prove by killing a ragtag militia? I couldn't imagine that aspect was lost on the other demons.

Am I missing something? Is there another reason for this trial? Maybe something more...sinister?

"Zilbagias, no one is underestimating your strength," a soothing familiar voice called out to me from behind. So familiar that I didn't even need to turn around to check. It was my "mother" in this life—Pratifya Rage. She was observing everything with an amused, affectionate smile. It was like she was waiting with anticipation to witness the joy on her beloved son's face upon seeing the incredible present she had prepared. "We have seen how strong you are in your training here. No one doubts that if you were dispatched to the front lines right now, you could handle any challenge with ease. But you are not a soldier of the Rage family. You are a demon prince. The risk is not worth taking, no matter how low the chances are. So before you are sent off to a real battlefield, we want to teach you something."

The sound of chain mail clinking—the footsteps of someone armed—filled the air.

"We want to show you just how annoying humans can be when bound

together with holy magic.” Prati pointed...at a hero.

He wore a well-used breastplate while wielding a brutish sword and a shield covered in scars and dents. Though he carried himself like a veteran of the battlefield, he was young—so young. Despite this, his face was as solid as a rock. His mouth was drawn tight, his brow deeply furrowed, and above all, the light in his eyes burned with anger, hatred, and resolve. It was almost like...

“Almost like looking into a mirror, is it not?” Ante sighed.

It was like I was looking at my past self. All of this made me feel uneasy. After all, how exactly had someone with a distinct hatred of demons make it this deep into the demonic kingdom’s territory? Night elf hunters stood ready to fill him with arrows, and the other demons nearby readied their spears, but the hero didn’t cower and stood tall—undaunted.

He was a shining example of a hero. It nearly brought me to tears.

“What a luxury,” the other woman said with a smirk. “Experiencing holy magic before reaching the battlefield is practically unheard of. This might be the first time in history.”

“We prepared this specifically for you, Zilbagias. It is exceptionally rare for us to capture a hero alive,” Prati explained, all smiles. “Your opponent will be this militia, led by a hero.”

I could hear my teeth grinding as I clenched them.

“Alex! Contain yourself!”

This time she was right. It would be out of character to get angry at this—as a demon prince.

So my best option was to try and pass off this anger, this hatred, as fighting spirit aimed at the hero.

“I’m at a loss for words, mother.” I somehow managed to smile. “Never in my wildest dreams could I have anticipated something this incredible!”

I looked around. Demon soldiers, family retainers, night elf hunters, beastfolk soldiers...

“I can’t wait to crush them.”

I'll kill all of you someday.

The hero's expression hardened upon hearing what sounded like ridicule coming from me.

So anyway, hello there. I'm the seventh demon prince, Zilbagias Rage.

This is my shitty life living as an enemy of humanity.

Chapter 1: The Demon Prince's Homecoming

Some time had passed since I summoned Faravgi's soul and had smoothed things over with Layla.

"Back home?"

"Yes. I think it is about time you meet the other members of the Rage family."

I was eating my night meal with Prati—the first time we had eaten together in a while. As rare as healers were among the denizens of the dark, Prati was an elite healer, so she was incredibly busy. It took her a great deal of effort to find time for our training. So outside of that, we had spent very little time together. If I was a normal kid, that kind of neglect would probably leave me heartbroken.

"Fear not. No matter how many tears you shed, I will be there to protect you," Ante declared proudly, although missing the fact that any normal kid would never meet her in the first place.

"Your first deployment has been on my mind recently," she said casually, causing me to freeze up. The rare delicacy of seafood within the castle's walls (brought here by way of ice magic to preserve it) lost all flavor in my mouth.

"Of course, we are not talking about the immediate future," Prati said, seeing my reaction. "But, as you may already be aware, Deftelos is on the verge of collapsing."

The kingdom of Deftelos. Yeah, I knew all about their situation from my time as a hero. My last battle just before the assault on the Demon King's castle had been on the front lines in a kingdom called Puroe Refshi. Deftelos was the kingdom located immediately behind theirs. By the time I had been reborn, however, Puroe Refshi had already been ravaged. This had left Deftelos completely exposed. In other words, it was the new front line. Starting last year, the demonic kingdom had stepped up their aggression against Deftelos, shaving away most of its territory. Its people were reaching the end of their rope.

"We expect to capture the capital sometime next year. Taking a capital city is

quite an honor. I believe it would be the perfect first deployment for you,” Prati said, looking at me with a sweet smile. Although I had technically already recorded my first battle, I still didn’t have any experience fighting the armies of the Alliance.

“I can hardly wait.”

Taking the capital would be quite the colorful debut, wouldn’t it? What a load of crap! I tried to keep an innocent, relaxed posture while I focused on keeping my breathing in check.

Prati chuckled. “You seem much calmer than your words let on. Most youth would be boiling over at this point.” She nodded in satisfaction.

“This woman’s airheadedness can be quite helpful at times like this.”

Y-Yeah...I guess so. The fact I was raised secluded from other demon children my age had also worked quite well in my favor.

“However, Zilbagias. If you are to fight against the Alliance, experience fighting alongside beastfolk and night elves is insufficient.”

Oh, guess we’re getting back on topic.

“Once we return to the Rage family territory, the first order of business is for you to meet those who will be fighting alongside you. You could call them your retainers.”

No thanks. The last thing I want is family retainers.

“Normally they would be demons around your age, but...in your case, those your age would be no more than children.”

“Did you forget I’m also a child?”

Prati chuckled. “As you are now, you could wipe the floor with any youth yet to fully reach adulthood.”

Hey, don’t just laugh it off. I wasn’t joking.

“But is it really okay for me to be in a group with people that are much older than me?” I asked, stuffing a piece of fish into my mouth.

Prati laughed once again. “Just so you know, there are only a handful of

people who could best me in a round of training, the family chief being one of those few.”

So there are some who can. That’s actually really surprising. The family chief must be something else.

“For someone like you, who can go toe to toe with me in training that borders on real combat, handling youths like them should be child’s play. Well, the youths in question will likely not view it the same way. So I’m sure you’ll receive quite the...reception upon your arrival.” A mischievous smile rose to her face. Apparently she was quite looking forward to it.

“You’re saying I might have to deal with more people like that guy with the fragile horns?” That idiot who claimed I didn’t kill Faravgi.

“Well, I can’t imagine the horns of anyone in the Rage family being quite so brittle.”

Okay, but the durability of their horns isn’t really the issue here. It’s whether they have a brain or not.

“Perhaps it would be best to make an example of one of them by displaying the feat once more, solidifying your nickname of ‘Hornbreaker Zilbagias’?”

Taking one of the members of the Rage family down a peg didn’t sound like a bad way of doing that... Oh yeah, by the way, that nickname of “Hornbreaker” was starting to catch on thanks to the incident with that moron. Well, it was currently between that or “the second coming of the Lustful” with Liliana and Layla being added to my retinue. I wasn’t quite sure which was worse.

But, to get back on topic, did that mean I’d have to start leading people that were weaker than me?

“It might be best if I fight alone. I wouldn’t want others to get wrapped up in my or Ante’s magic.”

“That is...true, I suppose.” Prati’s face clouded over as she recalled the times she had experienced **Constraint** herself. “You are much like Daiagias. Both in the way you fight and...other ways.”

Okay, but you’re the one who brought it up so don’t make a face like that. Like

really, how am I supposed to react to that?

“So Daiagias fights without any retainers after all,” Ante mused.

According to the reports, his preferred method of fighting was by wildly unleashing **Lust** magic and lightning magic. Having any subordinates in the vicinity would just get in his way.

“I’d like to fight the same way he does.”

“You don’t have that luxury. While it is already unreasonable for a family to send their demon prince to the battlefield alone on his first deployment, the primary purpose of this is to allow those you are leading to have an opportunity to make a name for themselves on the battlefield.”

“I...see.” Damn. Why should their achievements be my problem? All that’s doing is killing more Alliance soldiers! “I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to protect them, though,” I said, making a resigned expression. There, that should give me some leeway.

“Anyone willing to step onto the battlefield has already accepted the worst may come,” Prati replied with a casual nod, not picking up on anything but the superficial meaning of my words.

Remember that, Prati. You said it, not me. Not my fault if they all get wiped out.

But even so, it seemed killing more soldiers of the Alliance was going to be unavoidable. I was already feeling down about it. So to try and hide my building depression, I stuffed the last piece of expensive fish into my mouth and leaned back in my chair to stare out the window. Far, far away, as if to see all the way to the distant front lines...

So anyway, it was decided I’d be heading back to the Rage family territory to find some retainers of my own.

“I’ll be gone for about a month.”

“Yes sir. Thank you for your help while you are so busy this close to your departure!” Sidar bobbed his head up and down repeatedly.

I was in the night elf quarters within the castle, lying groggily on the sofa. Since I wouldn't be able to fulfill my obligations to him while I was away, I decided to take care of all the healing in one go before leaving. Although I was quite used to it by this point...I couldn't help but wonder why I had to go to such lengths to heal a bunch of night elves.

"Your little dog's adoption fee has proved quite steep, hasn't it?"

Don't word it like that.

The "dog" in question gave a pitiful whine. Liliana was still quite terrified of Sidar and the other night elves, so I really wanted to leave as soon as possible...but the damage I'd sustained from all that healing had robbed my legs of their strength. Liliana had jumped on top of me and shoved her head between me and the sofa, as if that was enough to hide her. Well, it hid her head but not much else. I started to stroke her hair, hoping it would calm her down, even just a little bit.

But even ignoring the quantity, the healing needed today had been pretty rough.

"Having your face crushed like that looked quite painful."

I had been afraid that taking it all at once would knock me out. That's why I had decided to do it in two phases, but I think that might have made things worse. I could still smell blood in my nose. The price for my healing was working as my private guard for a limited time...so this guy better get ready. I was gonna work him to death.

"Thanks to you, we have given many promising youths their futures back. I cannot help but stand in admiration of the nobility present in your spirit, Your Highness. Ah, shall I fetch you something to drink?"

Sidar laid on the insincere praise, rubbing his hands together with a forced smile like some kind of shady salesman. He had once been in charge of all interrogation procedures of the prisoners within the castle. But after the backlash he had received for letting Liliana free based on his sole judgment, he'd relinquished the position. That left him effectively unemployed, but in exchange he had been given the sole right to negotiate with me regarding the circumstances of our healing arrangement. So he was acting like even more of a

big shot than he ever had before.

“Some cold mint water, then. Lots of honey. Fast.”

“As you wish!”

One look from Sidar sent Veene—who was waiting quietly at the edge of the room—dashing out.

You’re not even going to get it yourself?

Even though they were related, he still treated her rather brusquely. Now I felt bad for rushing him.

Although I had spent five years living in the Demon King’s castle, I knew very few people. Since the lich Enma had been sent to the front lines to clean up some bodies, the only other person I really had any contact with outside the Demon King’s family was the king of the dark dragons, Oruphen. And I had zero reasons to say goodbye to him. I didn’t really need to say anything to my siblings either. They’d probably suspect it was some kind of political move.

So instead my next stop was the Demon King’s office.

“I heard the story. Back to your homeland, is it?” the king said, glancing up from his pile of paperwork, the pen in his hand not so much as slowing.

“Yes. Though it feels odd to say that when I was born and raised here in the castle.”

“I suppose it would. Even so, Prati plans to send you to battle? At your age? Unbelievable,” he muttered, a rough expression on his face. “Even I didn’t see the battlefield until I was fully grown.”

“I also feel it is...a little early.” But since it was bound to happen eventually, I suppose it was better to get it out the way sooner rather than later. If I brought down the demonic kingdom sooner, the Alliance may suffer fewer losses. “I heard it is because Deftelos is on the verge of collapsing.”

“Indeed. We will probably launch the attack on their capital next year, as soon as the snow melts,” he replied, as if looking for a response out of me.

“According to our spies, the Holy Church is in quite the panic. It’s a shame none

of that work is going to pay off for them,” the king sneered.

“It’s not?”

“No. The Izanis family’s army has been progressing. Not only have they already taken all the land that we’re after, but they are also closing in on the capital. Their advance will likely stop in the next few days.”

The Izanis family army. So that green bastard’s still making progress.

“My understanding was that our military policy was to avoid choking the life out of the Alliance. Why did you allow the Izanis family to go so far?”

According to *Founding of the Demon Kingdom* written by the first Demon King, demonic society would break out into internal strife the moment the opportunity arose and would lead to its downfall. This was why having constant external enemies to fight was a necessity. If the Demon King’s armies went all out, they’d take over the entire continent in no time and would be left with nothing to do. As such, the advance of the demonic armies was strictly controlled...so why had the Izanis family been allowed this exception? I figured my question was normal enough for a demon prince.

But the Demon King looked at me with something of surprise before breaking out into a hearty chuckle. “I suppose Prati hasn’t told you anything, has she?”

The king’s statement caused me to pause before answering with, “Told me what?”

“The Izanis family will be stopping its advance just outside the capital. That means it will be up to someone else to take their place and actually take the city, doesn’t it?”

The Rage family. My first deployment. That was why I was going to the Rage family territory...oh.

“Taking a capital city is quite an honor.” Prati’s words came back to me. *No way...have the Rage family really been pulling the strings just so they could get that honor for themselves?*

“Looks like you’ve figured it out. Right now, Aiogias’s faction is winning honor after honor, disturbing the equilibrium between them and Rubifya’s faction.

Having a family outside their conflict to be the ones to take the city would be ideal. But, a matter of this nature isn't something just any family would be capable of. As I mentioned before, our spies have indicated there will be a large-scale reinforcement of the city headed by the Holy Church."

"So if left to the wrong person, we could end up losing," I commented.

"In that respect, we can rest easy leaving it to the Rage family. After failing to save the life of my father, the first Demon King, the Rage family has not been granted an opportunity to redeem themselves in battle. A rather complex set of circumstances has led to Prati and the Rage family being given the right to take the capital."

So Prati has been hard at work behind the scenes, huh?

"No doubt to set the stage for her son. What an incredible mother she is. Astounding."

Shut it.

"If this was Aiogias I could see it, but I'm surprised the Izanis family was willing to accept that."

"Of course they weren't happy. After all, the honor of taking the capital was being plucked out of their hands, so they made their feelings heard loud and clear. In truth, the western region of Deftelos was originally assigned to the Rage family. But now, in exchange for the capital, it has been left to the Izanis family. They were allowed to keep anything they could take before the Rage family made their move."

Ah, now it makes sense why they were so aggressive. Everything they plundered they could keep.

"And naturally, they've also won quite a bit more healing quota than normal. I heard there has been quite a boost in the total healing available thanks to your unique little pet."

"Oho, all the pieces are fitting together quite nicely, are they not? The slaves meant to be spent on your training are now being shuttled elsewhere to be spent like mere currency."

The thought left me furious. Every time I thought I had saved even just a few lives, they just slipped right through my fingers.

“If that leads to us taking the capital, I’m glad to see my efforts have paid off,” I gave an ironic smile and a snort as I lied through my teeth. The king gave a wry smile of his own before retaking a serious expression.

“The reinforcements sent by the Holy Church are said to be enormous. It is possible the Sacred Tree Alliance has also stepped up to join them. You and the Rage family will be attacking a well-fortified city. Humans may be weak, but they balk at nothing when it comes to warfare. There is no telling what they will try and pull. Don’t let your guard down,” he said, staring right at me. Even though he looked down on humanity, he wasn’t underestimating them. He was very likely the strongest individual on the continent, but he wasn’t letting that go to his head. It was kind of a pain.

“I will be sure to keep that in mind.”

“Good. That said, once the Izanis family halts their advance, it will take much of the wind out of the Alliance’s sails. They will lack the energy to launch a counterattack. Plus, with so much of their food production lost, starvation will become a serious problem over the winter. Especially with so many extra forces crammed into the capital. I can’t imagine the night elves will let the supply lines go unmolested for long.”

“The demonic kingdom’s information network has really put the Alliance in a bad spot...”

No kidding. And the night elf spies are one thing. There are even human traitors working with them!

“Either way, whether fighting their last dregs or their most elite troops, the battlefield calls for nothing but our best,” I said.

“That’s a good attitude to have. Even though I said I believe it is a bit early for your first deployment, I have to admit that I’m looking forward to hearing about your results. There are no small number of warriors jealous of your honors already—even among your own family,” he said suggestively. *Is he suggesting there are some even in the Rage family who aren’t looking forward to my homecoming?* “You know what to do when that happens, yes?” he said, setting

his pen down and giving me his full attention.

I was living in a kingdom of savages. There was only ever one answer to that question.

“To silence them with my fists. But as members of my own family, it will be hard to decide how much to hold back.”

“I can imagine. It would serve you well to gain favor with the family chief. But aside from that, don’t pull any punches. Don’t show any weakness, even to your own family.” The king’s grin sent a chill down my spine. “Teach anyone who underestimates you just where they stand. Though, if you were any other prince, I wouldn’t offer the same advice. I’m fully aware of your true goal.”

For a moment I felt my blood run cold—almost frozen solid—until I quickly realized he was referring to my secret (and false) intention of taking the throne for myself. What a naive guy. I wasn’t looking for the throne at all. My sights were set quite a bit higher! On the king’s own head!

“Understood, father.” I nodded, quietly trying to hold those feelings in. “So, don’t hold back. Perhaps I should make an example out of one of them by breaking their horns.”

“Don’t do that.”

And so with all of my goodbyes complete, I left the castle behind.

+++

The demons of the ancient past lived in a stupidly small area, and their land was terrible. Their greatest wish was to have a vast, prosperous land to call their own. That was why the first Demon King had freely given away land to his subordinates. His ambition wasn’t to exalt himself, but rather to make demons more prosperous. He prioritized these gifts to those who were strong and his greatest supporters. This resulted in solidifying the western region of the continent such as areas surrounding the Demon King’s castle with the most powerful families. In contrast, the weaker families were left with whatever remained. This meant they were usually forced to make their homes in the region to the east—closer to the front lines. Though, amusingly, the eastern regions were actually more fertile than the western ones.

So, when it came to the Rage family I was born into, they were among the highest ranked families in the kingdom. They boasted a sizable territory just southwest of the castle. Apparently it was once an entire human kingdom that they had absorbed. It took the skeleton horses a bit more than a day to reach it from the castle, so while it wasn't exactly far away, it wasn't super close either. Although it would take a dragon about an hour, we were traveling by carriage for this trip. As winter was approaching, the skies were quite cold. Plus, we weren't in much of a hurry and we had to account for the large number of people we were bringing with us.

So here I was, being shaken in a carriage yet again.

"Not that there is much shaking," Ante commented.

I suppose.

Thanks to Enma's little black box, the turbulence we experienced was kept to a minimum. I couldn't help but want to apologize to the skeletons trapped inside it.

Prati, Sophia, Veene, and I were sitting quietly inside the carriage. I would have preferred to have Liliana and Layla with me, but even without taking Prati's opinion into consideration, it would leave a bad impression with the rest of the Rage family if I arrived in a carriage full of my "lovers."

I didn't care all that much about what gossip or rumors people spread about me, but Prati didn't share that indifference. On that note, when I went to report to my mother about how well things had been going with Layla, she had snapped and thrown a fit out of nowhere. Now every time she saw Layla, she just glared daggers at her. She hadn't been nearly as bothered when it was implied I'd be sleeping with Liliana, so what was it about Layla that irked her so much?

"Maybe it is an issue of self-awareness?" Ante suggested.

A mother whose criteria for caring about her son's girlfriend being about whether or not the girl is self-aware...I'm unsure how to feel about that.

At any rate, with all that having happened, I was now traveling in the same carriage as Prati. Sinking into the seat beside me, she was slowly starting to nod

off. She wasn't the type to usually lower her guard, so this was a rare opportunity for her to relax. Sophia was silently perusing the latest history books acquired from the front lines. She was really taking her time, thoroughly enjoying each page, as if afraid she might finish them too quickly.

Directly across from me was Veene, sitting at attention. As our eyes met, her pointed ears drooped a bit, her expression turning a little sad. Stuck here with the three of us, all ranked considerably above her, left her hardly any room to relax. During our previous excursion out of the castle, she had been allowed to travel with the other night elves. I had to imagine traveling with people she knew on a more casual basis was a lot more comfortable.

I wagged my eyebrows a bit, intentionally putting some pressure on her. It seemed my attack landed, as it prompted a bit of silent laughter from her before she gave up and turned to look out the window, sinking back into her seat.

"She can be strangely bold, can't she?"

Veene seemed like she was a bit...off compared to the other night elves. It made me wonder how she'd react if I angrily lashed out at her for daring to relax. Though I kept that bit of sadistic curiosity to myself. At least I would for now, in deference to Prati sleeping beside me.

As I entertained those thoughts, I turned to look out the window of the carriage as well. We had left the castle in the evening, and had been traveling for a few hours now. With nothing but starlight to illuminate the countryside, there wasn't much to see but darkness.

Being the territory under the direct control of the castle, the road was lined with farms and orchards that had already been thoroughly harvested. It was kind of a dreary sight. Every once in a while we could spot what looked like a beastfolk village, but there were never any lit lamps, so they were likely all fast asleep. The carriage was moving at an incredible pace, so the scenery passed us by with little time to enjoy it. *Hmm. There really isn't much for us to see.* I was getting kind of bored.

"Last time you had your pet cat and dog all over you, didn't you?"

For some reason Ante seemed a bit thorny today. *Ugh...I hate to admit it...but*

I've really gotten used to petting people whenever my hands are free. Whether it be Liliana, Garunya, or even Layla. Now I'm feeling kinda anxious without anyone to pet.

But there was no one I could pet in this carriage! Even with Prati sleeping, no way would I do anything like that around her even if I had someone to pet.

"Hmm. Then how about this?" Ante said, materializing before me. It was (an illusion of) the Devil God Antendeixis. An image that only I could see or feel.

"I should prove to be sufficient entertainment for you, no?" She gave a mischievous smile as she snuggled up beside me. *"Be grateful."*

You just don't want to be left out of the petting, huh?

"Quiet you."

Gah! You may be an illusion, but you jabbing me in the eyes still hurts like hell! Fine, fine. Thank you for allowing me to pet you, oh great Devil God Ante.

"Think nothing of it."

And so, with all my strength, I started stroking Ante's hair.

+++

At that time, Huh? What is going on?! Is he so desperate for a woman that he's now seeing things...?!

Veene immediately tensed up as she noticed Zilbagias stroking the air with a faint smile rising to his face. It took every ounce of willpower she could muster to keep looking out the window while praying to the dark gods that their journey would be over soon.

+++

Meanwhile, in the carriage behind them, Layla was completely immersed in studying a book written in the human writing system. Across from her sat Liliana and Garunya, both deep in sleep and snoring loudly. The soft cushions and lack of shaking in the carriage had lulled them into a comfortable snooze. Liliana was leaning on Garunya. Either Garunya was just a heavy sleeper or Liliana was too small to disturb her as the cat beastfolk maid was still so deep in sleep that she was starting to drool a little.



Layla glanced at them out of the corner of her eye with a frown as she turned the page. Only just recently had she gotten a good grasp on the phonetic characters the humans used and was now starting to get a handle on the ideographic ones. So this adult-aimed romance story turned into quite the challenging endeavor for her as she couldn't understand it at all. By the way, though it was "aimed at adults," that just meant it wasn't intended for a younger audience. It wasn't anything inappropriate.

Layla's one saving grace was that Sophia had created a special dictionary she could use specifically for this book. Any character that Sophia thought would be too difficult for Layla was written down based on order of appearance in the book. These characters were accompanied by the proper readings in the demonic script Layla was more familiar with to compare it to.

Thanks to that, Layla was somehow barely able to trudge through the book despite being a complete novice when it came to reading the human script. Right now, she was at the part of the story where the two lovers were being torn apart due to the circumstances involving their parents. Layla couldn't put the book down as she empathized strongly with the heroine.

Layla gave a heavy, longing sigh as she came to the end of the chapter. Feeling someone's gaze on her, Layla turned to see an old beastfolk lady knitting while sitting beside her. The veteran servant was looking at Layla with a warm smile.

"What a good girl you are, Layla. Even while traveling like this you're still studying." She nodded over and over, impressed. "I can't read at all you see. So in my eyes, you're quite incredible."

"N-No, I'm nothing special..." *Besides, I'm not studying, I'm just reading a love story...* "I just...really want to be useful to Lord Zilbagias as soon as possible."

Blushing a little, she gave a flustered excuse—although it wasn't entirely a lie. She was diligently studying so hard because she thought being able to read the human writing system would be useful. In a number of ways.

"How admirable. You didn't hear it from me, but I really wish that girl would put in a bit more effort. She's much smarter than I am, so she shouldn't be wasting her talent..." the old lady said, eyes shifting over to the unconscious

Garunya with a sigh. “Ah, now she’s even starting to drool. She’s going to ruin the cushions.”

“Ah, please, let her sleep,” Layla said, stopping the old beastfolk from waking her. She then pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the drool from Garunya’s mouth. “Garunya is very, very tired. She should be allowed to rest.”

Recently Garunya had been pouring every ounce of strength into her goal—becoming a Fistmaster. Every second of free time she spent on training. So at times like this, where she was stuck traveling and couldn’t do much else, resting was the right thing for her to do. She was naturally gifted physically as a beastfolk, but she still had her limits.

“I will become a Fistmaster that my master can be proud of!”

With that declaration, she had begun pushing her body as far as she could without obstructing her duties as a servant. Her strikes were getting so powerful that Layla figured they’d probably be pretty painful if she took them while in dragon form.

On that note, Layla was also learning a little bit of self-defense. Though, either because Garunya was just that strong or Layla was just that bad at using her human body, most of their training involved Layla being thrown around like a rag doll.

“B-But anyway, as long as you don’t get killed instantly, you’re pretty strong.”

The conclusion was that once she returned to her original form she’d be quite a bit stronger, so the main focus of their training was on her surviving surprise attacks while in human form so she could transform into that state.

Seeing Garunya’s relaxed, sleeping face stirred a bit of sorrow in Layla. She really liked Garunya. Ever since she had been taken in by Zilbagias, Garunya treated her with nothing but kindness. Layla couldn’t be more grateful. But...when she thought of Zilbagias’s ultimate goal, then someday Garunya too...

Layla’s fingers unconsciously tightened around her book. Even so. Layla wanted to be helpful to Alex. After wiping Garunya’s mouth one more time, Layla sat back in her seat and returned to her reading in earnest.

Meanwhile, in the western region of Deftelos.

“Looks like...we’ve managed...to survive!”

A black-haired swordswoman looked up at the sky as it took on the first signs of dawn, dropping to her knees at the realization the Demon King’s army was retreating. Around her was a sea of corpses. Among them were people with a myriad of injuries. From night elf arrows in their foreheads, to heads split open by spears, to bodies torn apart, and even some bodies burned to a crisp by magic...it was harder to find someone who was alive. She’d be surprised if there was anyone left unwounded.

This fortress was meant to be in the rear to act as a supply point for the front lines...but now it *was* the front line. They had survived the demonic assault that had lasted the entire night partially due to the death-defying counterattack, but also thanks to the group of allied forces who had been retreating that they joined up with, and additional reinforcements from the Holy Church that had arrived around the same time. If it hadn’t been for those heroes and high-ranking priests that were still relatively fresh, this fortress would have fallen long ago. But even if they survived today...

“Looks like it’s my turn,” the swordswoman muttered, the bitterness in her expression making it somewhat difficult to call it a wry “smile.”

“Oh, Barbara, you survived?” a hoarse voice called to her from behind. Turning around, she saw an old beastfolk warrior waving at her. White fur mixed with gray, his ears coming to sharp points, with a long, protruding nose—he was a wolf beastfolk of the Wise Wolf Clan, both hands all but black with blood. The blood of their enemies, of course.

“Ah, Master!” Barbara hurriedly corrected her posture. “Forgive me for showing such weakness!” Despite the old beastfolk not being her teacher, she had the utmost respect for him.

“It is nothing. Even my back is starting to hurt...” In contrast to Barbara’s formal attitude, the beastfolk gave an aloof frown. “After that assault, I half-expected to see you flat on your back. Good job on surviving! The fact we both made it is what matters!” he finished with a laugh, slapping Barbara on the

shoulder...and then pulling his face close.

“The hero is gathering our strongest,” he whispered, low enough that only she could hear. “It seems they have some sort of plan.” His sharp eyes did not show a hint of his advanced age. “I know you must be exhausted, but I will have to ask you to come with me.”

“Yes sir.” Fighting through her fatigue, she forced herself back to her feet. The battle wasn’t over yet.

In a sense, the interior of the fortress was in worse shape than the corpse-laden battlefield outside. The cramped, narrow corridors were lined with injured soldiers. There was barely any room to walk. The old master and Barbara had to be quite careful as they picked their way around the wounded. All the injured sat impatiently awaiting their turn with the healer, stifling groans and cries of pain. The human priests and forest elf mages were running around with visible desperation while trying to do as much as possible, but the exhausted expressions were palpable. It was clear they were lacking the resources to deal with this many wounded.

“Boss...” a frail voice called to them from the floor. Looking down, Barbara saw a pale-faced man looking up at her weakly...or at least, what was visible of his face was pale. Although half of that face and much of his abdomen were covered in bloody bandages, it was still a very much familiar face.

“Oh, your number didn’t come up today?” Barbara replied with the same energy as always.

“Too soon to say,” the injured man replied with a wry smile.

“You look an awful lot more handsome than last time I saw you.”

“Ha...not as much as you...”

“Excuse me? What was that?” Stooping down she poked at his yet healthy cheek, earning some pitiful whines about how that still hurt due to his injuries. Looking him over again, she noticed his dominant arm was missing from the elbow down. If that missing part was no longer attached to him, it had likely been lost somewhere on the battlefield. There were very few healers who could

handle missing body parts. And there was no telling when he'd get access to such high-level healing even if someone capable of it were around. This man would be of little use come the next battle...thus meaning he would likely not receive healing until things died down.

"Looks like I might be getting laid off soon..." he murmured, voice ripe with resignation. Men that sounded as though they had accepted their impending death was something Barbara couldn't stand.

"Stop whining!" she shouted, jabbing his forehead with her finger and earning another pained cry from him. "You still owe me like ten drinks. If you're gonna kick the bucket, do it after you pay me back!"

The soldier chuckled weakly. "No mercy, huh?" There was nothing he could do but laugh at her harsh treatment.

"I'll carry you to the bar myself if I have to, so make sure you keep it together."

"Thanks," he sighed, closing his good eye. "I'll try to get healthy enough so I can get around by just borrowing a shoulder to lean on."

"Good. Though that's another debt I'll be expecting you to pay back."

"Aha ha...don't worry, I'll pay you back in full once we're home..." The man smiled, his efforts turning to recovery. After slapping the man on the shoulder, Barbara got back to her feet. With a nod to the old beastfolk, they continued on their way.

That was just an act though, wasn't it?

Despite the confidence in the man's voice, he had been a wreck. No one would be surprised if his life slipped away after just a moment of reprieve. They could hope he would receive healing in time, but the amount of wounded was staggering. At times like this, Barbara cursed her own lack of ability as all she could do was swing a sword. Moping about it wouldn't accomplish anything, but she couldn't help feeling that way.

The beastfolk of the Wise Wolf Clan gave her a concerned glance but abstained from speaking. No...it was more like he had nothing to say. He likely shared the same feelings as the swordswoman.

Human swordswomen were actually fairly rare. Even though there were plenty of women among the ranks of heroes and priests, due to humans lacking when it came to magic, the rest of them were forced to rely on plain muscle when it came to hand-to-hand combat. They couldn't use magic to reinforce their bodies like the other races did. As such, the vast majority of soldiers and swordsmen were male. Women only reached the battlefield if they possessed exceptional talent, or if particular circumstances forced them there.

Barbara fit both of those criteria. She had a strong gaze, black hair tied back to keep it out of her way, and a face covered in scars. Well, not just her face. Her whole body was covered in them, telling stories of the countless battlefields she had waded through.

The Swordswoman Barbara—also known as the Unicorn Swordmaster, Barbara. She was truly a rare talent, possessing the abilities of a Swordmaster while still in her thirties. The nickname came from the single-horned helmet passed down to her from her ancestors, and the way she punched through even the thickest enemy armor with ease. Her undeniable talent, immeasurable foolhardiness, and frank personality had led to those around her affectionately referring to her as “Boss.” But when those same people heard she was actually of noble birth, typically they couldn't wrap their minds around it.

Barbara da Rosa. She was the second daughter of a countryside noble family...belonging to what used to be a neighboring country. Although they were weak compared to other noble families, they were still nobility. So they possessed a magical talent considerably above that of other humans...but Barbara had been born with less than zero. Even though her parents had been quite disappointed, since she had a talented older brother and sister, she was raised with a far more apathetic approach.

Maybe that was why, despite being a child of nobility, she had spurned the refinement of noble society in favor of learning swordsmanship for self-defense. Tormented by her lack of magical ability, she had compensated by devoting herself to the blade. And soon discovered she had a remarkable natural talent for the blade. By the time she was fifteen years old, her family's swordsmanship instructor could no longer even challenge her. She had refined

her body to a point unthinkable for a noblewoman.

Seeing her daughter discarding all sense of femininity, her mother had tried to put a stop to her training. She'd had one of her family's knights challenge her daughter to single combat to teach her a lesson, but Barbara had bested him with ease. Perhaps he had been holding back, but there was no excuse for a seasoned veteran to lose to a teenage girl. Her father had found the result rather amusing, and so had permitted her to continue the path of swordsmanship.

And then the armies of the Demon King had attacked, changing everything. Her father and older brother had been killed in battle, and the demonic onslaught continued. In place of her older sister, who had no experience or talent for combat, Barbara had led her family's troops to battle. Though she was incredibly skilled with the sword, she had received no training at all in command. But the army had no room to play pretend and treat her like a little princess. Barbara dived right into the front lines.

In her battles with beastfolk and ogres, at barely over the age of twenty, she grasped the essence of overcoming the laws of nature. It was said that even the greatest of Swordmasters didn't awaken until their thirties. For her to awaken so young, and as a woman no less, had her lauded as an undeniable genius.

But no matter how unstoppable she was on the battlefield, she was still only a single swordswoman. It would take more than her alone to turn the tides of the war. The army continued to lose, continued to retreat, and eventually their kingdom collapsed.

Some of her family had managed to make it out, fleeing to Deftelos, but they could hardly just settle down and live a quiet life there. They still had a responsibility as former nobility, and so Barbara entered the service of Deftelos's military.

She continued fighting, continued to bring herself right to death's doorstep, and continued to grit her teeth and fight her way back home each time. And that brought her to where she was now. Deftelos, on the brink of collapse.

"You're here."

As Barbara and the old beastfolk stepped into the underground meeting room, they saw almost everyone else had already gathered. A hero wearing magical armor covered in countless scars. A priestess with thick, dark circles under her eyes. An elven mage who was missing one of his long pointed ears—although treated with magic just enough to stop the bleeding. And a number of human and beastfolk soldiers, all Swordmasters and Fistmasters.

“Is this everyone, Sir Dogasin?” one of the Swordmasters asked the old beastfolk, clearly hoping the answer was no.

“This is everyone,” the old Fistmaster Dogasin confirmed, closing his eyes with a nod.

A heavy silence fell over the room. Barbara bit her lip. There were too many familiar faces missing from this crowd. So many that were far stronger than Barbara herself.

The door of the meeting room swung open, a lady with a pot of soup waddling into the room.

“Breakfast’s here.”

It seemed the kitchen was still hard at work despite the fighting outside. The rich, hearty soup’s aroma caused more than a few stomachs to growl.

“Ah, thank goodness.”

“Let’s eat, then. We can hardly fight on an empty stomach,” the young hero started with a wide smile, quickly dispelling the room’s dark atmosphere as everyone took dishes and began digging into the soup. It was really thick with meat and vegetables. Almost as if they had crammed every last thing in the storehouse into the dish. “We can talk while we eat. I have an idea,” the hero said, looking over everyone as he ladled soup into his mouth. “Our priest put a blessing on one of the demon soldiers.”

“I can still track him now,” the priestess added quietly.

“Apparently the target was someone close to the leader of the enemy army, the fourth demon prince Emergias...which means we now know where their leadership is headquartered.”

The atmosphere in the room grew tense.

“At this rate, just holing up in the fortress is causing us more harm than good. Either tonight or tomorrow morning, they’ll have completely overrun us. Of course, we can’t simply retreat. They’ll just take us out while our backs are turned,” the hero continued, downing another mouthful. “So I suggest we take a group of elites, use some concealing magic, and deliver a lethal yet swift blow to their leadership. Our target of course is Emergias, their leader.”

Barbara found her grip tightening unconsciously on the hilt of her sword.

“I want to ask you all to help.”

No one answered immediately, but it was impossible to miss the look in their eyes—it was impossible to miss that look of resolve.

“Everyone’s in?” The hero gave an awkward smile, pleased but still somewhat troubled.

“See? I told you this would happen,” the one-eared elf declared proudly.

“What do you mean?”

“I told him no one would refuse if he asked for help. Leonardo was certain some would elect to stay behind.”

The young hero, Leonardo, could only shrug awkwardly at the mage’s explanation. “I’m well aware of how reckless this is. I figured if we had a couple more people joining us things could work out.”

“Come on now, Mr. Hero. Are you underestimating us or something?”

“Seriously. Do you honestly think any of us are afraid for our own lives at this point?”

“How can we call ourselves men if we just turn tail?!”

“Or women, for some of us!”

The Weaponmasters looked to Barbara.

“Oh, right.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re so manly, I tend to forget...”

“Hold on, what is that supposed to mean?!” Barbara shouted back, earning a wave of apologies from the men before they all started to laugh. Things were back to normal.

“Anyway, all of this is exactly what I expected would happen,” the elven mage said, pulling a bundle of strings from his chest pocket. “So I prepared a lottery for us. In it are two winners.”

“Wait, are you saying some of us have to stay behind?”

“We can’t bring *everyone*.” The mage gave a sarcastic smile, not the least bit cowed by the Swordmaster’s criticism.

“While the attack is being launched, the forces still stationed here will need to retreat,” the priestess quietly added. “Though we will be poking the hornet’s nest with our attack, upon discovering our intention to retreat, they will surely organize an attack to pursue us. Those who ‘win’ the lottery will be asked to serve as rear guard.”

The Weaponmasters all scowled as one.

“I think you mean those who ‘lose.’”

“It really is winning in name only, isn’t it?”

“True enough,” Dogasin gave a bitter laugh.

“Okay, let’s get started. We are short on time.” The elf held out the bundle of cords, their ends kept hidden in his fist.

“Let’s see... I think I’ll go with this one.” With hardly any hesitation, Dogasin placed a finger on one of the strings. “Let’s have everyone pull at the same time.”

“Good idea. I’ll take this one.”

“Then I’ll take this one.”

Everyone began selecting a string.

“What about you? I think I’m taking this one.”

“Wait, that one’s mine. I’ve got a bad feeling about the one on the end.”

“Too bad, it’s yours.”

“No way! It’s definitely a loser!”

“I’m telling you, this one is mine!”

“Shut up already! I’ll take it then!” Barbara grabbed the string in question.

“Everyone ready? Then—”

As one, they pulled the strings from the elf’s hand. They looked around, checking everyone’s strings.

Dogasin’s string was white. The two who had been fighting over the last string were both white. White, white, white.

Barbara’s string was a dark red. Across from her was a Swordmaster with a greatsword, lamenting his own dark red string.

“Looks like Barbara and Hessel win.”

“Congratulations! Though I guess it’s more like losing, huh?”

“Too bad for you guys!”

The “losers” laughed while Barbara and Hessel scowled.

“I’m terrible at defense. Someone wanna trade with me?”

“No way. Be a man and accept your fate, Hessel!”

“You suck at running. Wouldn’t you make a perfect rear guard?”

“I’m always on edge when fighting alongside you. Kind of glad we’re on separate teams this time around.”

“So I’m the loser here after all!”

And on and on it went.

“Now then...” In part amused, in part regretful, the elven mage stood from his seat. “It’s almost time.” The casualness in which he spoke was as if declaring he was going on a morning stroll. The others quickly stood from their seats with the same casual energy. Barbara joined them, and though her hands had been clenched in frustration under the table moments prior, she now wore an impassive expression.

The hero Leonardo began lining up cups on the table. "Wine or water?"

"Water for me. Alcohol has a way of dulling my senses."

"Water for me as well," Dogasin said, followed by another black-furred beastfolk Fistmaster.

"Give me the good stuff. I never pass up on alcohol."

"No wonder you keep wrecking your stomach drinking swill so cheap it's mixed with muddy water."

"That was ages ago! I guess you're going with water, then?"

"Wine, please!"

Leonardo filled the last two's cups to nearly overflowing, laughing at their back-and-forth.

"Heroes of humanity, assemble! No foe can match our might!"

"Brave warriors, sing your spirit to the heavens! Let them witness our fight!" the two Swordmasters began merrily singing.

"Song of heroes resound. Make our hearts unwavering and bound. Warriors who drive out darkness, advance. Scatter your foes as your blades dance," another Swordmaster continued the song, smiling. It was a rather well-known anthem in the Alliance.

"Oh flames of hope, burn bright! Let our fight illuminate through the night!" Leonardo raised his cup high.

"Souls of the warriors, shine. Allow your purifying silver light...to guide," the priestess continued as if praying, raising her staff.

"May our deeds echo eternally!"

"The story of our triumph forever fervently!"

Even Barbara and Hessel joined in.

"Oh gods of light, oh laws of nature, smile upon us!"

Though it was a human anthem, the beastfolk didn't hesitate to take it up.

"No matter how dark the veil of night, there's no need to fear!"

“Our souls, our light, will cast all evil out of here!”

At some point the elven mage had pulled out a flute and had started playing.

“Together we will greet a new dawn!” Everyone was smiling brightly as they sang. “With victory and glory in our palms!”

They held their drinks high.

“For good fortune.”

“For divine protection.”

“May the spirits guide us.”

Prayers and wishes mingled as they all downed their drinks. They were all overflowing with energy and determination.

“Now, let’s go.”

With Leonardo in the lead, they left the meeting room behind. The procession of hero, priestess, mage, and Weaponmasters drew the attention of the resting soldiers. The brighter among them began to pray, giving blessings and well-wishes as they passed. Behind the fortress, they did one final check of their gear.

“We’ll go through the forest to avoid their half-encirclement. Once we make contact...well, I imagine it’ll be pretty flashy, so you’ll notice right away.”

“Right.” The priestess couldn’t help but pause before responding.

Leonardo discussed the plans with the priestess. The hero seemed as calm as always, but the priestess was clearly struggling to maintain her composure. Their conversation seemed to stall a bit.

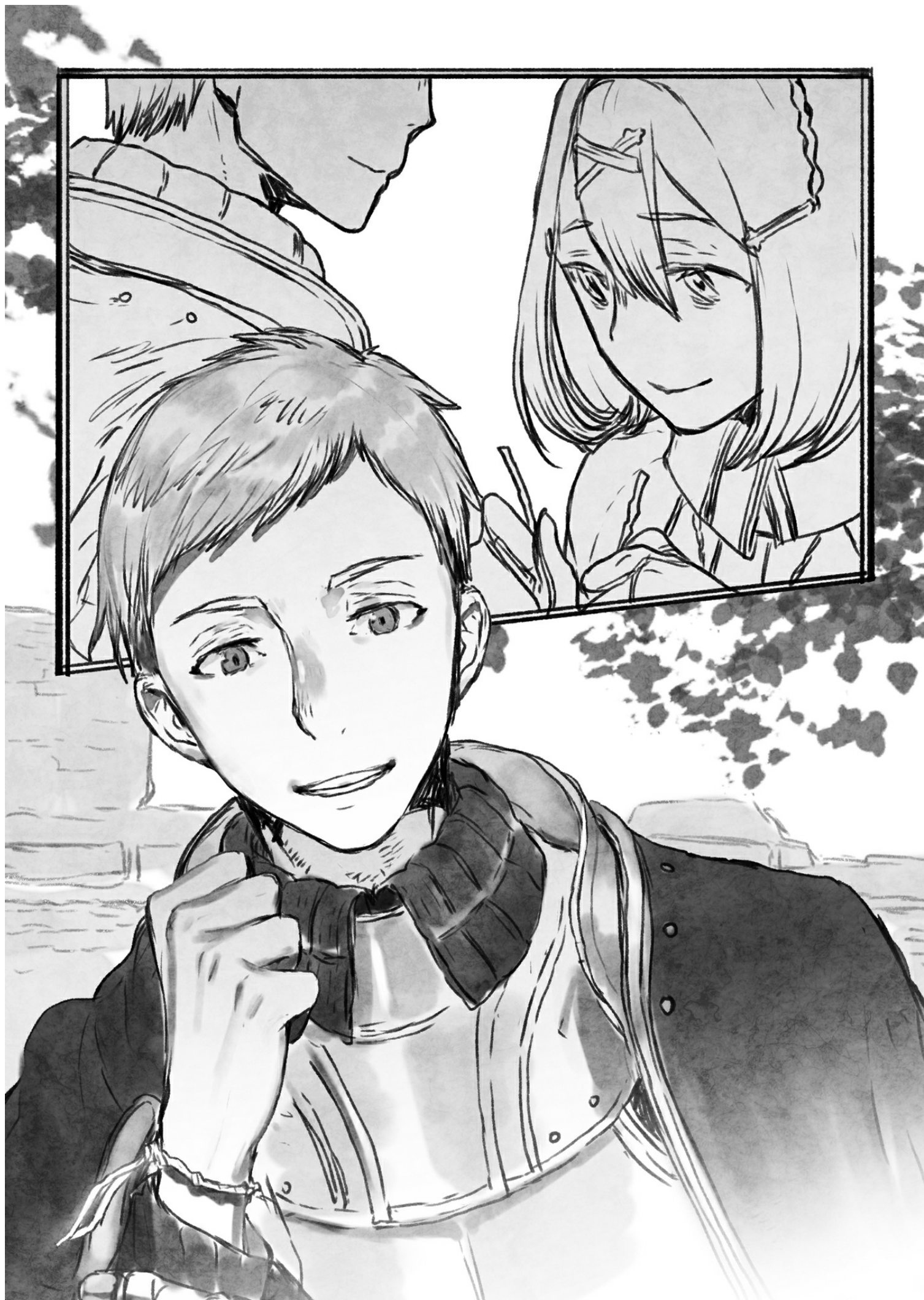
“Leo...”

“Yeah?”

“Here...take this.”

From her pocket she pulled out a small bracelet. “I wanted to spend more time on it...but I wove this together, hoping it would keep you safe. So please...take it with you.” The priestess smiled awkwardly. “And no matter what you do...please come back safe.”

“Char...” The hero Leonardo took her bracelet with a smile. “Thank you. I feel stronger already. Really, thanks.” Tying the bracelet around his right wrist, he started to flex, earning a fretful smile from the priestess he called Char. Although his demeanor was bright and cheerful...she was hoping for him to say something else.



“Master...” Barbara called out to Dogasin as she watched the exchange between those two.

“Mm-hmm. Time to go raise some hell.” The old Fistmaster gave a toothy grin. “I’ve got a real chance to carve out a name for myself. I can hardly wait.” His aloofness, together with his ferocious fighting spirit, made him feel as dependable as ever...but it couldn’t stop the tightness Barbara felt in her chest. In the brief time they had known each other, she had learned a great deal from him.

“I wish I was going with you.”

“Me too. But no matter. When I come back, we’ll have plenty of opportunities to fight together.” Dogasin held out a fist. Drawing on all the strength she had, she returned the fist bump with a smile.

“Want to take bets on who gets the demon prince’s head?”

“I’m in. What are we wagering?”

“The loser has to dance naked in the bar!”

“Oh, you’ve done it this time. Can’t wait to see you dancing in the buff!” The two Swordmasters who had been fighting earlier were now joking as if their lives weren’t soon to be at risk.

One Swordmaster with a curved blade sat with closed eyes, as if in meditation. Another was polishing the shield he held in his left hand with a small cloth. A Fistmaster was doing some meticulous stretches. One lay sprawled on the ground, enjoying the warm sunlight.

“All right then...let’s go. Please hide us.” Turning away from Char, Leonardo seemed to have little to say.

“Okay.” The priestess lifted her staff as the warriors in the attack party gathered around. Gathering what strength she had left, praying as hard as she could, Char began to chant...and the party started to grow hazy and indistinct.

“See you soon, Char,” Leonardo said, still facing away. Char’s eyes went wide with shock, but the incantation had finished. The hero and his group were no longer visible—not even their departing footsteps could be heard.

“Leo...!”

As if exhausted, Char dropped to her knees as tears rolled from her eyes. Barbara and Hessel, the two left behind, shared a look. The priestess now had no one else, so Barbara wrapped an arm around Char’s shoulders. After giving her a moment to cry...

“All right, let’s pull it together.” They needed to start making preparations for the retreat. “There’s still plenty of work ahead, right?” They didn’t have time to sit around and wallow in their feelings.

“R-Right...!” Gathering herself, Char wiped the tears from her face and staggered to her feet, making her way back to the fortress.

The party ran as a group through the forest under Char’s concealing veil.

“You sure that was okay?” one of the Swordmasters whispered to Leonardo.

“What was?”

“At the very least you should’ve given her a hug and a kiss.”

“We’re not like that.”

“Seriously?” one of the usual duo exclaimed.

“We were sure you two were like this,” the other of the duo said as the two linked their pinkies together.

“There’s no telling when we might die, right? It’s better this way.”

One of the Fistmasters slapped a hand to his own forehead with a groan. “That’s exactly *why* you’re supposed to be close like that!”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve gotta be joking...”

“Huh? What?” Leonardo suddenly felt at a loss, being stared down by so many critical looks.

“You’ve known them for a while. Why didn’t you say something?” another Swordmaster asked, turning to the elven mage, whose one good ear wagged unhappily.

“Trust me, I’ve tried. I’ve had to watch their nonsense from sunrise to sunset every single day. The more I encouraged them to come together, the more they pulled away from each other. What was I supposed to do?” The elf gave Leonardo a dirty look, who could only respond with a confused shrug.

“Anyway, I’ll talk to her when we get back,” Leonardo said, looking forward again. “This plan may be very risky, but I have no intention of dying for nothing,” he declared.

“Heh. You said it.”

“Let’s get this done and dusted so we can head back.”

The Swordmaster duo answered, not a hint of fear in either of their expressions. No...that went for everyone. They all wore fearless smiles as they ran.

Running wide to get around the demon encirclement of their fortress, they made it into the fortress. Dogasin, running at the head, sniffed.

“Smells like cat.”

“Looks like they’ve set patrols wide,” another of the dog beastfolk Fistmasters confirmed.

“We’ll take the lead. I have the right.”

“The left is mine, then.”

With the sharp sound of a cutting wind, the two Fistmasters vanished.

“Jeez...”

“They’re fast.”

The Swordmaster duo muttered. Though the rest of them were running quite quickly already, the physical abilities of beastfolk—and Fistmasters, no less—were on an entirely different level.

“Glad they’re on our side.” Leonardo grinned. “But we can’t fall behind.”

They couldn’t afford to lose here.

We’ll stop their advance, and everyone will escape...

She would escape.

+++

Within the depths of the forest, someone was hiding among the branches of the trees—a cat beastfolk. Dressed in dark greens and browns to blend in with the environment, he hid and kept an ear and eye on the activity in the surrounding area. Every time the wind blew and rustled the nearby leaves, his ears twitched. This was one of the lookouts posted by the Demon King’s army. Though it was a long shift, there was no sign of the lookout lowering his guard.

The wind blew once more. The lookout kept his eyes peeled and his pupils wide to pierce through the darkness of the forest. Behind him crept a gray shadow. With a quiet thunk—so quiet that it was barely audible—a fist struck the back of the lookout’s head. Blood spurted from the lookout’s ears and nose as he fell forward, slipping out of his perch in the tree.

The old beastfolk Fistmaster gave a grunt as he caught the falling body out of the air, guiding it gently down to the forest floor. That beastfolk was the old master, Dogasin.

After delicately placing the corpse down, he turned his head up and sniffed at the air. Kicking off the ground, he launched himself back up into the foliage, dancing between the branches like the wind slipping through the leaves.

There. A night elf sat on another branch, wearing a heavy robe to block out the sunlight. Whether by coincidence or by some instinctual prediction of his impending death, the night elf looked up just as Dogasin appeared in front of him.

“Wha—” One hand reached for a knife, the other for his whistle, and then another thunk. Before his hands could grab his tools, a quick strike snapped out and struck his forehead. Blood spurted from the night elf’s eyes, nose, and ears as Dogasin gently guided the fresh corpse to the ground.

I was spotted? Guess I still have a long way to go.

Muttering to himself silently, Dogasin returned to sniffing the air. It seemed they had disposed of almost all the lookouts. Hiding the body in the shadow of a tree, he ran through the forest once more—a fierce wind looking to rejoin its

comrades.

While the “old master” Dogasin was a veteran of countless battlefields, in truth, obtaining the rank of Fistmaster had been a fairly recent acquisition. He had awakened his powers only a few years prior. It was possible he was lacking in talent as a Fistmaster. Any normal beastfolk would have wallowed in lament of their failure and abandoned their goal, or else their skills and abilities would have lapsed—long before they reached his age. But Dogasin had never given up. Even as he watched the young Fistmasters surpass him, he endured the ridicule as he earnestly continued to refine his own skills, until eventually he climbed to the same plateau as them.

In honor of his unshakable spirit, willpower, and tenacity, he had earned the moniker “old master” out of respect. And after awakening as a Fistmaster, he continued to further sharpen his skills. Instead of declining with age, he was ascending to a level others considered to be divine.

“We’ve cleaned them out,” Dogasin reported to his comrades. People under the same concealment spell could vaguely detect each other, so by following their smell, he was easily able to reunite with his allies. The Alliance’s gratitude for having the dog and wolf beastfolk on their side was immeasurable.

“How’s the enemy’s position?”

“Fast asleep,” the other dog beastfolk replied to Leonardo’s inquiry. “We cleaned out the forest, but we haven’t touched the towers in the main camp or the demon sentries.”

Now what?

“Any idea on the prince’s location?”

“Not exactly. But there was one heavily guarded tent that seemed much fancier than the others.”

“Any flag or crest visible?” the elven mage asked.

“A solid black flag, and a green flag with gold embroidery on it.”

“More than eighty percent chance that’s the Izanis flag. That should be

Emergias's tent."

"Good. That's our target, then. Let's be flashy about this. And it goes without saying, we are all making it back home safe and sound...together."

Leonardo held out a fist. Everyone—even the elven mage—put their fists together with his as ferocious smiles rose to all their faces.

"Let's do this."

Swords were drawn. With the lookouts silenced, they dashed between the shadows of the trees, past the outer lines, and toward the center of the camp—where among the sea of tents sat one larger than the rest, flying a green flag.

It was two hundred paces from the tree line. It was far and tightly guarded by bow-wielding night elves wearing robes to block the sunlight, and demon warriors armed with spears. Though this was the heart of the night for denizens of the dark, the prince's guard was unfortunately anything but lax.

"A rather passionate bunch."

"They aren't on our level, though."

"True enough. Let's go say hello, then."

With a wry smile, Leonardo nodded to the mage. Magic burgeoned from both of them.

"Spirits of nature, guard us."

"Gods of light, turn your gaze onto me."

The concealing magic...

"Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!"

May your holy light shine in my hands!

...shattered.

"Death to the dark!" the men roared as one.

"We're under attack!"

“What are those lookouts doing?!”

As the hero's party dashed out from the trees, the demons took immediate notice of them as one night elf reached for his whistle while the others prepared their bows. Before the whistle even touched his lips, one of the dog Fistmasters fired off a small rock. Launched forward by a punch in midair, the rock made an explosive sound as it transformed into a deadly missile—soaring through the air and leaving a trail of steam behind it. Not only did the projectile smash through the alarm whistle but also the night elf face behind it.

“How dare you!” The remaining night elves drew back on their bows. Their lethal barrage was dead-on. One could hardly tell it had been an instant response to a surprise attack. But the old master Dogasin leaped forward to protect his comrades. His hands and feet drew wide arcs through the air, gently and calmly as if it were all a dance. The rain of arrows moved in accordance with his hands and feet...

“Let me return these to you.”

...before twisting unnaturally in the air to fire back at the archers.

“What?!”

The returned barrage of night elf arrows left very few unscathed. Most fell to the ground, their own arrows protruding from their necks. One who had barely managed to avoid being fatally wounded drew his whistle and blew hard, the sharp sound ringing through the camp. The camp immediately began to stir as the resting demons rose to battle.

“Damn you!”

“Kneel, worms!”

The demon spearmen attacked next. One attempted to throw a curse on them, but—

“Let us pass through, veiled from these cursed words.”

The elven mage's wards thoroughly deflected it.

“Incinerate!” Another demon lifted his spear, a gout of flame bursting from it akin to a dragon's breath.

“Oh great flame!” In response, Leonardo lifted his sword, a silver-white fire erupting from it to contest the coming blaze. In appearance alone, the demon’s flame was much larger—much more intense—but the holy magic of Leonardo’s bit into it like a ferocious wolf. A massive explosion rocked the scene as both flames were extinguished. And in the aftermath—

“Advance!” The Swordmasters’ blades lashed out.

With a single step, all common sense was defied. Piercing through the lingering residue of the explosion, the Swordmasters were on the demon spearmen in an instant.

One of the young demons was taken entirely by surprise. The dual-wielding Swordmaster in front of him lifted his blades, a calmness to him like he was no more than polished steel himself.

“I am—” The demon’s mouth was agape—starting an incantation—but at the same time, the two blades flashed. One severed the spear held in defense, the other separated the demon’s head from his shoulders. His disembodied head tumbled through the air while still wearing an expression of shock, his mouth still working as if to finish his incantation.

“Shit! They’re Swordmasters!” another demon roared, his spear ablaze. Honestly, it was quite a late realization considering the Fistmaster feats they had witnessed before. They should have been well aware of what they were up against. *“Stay away!”*

As if partaking in a stage performance, fire erupted from the demon’s mouth—attempting to ward off the Swordmasters. However, one of them managed to easily dance around the flame, his shield keeping him unharmed as the other hand brought his curved sword to bear.

The demon grunted, lifting his spear to defend. A sharp metallic ring filled the air. The Swordmaster’s clothes fluttered as he leaped backward after the single exchange, the demon firing a protective blast of flame from his hands as he did the same.

“D-Damn, that was close...!” Realizing he had barely survived, the demon broke out in a cold sweat. *No number of lives is enough to engage a Swordmaster in melee combat!*

As that thought crossed his mind, the dwarven-made magic spear he was wielding split in two.

“Ah, my spear!” And shortly after, his abdomen followed suit along with spraying blood. “D-Damn...y-you...” Without the blade even reaching him, a deep gash now adorned his midsection. That was why the Swordmaster had pulled back—he had already won. The demon dropped to the ground as if already dead, a line sliced cleanly from the bottom of his torso up through his chest, punching through ribs and into his heart.

“Damn you!” an older demon raged, seeing two of his young companions cut down. *“Rot away!”*

The seasoned veteran had no fear for the Swordmaster before him. As always, he opened with magic to weaken the enemy. Ominous, dark green curses erupted from his hands, lashing out at the Swordmaster like a horde of venomous snakes.

“Spirits of the wind, cast away this gathered filth.” But they were scattered by the purifying winds called by the elven mage in the rear.

“My thanks!” The Swordmaster grinned, a slender man with a straight blade and a small shield polished to a mirror finish. He then turned that smile on the demons. The demon clicked his tongue, but was otherwise not overly disturbed by the interference. On guard against the magic retaliation, the Swordmasters’ advance had slowed. That gave the seasoned demon warrior more than enough time to regain his footing.

“Die!” Pouring magic into his spear, the demon coiled himself like a spring before shooting forward. But, with ease, the Swordmaster deflected the full force of the blow. As he knocked aside the approaching spear point, the Swordmaster dashed forward—but the demon was ready. Digging his front foot into the ground, he kicked up a cloud of dirt into the Swordmaster’s face. Then, in time with his distraction, he brought his spear down—

“Guh...”

But the Swordmaster only flicked his wrist, his blade flashing before his eyes just long enough to deflect the incoming sand and debris. In retaliation, he lifted his shield, its mirror finish catching the light of the sun and reflecting it

right into the demon's eyes.

"Gaaah?!" as the demon swung his spear, he cried out, blinded by the light. Although he was only unable to see for a brief moment, that was fatal when facing a Swordmaster.

"No complaints of cowardice, I presume?" whispered a voice in the blinded demon's ear.

"Damn you—" Before he could finish his curse, the demon's head was separated from his body.

With the guards dispatched, the hero's party pushed their way into the large tent.

"He's not here!"

"This is just the meeting area!"

Contrary to their expectations, it was empty. Instead of a sleeping prince they had found a circular table, a large map, and piles of documents—nothing more.

"Oh great flame!"

Setting the papers ablaze, they headed back outside. The amount of time lost was devastating. Would they keep searching for the prince, pull back, or just wreak as much havoc as possible? No...they didn't have the luxury of making that choice for themselves.

"Swordmasters!"

"They're strong! Keep your distance!"

"Get the mage first!"

They'd have to wreak as much havoc as they could while searching for the prince!

Roused by the alarm whistle, demon soldiers had begun pouring from all the surrounding tents. However, most of them were in sleeping attire. A choice they seemed to be regretting as they hurried out without getting fully equipped now that they saw they were up against Swordmasters. Even light armor would be a futile choice, but it would have been better than fighting half naked.

As Leonardo's group emerged from the meeting tent, they were already surrounded, and a battle of magic began.

"Kneel!"

"Be crippled!"

"Writhe in agony!"

Curses fell on them like rain.

"Oh great blessings!" Leonardo roared, lifting his shield high as a silver light enveloped his group.

"Veil us from these wicked curses!" The elven mage desperately added his own wards to the mix. Grouped tightly together their party was able to advance slowly, but with the demons keeping their distance, they were at somewhat of a deadlock. The Swordmasters were ready to pounce whenever the opportunity came, but separating from the group meant leaving the safety of the magical protection. Doing so would mean diving head first into the curses, so they needed to avoid any recklessness.

"What is this? You call yourselves demons?!"

"Man, sure looks like a bunch of cowards. Don't you agree, bro?!" the usual Swordmaster pair declared loudly, giving exaggerated shrugs while mocking their enemies' caution.

"We finally came all the way to their base to say hello."

"And here they are, standing around like idiots! What a waste of time!" one spat, his face the textbook definition of scorn.

"What, are those spears just for show?"

"Maybe you should trade them in for walking sticks!"

"At least then you'd be safe when your knees start to wobble!"

"That's what's going on now, right? Why else would you be stiff as a board and mumbling to yourselves?"

The two started to laugh uproariously.

"Waaaah, mommy! The Swordmasters are so scary!"

“There there, little baby, I’ll teach you a nice little curse.” One whined in a high-pitched voice like a child, while the other “soothed” him with a gross, motherly falsetto. *“De Mon Be Week! Speer Be Com Wok Stick!”*

“Oh, look everyone! Mommy taught you a handy-dandy curse!”

“Now let’s say it together! Show us the magic you’re so proud of!”

“No need to be afraid of those scary Swordmasters anymore!” The two continued to roar with laughter.

The camp was deathly quiet. The demons watched the charade with blank expressions. No...it wasn’t that they were expressionless. It was that their faces were drawn so tight they couldn’t make any expression. Little by little, their faces grew darker and darker...

“Kill them!” With bloodshot eyes, the half-naked demons began to rage with the younger ones leading the charge. The older demons tried to stop them, deriding them for falling for such obvious provocation, but their efforts were in vain.

The two Swordmasters pulled themselves together, finally letting go of their laughing fit...raising their shields with ferocious smiles. But even those smiles quickly vanished as the two took up mirrored stances, sword and shield at the ready.

Their stances were identical, like the two Swordmasters had been cast in the same mold. Unlike other Swordmasters, any individuality or personality was not present in their swordsmanship. But that was to be expected. The two of them had awakened after serving as common rank-and-file soldiers. They had reached perfection in the human standard swordsmanship, transcending it to overcome the laws of nature. And the heart of human swordsmanship was coordination.

“I’ll follow your lead.”

“Got it.”

The formation of two charged into the throng of enraged demons. Magic spears were knocked aside by plain wooden shields. No, they were shattered by them. The Swordmasters stepped in. Solid, precise, with no wasted movement,

their blades pierced hearts and sliced necks—the crowd of dozens was reduced to a pile of corpses in the blink of an eye.

“D-Damn them...!”

“Those...those idiots!”

“Don’t let them escape! They don’t deserve swift deaths!”

Finally, the more experienced demons were overcome with rage. Rather than losing their cool, they began with a new barrage of magic.

“Ugh...*Spirits of nature, grant us protection, cast aside these cursed words!*”

“*Oh great blessings!*” The elven mage strained under the weight of their magic as Leonardo desperately tried to support him.

“Kill them all!”

“Die, grass muncher!”

At the same time, a newly arrived band of night elves gleefully fired a volley of arrows at the elven mage. But the mage still had Dogasin and the other Fistmasters at his side.

“My, aren’t you popular today?” Dogasin gave an aloof laugh as the night elf hunters fell at the hands of their own arrows. Reinvigorated, the elven mage smiled, returning to his incantations—

“*Rip apart.*”

At that moment, he heard a whisper in his ear. Something sliced at the mage’s face, causing him to cry out in pain. It was a shallow wound, but nevertheless it stunned him. Somehow a curse had sneaked through the protection of the wind spirits and reached him. It was like someone had chanted the curse from just behind him.

Suddenly, an overwhelming presence emerged from behind the throng of demons.

“Looks like they’ve been pretty rough on you,” the new arrival sighed as he looked over the mountain of corpses. A demon with green hair, fully armed and armored. Even though they had never seen him before with their own eyes,

they knew exactly who he was. This was their target.

The Fourth Demon Prince, Emergias Izanis.

“Your Highness!” More demons poured out from behind the green-haired prince. They were similarly fully armored. They moved with the calculated precision of a practiced formation. And though they didn’t match the prince, they each had a strong magical aura.

The elites...!

Holding a hand to the wound on his face, the elven mage’s expression turned dire. These new arrivals were on another level compared to the half asleep and half dressed demons they had been fighting.

“We’ll handle this. Get back!” a female soldier at Emergias’s side ordered. Like the prince, she also had green hair—meaning they were likely related.

Luckily, the crowd of demons heeded her words and pulled back. No matter how terrifying the Swordmasters were, they couldn’t afford to shame themselves by fleeing. But if they were being ordered to back off, they had an out. In their place, the prince and his elites moved forward.

But this is the exact opportunity we were looking for! Meanwhile, Leonardo was pumping himself up. Thinking about it, the target of their assassination had willingly shown himself. They had saved a lot of time looking for him.

The hero’s party shared a look.

“Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!”

May your holy light shine in my hands!

Leonardo unleashed all the power he had been holding back.

“Aigia A Lumaturasu!”

Divine Armor of Champions!

A powerful blessing wrapped itself around the party, a cloak of light filling the Swordmasters and Fistmasters with new strength. They had to put a swift end to this.

“Ha. You’re wasting your time.” But the demon prince was unfazed, only sneering at them. *“My name is Emergias Izanis, Fourth Demon Prince!”* Magic surged from the prince, so thick even the humans could see it.

“Aposarusurosui.”

Weather away.

A mighty gust whipped up around them, so heavy with magic that it distorted the view of the hero’s party. Unsurprisingly, the powerful display filled them with hesitation.

“Spirits of the wind!” The elven mage wasted no time in uttering his own prayer, nullifying the curse with his own purifying wind. Or so he initially thought. But...

It’s tearing apart the purifying magic?!

The mage felt goose bumps rise on his skin. He had barely managed to defend against it, but the prince’s attack had been a horrendously powerful dispelling curse. Even with their holy magic and wards, it would have left them all but completely exposed to the magic of the demons. They’d have the feebleness of infants. Unless he stepped up his game as the party’s mage, they’d be wiped out in an instant.

“Ah. So you’re the real problem,” Emergias smirked, turning his attention to the elven mage.

Sensing something ominous brewing, Leonardo wrapped his blade in holy fire and roared, “Death to the dark!” The blinding inferno lashed out at the demons. Naturally it was deflected by their defensive magic, but for a brief moment, it had blocked their vision.

The Swordmasters caught the signal and leaped into action. They were now prepared for the magic they would have to face. No matter how many of them died, as long as they got the prince...!

“Aposarusurosui.”

“Wind of cleansing!”

The elven mage was undaunted in his attempts to ward off the prince’s dispelling wind. Their powerful magics intertwined, tore into each other, and dispersed.

“Be crippled! Petrify!”

“Oh wind, ensnare their filth!”

The prince’s personal guard launched curses at the hero’s party once more, striking the charging Swordmasters head-on. But the holy light around them absorbed the curses, dispersing along with them. Although they had been stripped of their protection, it had done its job. The distance between the Swordmasters and the demons had been closed.

The sharp ringing of metal on metal filled the air. The demon guards were barely able to defend against the Swordmasters’ strikes. Without a care in the world, Emergias wrapped his spear in magic—the intensity so great it was even visible to humans—deflecting the incoming blades. A number of the demons were unable to fully protect themselves against the assault, armor and chain mail tearing apart around them...but none were killed. As the wounded wasted no time retreating, they were promptly replaced by fresh troops.

These guys are good.

They’re strong even without magic!

It doesn’t matter! Push!

Though sensing their dire situation, the Swordmasters continued to reach for Emergias.

Leonardo roared again, *“Oh great blessings!”* Pushing himself to his limits, he strained to share his power with the Swordmasters, barely managing to keep them within his protective veil. If this was a simple bout via hand-to-hand

combat, their chances of winning would be much greater. The Swordmasters continued delivering blows faster than the demons could chant their curses, and the enemy's guard slowly began to crumble. As they pushed their advance, some of the demons finally started to fall. They could do this. They *had* to before more reinforcements arrived.

We're doing it! At this rate—

They could win. With this momentum behind them, they could take down the prince. The elven mage was filled with exultation, maintaining the circulation of his magic around the party.

"Quite the powerful magic you got there. I gotta say, you're pretty good," came that whisper in his ear again.

He looked to the side, startled, but there was no one there. No, that voice...

"You aren't an ordinary forest elf, are you? Looks like you've got some high elf blood."

Though dozens of paces away, it was the voice of Emergias. The elven mage could see the prince's lips moving.

"I'm jealous." Even at this distance, Emergias's words were clear—as if the prince were standing right beside him. *"So envious. Jealous of that power you were born with."* The prince's voracious, hateful gaze bore into the elven mage. *"Here you are, powerful enough to go toe to toe with me. And you didn't even need a pact with a devil!"* A sly, venomous light shone in his dark eyes. *"I'm jealous. Envious. I want that for myself...!"*

His eyes were like twin voids, endless pits that sucked in all light, never to escape. And within it all, the elven mage could sense a terrifying madness.

Stop it! The mage came back to his senses. What was he doing listening to the prince's mutterings?! This was a curse! He couldn't allow those words to pry their way into his heart.

"Surrender." The magical wound on the elven mage's face began to burn.

"Gah...!" Strength left the mage's body, a wave of dizziness rocking him. If not for Dogasin at his side, he would have fallen to the ground. It was like...the

world had suddenly lost all color.

The prince laughed, a sadistic smile on his face as his presence grew even stronger. “*Aposarusurosui.*” In an instant, his cursed wind returned to attack the Swordmasters.

“Purifying wind!” the elven mage shouted but was only met with confusion. His words, his incantation...they were powerless. His magic...didn’t work? “This is bad!” His shouts were now more like screams.

The prince’s cursed wind struck Leonardo and the Swordmasters. The holy light protecting them was shredded like fog in a gale.

“What...?” A similar look of confusion struck Leonardo.

“Now! Get them! *Be crippled!*”

“*Petrify!*”

“*Rip apart!*”

Curses surged forth from the prince’s elite guard. The fierce efforts of the Swordmasters immediately ground to a halt, at least for those who weren’t torn apart from the outset.

“Guh... Don’t...underestimate...us!!!” Even as blades of wind slashed his stomach, the dual-wielding Swordmaster cut down the demon before him, spitting blood as he charged for Emergias.

“*Rip apart.*” That one utterance by Emergias spawned a whirlwind that sliced him and his blades to pieces, both dropping to the ground drenched in the Swordmaster’s own blood.

Using the falling body as a shield, the Swordmaster with the curved blade nearly reached the prince. His blade whistled through the air as he aimed for the prince’s neck.

“Incredible physical abilities.” But Emergias was not a simple mage. He greeted the attack with practiced spearmanship. The tremendous magic in his spear deflected the attack with ease. “*Rip apart.*” Once again, that short phrase signaled the end, the Swordmaster dropping into a pool of his own blood with a wet thud.

“Protection...!” Leonardo intoned, drawing the last dregs of magic from his body. A faint silver light wrapped around the surviving Swordmasters.

“We’re not done yet!”

“This is our swordsmanship!”

The Swordmaster duo roared, charging forward with the mirror-shielded Swordmaster.

“I must applaud your bravado. It’s almost enough to move me to tears.” Effortlessly swinging his spear around, Emergias drove its point into the body below him. “But I’m afraid you stir no envy in me—not in the slightest,” he sneered. *“Aposarusurosui.”*

The heroes’ last ray of hope—that faint silver light that provided them protection—was stripped away as if it were nothing.

With one last roar, Leonardo swung his sword forward, wrapped in silver fire. But his blade only met defensive curses. With a flash of Emergias’s spear, Leonardo’s right arm was sent flying. It fell to the ground, bracelet and all sinking into the mud.

“How unfortunate.” The prince’s spear whirled, its butt driving into Leonardo’s helmet. The hero gave a sharp cry before losing consciousness, dropping into the mud alongside his arm. “Okay, I believe I’ve exceeded my fill for today. After all, I can’t take all the fun. You guys can finish this up.”

“Whoa, really?”

“Thank you, Your Highness! You’re generous as always!”

As Emergias stepped back, his subordinates rushed forward to fill the gap—as if the battle was already over.

“Don’t underestimate—”

“—us, dammit!”

The Swordmaster duo lifted their shields and charged again.

“Rip apart.”

“Be crippled.”

Curses rained down on them again.

“Veil us from those cursed words!”

Somehow, the two barely managed to weather the storm...only to see it followed up by a wave of spears.

“Dammit!”

“Cowards! Fight us without—”

Sharp thunks resounded as spearheads sank into them.

An explosion shook the air as the dog Fistmaster began firing off rock after rock.

“Whoa! Watch it!”

“Gah!”

Some of the demons were caught off guard, but there was quite some distance between them. Aside from one unlucky demon sent sprawling with a spray of blood, the rest managed to dodge or deflect the projectiles. The Fistmaster then sprang backward, scurrying back into the depths of the forest.

“Hm? Where did that elf go?” Emergias suddenly noticed something was wrong. The elven mage and his old Fistmaster bodyguard had vanished while he wasn’t paying attention.

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Elven mage on his back, Dogasin ran full tilt through the forest. Even without magical protection, a Fistmaster’s physical abilities were tremendous. A single slender elf should have been no burden at all. Should have been. But the old beastfolk ran with a strained, suffering expression, like he was carrying an enormous stone.

“Leave...me... I’m just slowing you down...!” the elf gasped, barely able to keep from biting his tongue as he was jostled by the running.

“No.” After that curt reply, Dogasin closed his eyes for a brief moment, pausing to retake his usual aloofness. “While magic isn’t my specialty, that prince did something to you, did he not? Information about the prince is vital.

Survival may bring shame to us, but we must run.”

Honestly speaking, he would have preferred to stay and fight to the death. Abandoning the other Weaponmasters, abandoning the fallen hero while he ran to safety...all of it was too great for him to bear. But as frustrating as it was to admit, without magical protection, the demons would make easy work of him in a matter of seconds. Maybe he could bring one down with him, but that would be all. So for the sake of the future, they needed to return with any information they could. Even if he was labeled a coward for fleeing, this would be far more effective than throwing away his life for nothing.

Besides, the dog Fistmaster had waited briefly, then fled in the opposite direction of Dogasin. It was likely an attempt to use himself as bait to ensure the elven mage made it back to safety. There was no way Dogasin would spurn that sacrifice.

Dogasin gritted his teeth. He had been trying to act like normal, but the moment he let down his guard, anger and frustration filled his head again.

Dammit...! Why are we so...so weak?!

He had perfected his martial art, had overcome even the laws of nature, and yet could only mourn his own powerlessness. His lack of magic. No matter how much he trained, no matter how skilled he became, a single word from a demon could take his life in an instant. It was like a child stepping on worms. Stepping on all their effort, all their resolve, all of their spirits...!

“Leave me... They might be able to track me...!” The mage was so weak, even stringing together words was proving to be a monumental effort. “In exchange, I want you to deliver a message for me...as you can guess, about the prince...”

“My memory isn’t that good, but let’s hear it.”

“He uses wind magic. I’m unaware of its activation conditions, but he could bypass the protection of the wind spirits with a curse that steals the magical abilities of his target. Before he used it, the wound he left on me started to burn, and I felt like I could hear him whispering in my ear—”

Dogasin had turned his full attention to the mage, devoting his entire brain to remembering each and every word, but was soon pulled from that attention by

a strange presence.

“Crap!” the elven mage gasped, pushing off Dogasin with all his might in an attempt to throw himself off the Fistmaster’s back.

Run. Turning around, he saw the mage’s lips move—

“Be sliced to ribbons.”

It was Demon Prince Emergias’s voice. At the same time, the air roared as hundreds of blades of wind whipped into a storm. In seconds, the elven mage had been reduced to a pile of viscera. But it wasn’t just him. Noticing Dogasin nearby, the blades turned their attention to him.

But another shrill sound had pierced the air. Moments before he had been torn apart, the elven mage had managed to pull a whistle from his pocket, and with his last breath blew hard on it. A gentle wind wrapped itself around Dogasin, warding off the malicious blades. At the same time, Dogasin felt his own presence starting to fade.

Concealing magic. No doubt, the mage had expended the last of his strength to give Dogasin a better chance of escaping.

“Thank you...!” Gritting his teeth again, Dogasin turned his back on what was once a great mage and ran. If possible, Dogasin wanted to bring back something, anything, to prove the mage had once lived. But the risk was too great with the tracking curse. Despite his broken heart, all the Fistmaster could do was leave the mage behind. He felt pathetic as he could do nothing but tuck his tail and run.

“Why...why...?!”

Why were they so weak? He could no longer keep up his aloof facade. With fists clenched so tightly they nearly burst and with tears of frustration pouring from his eyes, the old Fistmaster ran—the shadow of his shame never far behind.

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“Hm, looks like he’s dead.”

While leaning against a tree in their main camp as if about to doze off,

Emergias sensed the elven mage had taken his last breaths. The connection between the prince and the mage was now severed, and with it, the magic the prince had stolen was beginning to disappear.

Emergias the Envious. That was his nickname. Much like Daiagias's titles "the Lustful" or "the All-Loving," it was partially intended as an insult, owing to the fact Emergias couldn't hide his general discontent in his daily life. However, very few understood the true meaning behind the name.

Emergias held a true pact with Jiiria, the Devil of Envy. No doubt there was no need to explain its authority: as one's envy and jealousy grew, the greater power they garnered. Jiiria possessed the power to drag down those who you envied to a position below yourself. By letting your jealousy run wild and wishing for it from the bottom of your heart, you could steal the power from anyone you injured. However, it wasn't a perfect theft. When the original owner of the power died, that power vanished.

No matter how much you yearned for another's strength, it could never be yours in truth. That was the limit of envy. This limitation led to greater frustration, fanning the flames of envy to fuel even more power. No matter how much the enemy resisted, if Emergias could take even the slightest sliver of their power, the result would be the same—empowering him while weakening his enemy. This would cause their resistance to grow weaker, allowing him to take more of their power, until they eventually reached a state of complete powerlessness. It was not much different from a serpent slowly strangling the life from their prey.

However, as a technique that stole power from others, most demons would look down on it. Thus only a small circle of people within his own family were privy to the true nature of his power. To most people, it was merely a tremendously powerful weakening curse.

I suppose I could have let that mage live...but optics would have been annoying, Emergias thought to himself. While allowing the mage to live would have enabled Emergias to retain his power, letting someone go free who ambushed his camp would mar his reputation as a prince. So he had no choice but to eliminate him, along with the Fistmaster that had aided in his escape. His subordinates were handling the Fistmaster that had fled in the other direction.

“Your Highness, we have caught sight of the black dog. We are in hot pursuit,” the prince heard a voice at his side. There was no one there, yet a voice echoing from the distant forest was clearly audible.

“Good. Kill him. Don’t let your guard down,” Emergias replied in a similar tone.

“Understood,” the voice answered.

This was the Bloodline Magic of the Izanis family. It was called the **Curse of Transmission**. As the name suggested, this magic allowed one to send their voice across great distances to a specific target. It had a great affinity for the Izanis family wind magic. On the battlefield, it provided a means of instantaneous transmission of information to distant allies. If two people were of the same family, they could follow that blood connection to enable accurate communication while on the move. It was an incredible piece of magic that had solidified the Izanis family as master tacticians.

That said, it was undeniably rather plain and was written off by other demons for being “an errand boy’s magic.” Demons of higher rank along with the night elves understood its value, but the rank and file weren’t so understanding.

At any rate, **Transmission’s** greatest strength was not its ability to plainly send messages but to lace those words with magic. The wind would carry those enchanted words—in other words, a curse. It was commonly believed that typical curses and attack magic had a maximum range of about fifty paces. As distance grew between magic and its caster, the more it was degraded by magic latent in the environment.

But with **Transmission**, the magic in the words became remarkably solid and robust, allowing one to create even blades of wind as far as they could see. However, the curses could still be resisted and nullified just like any other if the opponent’s strength exceeded the caster’s. And when used against those weaker than yourself, you’d be insulted and called a coward for being dependent on magic. As such, there were surprisingly few opportunities to make use of it.

“Your Highness, we have retrieved some information from the target.” A night elf in a heavy hood approached Emergias.

“Good work. What did you learn?”

“Little more than what we already knew. He was rather obstinate, so we had to use drugs. That loosened his lips,” the night elf hunter said with a wicked grin. “According to him, the forces in the fortress are retreating. Their attack was merely a diversion.”

A malicious smile akin to a night elf’s rose to Emergias’s face. “Oh? Guess all I can say to them is congratulations on wasting your lives.”

“Young lord, what shall we do?” a green-haired demon at his side—one of Emergias’s direct subordinates—asked.

“Forget them. We are not allowed to push any farther.” Emergias shrugged.

Once they passed that fortress, it was a straight line to the capital. Thanks to their negotiations with the Rage family, the Izanis family were allowed to take much more ground than they had initially anticipated, but everything beyond the fortress belonged to the Rage family.

As infuriating as it is to be forced to sit back and watch while they take the capital.

The fact that it was the Rage family taking that role—the same family as his new annoying younger brother—irritated him even further. Emergias snorted as there was little reason to think about that now.

“If these guys had gone with them, we’d have let them escape too. What a waste of life.” It was both derision of the hero’s party, and pity for their own young soldiers that had been lost. “Anyway, at least it added a nice bonus to our record. Right?” Emergias joked, earning grins and nods from the Izanis soldiers gathered around him. In the end, it was the fault of any soldier that died for being weak. It was as simple as that.

“Speaking of which, what of the hero?”

“For now he is still alive...but the powerful drugs have left him mentally crippled. He just keeps moaning about wanting to return home. Would you like to finish him off, Your Highness?”

“No, it would be a waste of my time. Boil him, burn him, or whatever it is that

you people take pleasure in.” Though he had asked, he wasn’t actually all that interested.

“Yes sir. We shall dispose of him, then.” With a deep bow, the night elf took his leave.

Emergias went to retire to his tent...but stopped as his eyes came upon the corpses of the hero’s party scattered around him.

“Homesick, is he?” A cruel smile rose to the prince’s face. “Fine. Hard work deserves a worthy reward every so often. Otherwise, how else will they keep up the will to fight?”

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A column of human soldiers—most of them wounded—poured out of the fortress. Leaning on each other for support, with those in better shape carrying those in the worst, they retreated as fast as possible.

In front of the fortress, the “Unicorn Swordmaster” Barbara, along with the Swordmaster Hessel and the Priestess Char watched nervously.

“It’s quiet...” Barbara murmured, licking her dry lips. Together with a unit of armed priests, they were on guard against an assault from the Demon King’s army. However, contrary to expectations, the beastfolk and ogre armies maintaining their partial siege held their ground, refusing to budge.

“Maybe everything went according to plan,” Char responded to Barbara talking to herself, exhaustion clear in her voice. Clinging tight to her staff, as if in desperate prayer, she stared hard at the forest where Leonardo and the others had ventured out.

“Perhaps the enemy camp fell into utter chaos because they took down the demon prince?” Hessel added, tapping his great sword on his shoulder, as if trying to ease the tension.

“In that case, we’ll probably see them pop out of the forest any minute now —” Barbara responded with a matching lighthearted tone when a chill slithered down her spine. She could only describe it as intuition, an instinct that had saved her countless times on the battlefield.

Barbara's eyes snapped to the forest where she spied a speck like a grain of sand in the far, far distance. Something was racing through the forest toward them.

"Look out!" Grabbing Char's collar, Barbara pulled the priestess out of the way. And not a moment later, something thunked to the ground in the spot where she once stood. A demon's spear, pierced through something else. Something...no, it was easy to tell at a glance what it was. But none of them wanted to recognize it.

"No...!"

It was a small piece of *someone*. Someone they knew. Someone who had changed irrevocably, as if they were now no more than skewered meat.

Char's eyes went wide, shoulders heaving as she started gasping for air. They couldn't look away. Their eyes were all nailed to the point of the spear, and the arm it had punched through—and to the gore-soaked bracelet tied to the dismembered arm's wrist.

"No... No! Nooooo!" Char began to wail.

"Pathetic men and women of the Alliance!" But her screams were overpowered by another voice.

"Who's there?!"

The audible voice was not accompanied by anyone visible. Hessel and Barbara took fighting stances.

"My name is Emergias. Fourth Demon Prince, Emergias Izanis." The voice seemed to be emanating from the spear itself. *"It seems one of your lowly peons wandered into our camp, so I am returning him to you. He was quite desperate to make it back home."*

"Y-You...bastard...!" Hessel cursed, but the voice continued.

"Know your place, weaklings. You have no chance against us. Your destiny is to die meaningless deaths," the voice sneered. *"Go ahead and retreat. Prepare yourselves for the next attack. Our elites are preparing to assault your capital, you know. If you remain weak as you are now, you can try and muster what*

little strength you have to mount a proper defense. But it's pointless. You won't last more than a few days. Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Barbara lashed out at the spear with her sword, her precise strike smashing it to pieces. But the magic on the spear remained intact, its laughter still ringing in their ears.

Char was still screaming, clinging to Leonardo's dismembered arm. Hessel roared, swinging his great sword at the sky. All Barbara could do was squeeze her hands around the sword in her hands, trembling.

She felt so angry. So full of hatred. So...powerless.

Chapter 2: Home of the Rage Family

“Ah, looks like we’re in Rage territory now,” Sophia said as she looked up from her book to peer out the window.

The magically infused signpost they passed rapidly disappeared into the distance. These kinds of signposts were usually posted at significant spots throughout the demonic kingdom. While they served as sturdy points to mark the road for travelers, their real purpose was to act as waypoints for the skeletal horses to follow. It’s thanks to Enma’s lectures that I learned that. Despite having less intelligence and conscious awareness than a real horse, those signposts allowed the skeletal horses to still travel all but autonomously down the main roads. In terms of the magic used to make the horses, I had learned a thing or two myself. Though I wasn’t sure when I’d ever be able to make use of that knowledge.

“Magic-forged roads, magic signposts...you can really tell this kingdom was made by the magically inclined. Ah, yes, that’s the spot...”

Here? You like that?

“Ahhhhh...”

Feeling exceptionally bored in the carriage, I pet (the illusionary) Ante while watching the scenery flash by. Now that we were in the land of the Rage family, that scenery was starting to change a little.

Within the territory directly under the king’s control, aside from the occasional beastfolk village, we saw ruins of former human cities, old abandoned forts, untamed forests, and withered fields. In a way, the area had a desolate feeling to it. Almost like the rulers of the area had been unable to maintain the upkeep.

In contrast, the Rage territory boasted organized fields and orchards as well as plenty of settlements with uniformly constructed dwellings. It gave a much more “cultured” vibe.

The Rage family territory had one other feature that set it apart from the other territories: the number of humans living there. And when we came to rest in one of those settlements, the painful reality those humans lived became abundantly clear.

“Welcome to our humble dwelling, Archduchess.”

Stopping in a village surrounded by walls made of hefty logs—which kinda made it look like a fortress—we were greeted by what appeared to be white tiger beastfolk. They must have known of our arrival as drinks and a light meal were laid out and ready for us, almost like we were having a picnic.

“I suppose this is your first time on one of the farms, isn’t it, Zilbagias?” Prati said, the thought suddenly occurring to her as she took a sip of tea.

A farm...?

“As you know, the Rage family territory produces the greatest amount of human slaves in the kingdom.”

Produces...?

“We have farms like this all over, specialized in efficiently breeding and raising them.”

Raising...b-breeding...

“Alex! Calm down! Keep yourself in check!”

What are you talking about, Ante? I’m...totally calm... I learned about this a long while ago. Why would I be angry now...?

“What’s wrong, Zilbagias? You’re trembling,” Prati asked, peering into my eyes with concern. That wasn’t good.

“It’s nothing. Think I’m just stiff from sitting for so long.” Noticing my expression was rather strained, I tried to force a smile. “I was just trying to loosen up a bit.”

“I see...”

Looks like she bought it.

“Anyway, you will one day need to lead the kingdom, so this will be a good

learning experience for you. Why don't we take a look around?"

"Oh, having a prince observe our facilities himself is a great honor! Let me go begin making preparations—"

And so, with no consideration for my personal wishes, I was taken on a tour.

The center of the settlement was a wide square. Even though it was the middle of the night, the humans were lined up, lying prostrate. My rough estimate was that there were two to three hundred of them...mostly women and children, with very few young men. Actually, the person at the front of the line was the only elder among them.

Their clothes were all the same—blue and faded. It was like a prisoner's uniform... Well, given the circumstances, it was a lot worse than being a simple prisoner. At first glance, the large log walls surrounding the settlement seemed to be a means to keep out fiends, but...the spikes were aimed inward.

"You've trained them well," Prati complimented. Despite the abrupt nature of the inspection, and the fact most humans were dead asleep at this time of night, they had been rounded up and lined up in no time flat.

"What is the population of this village?" I figured being silent might draw suspicion, so I tried asking a harmless question.

"This village? I'd say about fifty," the overseer replied.

What about the over two hundred humans right in front of us...?

"Ah, you meant the humans? Right now we are at about five hundred head, including the babies."

Head...

"Relax!"

I tried to keep my breathing calm. "So there are fifty of you guys, then?"

"Correct."

"And you're able to keep them in check when they outnumber you ten to one?"

“Yes. The humans here are quite docile, so it is easy work. After all, we have spent a hundred years pruning the rebellious streaks from our stock,” he replied, stroking his whiskers proudly.

A hundred years... I was starting to feel dizzy. So this was what became of the descendants of the human kingdom the Rage family had swallowed that I heard about. The humans bowing to us didn't so much as tremble, afraid of standing out in the tiniest way. Even the younger ones, children not yet ten years old, weren't making a peep.

“How many years has it been since we needed to break out the whips? I'm not sure I can remember.” Even without being asked, the beastfolk continued talking. Apparently the fertile young men were rotated between settlements every half year, both to stifle thoughts of rebellion and to prevent bloodlines from growing too intermingled.

Normally, the fit and strong men were kept around while the rest were used as vessels for **Transposition**. Once the women were old enough to give birth, they were made to do so as quickly and as often as possible. Those who were able to produce enough children were permitted to stay for some time, but after reaching a certain age they'd be shipped out as well. Very few elders were allowed to stick around to keep the settlement together.

“Originally we kept more elders, but they have proved less effective for use with **Transposition**. After some reevaluation, we decided to decrease their population gradually.”

Prati's words caused the elder bowing at the head of the column to flinch.

Apparently, in addition to reproduction, the humans kept at the farms were also made to tend to crops. They had managed to establish a certain level of self-sufficiency. “Being capable of producing their own food makes them valuable livestock,” the overseer said with a laugh.

Their clothes, farming implements, and other goods were produced by other human settlements. The skilled craftsmen of the previous kingdom were allowed to maintain their crafts, passing down their skills as a kind of high-level slave class. They were permitted at least some measure of respect in their livelihoods. Though, of course, that was only in comparison to those here on

the farms.

“Take care!” The smiling beastfolk saw us off as we departed once again.

“What did you think, Zilbagias?” Prati asked, smiling from her seat beside me.

“It was extremely eye-opening,” I replied plainly, the experience leaving my heart numb. “I feel it will be very, very helpful when the time comes to rule the kingdom.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Prati smiled with satisfaction.

Oh yes, it was very eye-opening. Very, very eye-opening.

With that forced smile stuck to my face, the carriage carried us for another few hours before we reached the Rage family stronghold.

I couldn't help but wonder if this had once been the capital of the human kingdom. The clean, neatly arranged stone buildings seemed culturally advanced in a way. While there were still plenty of beastfolk and night elves living here, there were very clearly more demons than usual.

“It is finally time for you to meet the members of your family.” Our carriage came to a stop outside the family chief's residence. Putting a hand on the door, Prati turned to me with a smile. “Are you ready, Zilbagias?”

I took a moment before answering, “Yes.”

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of people the Rage family were. I didn't care how annoying they were. If things got out of hand, I'd knock 'em out without a second thought.

I'll put on a great show for you, you damn demons.

As those dark thoughts brewed in my mind, I stepped out of the carriage.

“Ohhh!”

“That's the young lord?!”

“Hey, guys! Do it!”

Immediately, a group of young demons with large sticks jumped out in front

of me.

Already?!

As I prepared to face them...the young demons stuck their poles out to the side. My eyes went wide. Cloth was tied to the tips of the poles, which when spread out revealed in giant, messy letters: "Welcome! Your Highness, Lord Zilbagias!" The demons holding up the poles wore bright smiles.

It was a banner to welcome me.

"So, that's the young lord we've been hearing about? He has quite the magic."

"He's a lot bigger than I thought he'd be."

"Is he really five years old...?"

Behind the three demons and their welcome-banner attack milled a number of others in what looked like what savages may consider to be noble attire. Though they whispered to each other and watched us with great interest, the welcome brigade seemed to be ignoring the lot of them.

"Young lord!"

Leaving the banner to the other two, one of the demons with gray combed-back hair stepped forward and knelt before me. He produced a pair of fans, on which were written the words "Take us!" and "To the front lines!"



“Please, let us be your retainers!” he asked, bowing his head, at which point his two accomplices shouted, “Please!”

What was with these guys? I was five! Did they have no pride?! Were they really demons?! Granted, they had horns and their skin had a bluish hue to it. Plus, they seemed to possess decent magic.

Compared to me, how do these three stack up, Ante?

“I’d say about two thirds of your strength. Maybe a little bit higher.”

Despite her objective observation, her voice was tinged with some bewilderment.

I see. So above a baron but not quite a viscount.

“Recently we haven’t been able to make it to the battlefield!”

“We’ll definitely be able to help you!”

“Please, we beg you!”

The three continued, seeing me entirely failing to respond.

“Who even are you guys?” I responded with a perfectly natural question.

“Ah! So rude of us! We are—” Snapping his fans shut, the gray-haired head of the bunch gave a bashful smile, but as he moved to introduce himself, a shout bordering on a roar resounded from the chief’s residence behind us.

“You’ve got some guts, trying to greet them before the chief!” A burly, aging demon kicked his way through the front door—his silver hair seemingly starting to turn white. Though his face had deep wrinkles, his features made it likely he had been quite handsome during his prime. The man stomped and swaggered his way toward us, a number of similar-faced people coming out from behind him. I assumed these were my relatives.

“Crap!”

“Make a break for it!”

“Young lord, we shall continue this later!”

With rather astonishing coordination, the party collapsed their banner and

waved goodbye, sprinting off. They were perfectly in sync but damn did they run fast. I got the impression they'd be quick to use that speed to flee on the battlefield.

"Those guys..." the older demon sighed, watching them depart. But very quickly, his falconine glare turned to me. "Duke of the demonic kingdom, chief of the Rage family, Zizivalt Rage," the man—Zizivalt—stated his name plainly.

So this was the Rage family chief, then. According to Prati, he was some 220 years old. However his presence was hardly marred with age, maintaining a solid, rocky presence along with magic befitting a duke. Just looking at how he carried himself made it clear he was a seasoned warrior. And yet he lacked even a single scar.

As expected of the Rage family!

"I am overjoyed you managed to make it to this day, Prati. We have finally been able to meet the son you are so proud of," Zizivalt said, turning to Prati with a wild smile.

"A pleasure to see you again, uncle. Yes, I have long been waiting for this day." Prati bowed with a smile of her own. Showing the chief respect, she nevertheless spoke as if they were quite close, careful not to deprecate herself too much as an archduchess. It was a strange balancing act to witness.

I had been trained thoroughly on how I was to speak to everyone as well. Although I was a candidate to become the future Demon King, currently I was only a viscount. Thus I needed to find a balance between not being too arrogant or too servile. I had to display respect to the family chief but maintain a firmness to avoid ridicule.

Everyone turned to me, as if urging me to speak. And so, I opened my mouth...

"Ohhh!"

...and was promptly cut off by chaos in the crowd.

"Bark!"

It turned out it was just the other carriage arriving behind us. Specifically, it was Garunya carrying Liliana, with a somewhat forlorn-looking Layla trailing behind them.

“So that’s the rumored...”

“...high elf pet...”

“What a strange fetish...Daiagias...”

Whispers abounded, curious gazes returning back to me.

“Is that a human?”

“Look closer. She has horns.”

“Wait, a dragon?”

Layla started to shrink.

“That one...he assaulted...”

“Gift...dark dragons...”

“A slave maid...so jealous...”

Yet more whispering.

Prati held her smile, but Zizivalt and the others were clearly a bit taken aback. *What’s this I’m feeling? Wasn’t this a homecoming? Why are things so awkward?*

“Ahem!” But this wasn’t some kind of marriage interview, so there was no use worrying about that. So I cleared my throat, trying to clear away the awkward atmosphere with it. “A pleasure to meet you. I am the Seventh Demon Prince, Zilbagias.” I gave a calculated bow, perfect in form.

“A-A pleasure,” Zizivalt replied with a nod, recovering. “I am happy we have finally met! You carry yourself with dignity, and as the rumors suggested...”

Hey, don’t look at Liliana when you say that!

“You have quite the open heart! Gah ha ha ha!”

Don’t try to laugh it off either! At the very least stop sounding so distressed by it all!

“While I would love to move right along to the welcome banquet, first I should introduce my family!” Slowly returning to his usual self, Zizivalt spoke with a soft slur as he turned to point to the people gathered behind him. “This is my son, Ziekvalt.”

“Long time no see, Prati. And nice to meet you, Zilbagias.” The silver-haired demon greeted us with a wild smile on his strong, handsome features. I’d heard of him. A hundred and forty years old with the rank of marquis—Ziekvalt Rage. Prati’s cousin and likely to be the next Rage family chief.

He gave off a refined air while carrying himself with a remarkable level of stability. Though his smile was bright, his eyes were sharp, watching and weighing my every move. He seemed like the type that would kill you while wearing a smile. When Prati said there were few people among the Rage family that could best her in spearmanship, I had to wonder if this guy was one of them.

“A pleasure to meet you, Sir Ziekvalt,” I replied, returning his gaze head-on.

“And these are my son and daughter. They are about your age...okay, not quite. They *look* about your age, so I hope you can get along,” Ziekvalt said, signaling to the young man and woman at his side. In human terms, one looked just over twenty and the other about sixteen or seventeen, but demons fully matured by fifteen. Also, based on what I had heard, they were a bit younger than they appeared.

“Yo, Zilbagias. Name’s Eizvalt Rage. I’m a viscount, just like you.” The boy smiled, offering a handshake. Assuming the pattern would continue, he would be the next in line for the chieftdom after Ziekvalt. If I recalled correctly, he was seventeen.

“Nice to meet you, Eizvalt. I’m Zilbagias.” I returned the rare gesture undaunted. As that oddness occurred to me, his grip tightened. It was like he was testing me.

“Ha ha, nice to meet you too...my future king?” He gave a small bow. *Oh boy.* Though he lowered his voice as he said it, it was still audible to everyone around him. Although he tried to laugh it off like a joke, much like his father, his laughter never came across in his eyes. I looked to Zizivalt, wondering if he was

really okay with that.

“Hey, don’t say something so reckless,” Zizivalt scolded him lightly. As usual, Prati was smiling without saying a word.

“I would hardly call it reckless! He’s our family’s prodigy. There’s nothing strange about having high hopes for him.” Eizvalt laughed again, letting go of my hand.

Though no one was bringing it up, I was really too young. Five years old, remember. Even so, despite being the same rank as Eizvalt and actually younger than him, he treated me like a person above him in status. He was trying to show respect for my future potential. But for prideful folk like demons, that was a level of subtlety generally beyond them.

“I know I am still just a child...” I spoke carefully, intentionally looking to Zizivalt instead of Eizvalt to show who I really respected here, “but I fully intend to devote myself to being a warrior that can honor the Rage family name.”

“Good! That’s the right attitude!” Zizivalt and Ziekvalt beside him nodded, impressed. Ignoring Eizvalt’s claim, neither confirming nor denying, while endeavoring to work hard seemed to be the correct response.

Meanwhile, that brat Eizvalt just laughed again.

“The same could be said of you, you know.”

Fair enough.

“Zilbagias, you are truly the star of hope for our family. We have high expectations of you! Finally, I’d like to introduce my granddaughter, Lumiafya,” Zizivalt continued with another smile, patting the young girl on the back.

What are you smiling about this time, gramps? Are you that proud of your adorable little grandkid? Doesn’t seem like she’s too pleased to be pushed into the spotlight.

“Pleased to meet you,” she spoke quietly and curtly, eyes averted. Lumiafya Rage...thirteen years old, I think.

“Nice to meet you, Lumiafya.” I gave her a polite smile and a bow, which she replied to with a glare.

"I'm going back to my room." Swiftly she spun on her heels, scurrying back into the house.

Uh...kinda felt like I did something wrong. What did I do to make her hate me?

"She's a girl around that age, so of course you did. Look behind you."

As Ante suggested I turned around, my eyes meeting with Layla standing behind me. And sitting at her feet was Liliana.

"Oh..."

Yeah... Guess I shouldn't be surprised.

Though things became a little awkward with the way Lumiafya left, we did what we could to shake off the atmosphere and headed to the welcome banquet which was to be held in a banquet hall within the chief's residence. The space seemed like it could easily seat a hundred people. Chandeliers of polished crystal hung from the ceiling, radiantly illuminating the room. It was honestly way brighter than I would have expected from denizens of the dark. The beastfolk servants had a lot of white tigers among them. I guess that made sense for the Rage family home base.

Together with the chief, we sat at a table at the head of the room set on a raised platform. It was almost like we were a wedding party with the way we were being so prominently put on display.

"Well, in a sense, this banquet is meant to put you on display," Ante commented.

She had a point. By the way, this was the layout of the table: Lumiafya, Ziekvalt's wife, Prati, Zizivalt, Ziekvalt, me, then Eizvalt.

So, everyone was arrayed around Zizivalt in the center. Being on a raised platform looking down on all the demons felt kinda nice. It was clear Lumiafya had been dragged out of her room unwillingly as she looked pretty irritated. Another thing of note was that the chief's wife had apparently passed away quite some time ago.

My future potential, combined with my current circumstances, seemed to have earned me a favorable spot. And while I understood how Lumiafya felt, I

was unsure how to feel about her decision to make her distaste in me so obvious in front of everyone. If this was a private family meal, that would be one thing...but no one else seemed to be paying her any mind. Was she just spoiled?

Well, when Liliana came bounding over and started licking me, that certainly earned some looks. Seemingly she was upset with how long we had been separated. The others might have been taking it easy on Lumiafya out of sympathy after witnessing that. Between the night elves, the dark dragons, and Enma, my adventures in the castle meant I was almost always around utterly twisted individuals. Maybe I was just numb to this kind of thing. Taking a punch of common sense in a place like this hurt more for how unexpected it was. Apparently I didn't have a very objective opinion of myself.

"Now, let us celebrate the arrival of our prince. To him, and to the future of the Rage family. Cheers!" The room roared with demons taking up the toast. While I was busy feeling down about myself, Zizivalt urged the party into full swing.

As soon as he did, much to my surprise, music started playing. And damn was I surprised. Bright and cheerful melodies poured from behind a curtain on the lower level. For the first time since I had been born as a demon, I heard music. Real music, not just war drums and bone whistles.

"Surprised?" Ziekvalt said, a mischievous smile on his face.

"What is this?"

"A family of musicians we permitted to live dating back to the time we took control of this land," he replied with a faint smile, taking a sip of wine. "As weak as humans are, they're capable of some good melodies. It really lifts the mood, don't you think? Unlike other families, we have an appreciation for culture." There was a look in his eyes, like he was testing me. "Still, they are the melodies of a pitiful bunch. If it bothers you, shall I ask them to stop?"

"No, not at all. I actually quite like it," I replied with a smile. *Seriously? So there are some humans allowed to keep their skills alive here besides the high-level slaves!* "I've never heard a performance like this before, not even in my father's palace."

Ziekvalt gave a satisfied nod at that. Eizvalt on my other side puffed up with pride. Being seen as more cultured than the Demon King's own palace must have really tickled their fancy. Not that the Demon King's palace had a band in the first place.

In short order, a luxurious meal was brought out for us, large carts holding whole roast lambs and large cauldrons of soup. Luckily for me, demon banquets were very much focused on the food. The servers skillfully started delivering plates, preparing the food on the spot as they served it. The best parts of the roast lamb were quickly brought to our table. The application of the herbs to season it seemed rather rough, but it brought out the flavor of the meat excellently. The soup was hearty, filled with root vegetables and quite delicious. The nutritious flavor felt like it was drawing strength up from the bottom of my belly.

Before the Rage family took this land, it had been famous for its cuisine...or so Ziekvalt told me around mouthfuls of food. Meanwhile, the people that had developed it worked as slaves, or wasted away being bred like cattle on farms. All while demons sat proudly at the top, gorging themselves on the results of their culture. I put a lid on the complicated mixture of emotions welling up within me as I returned Ziekvalt and Eizvalt's smiles with one of my own, digging into the food and drink with vigor.

So that I could truly experience this food for myself. So that I'd never forget it.

Once the first stages of the meal were complete, the inevitable true reason for the banquet came to the surface, a deluge of demons coming to greet me. So, while picking at the sliced fruit presented to us for dessert, I relaxed like a king on his throne as I greeted each of the leaders of the Rage family.

And they came in droves. Even though I felt smarter than my previous life, the torrent of names was overwhelming.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Zilbagias..."

Old and young alike, although they all wore smiles while greeting me, it was clear not all of them liked me. You could tell by looking in their eyes. That look in their eyes was one I was very familiar with from my previous life. The eyes of

a noble, weighing the person before them.

I was actually quite surprised to see even demons had those same eyes. Ironically, despite how important everyone in the castle acted, I didn't feel like I was being so obviously *appraised* back there. The castle held only the strong or those longing for strength, so there was no room for flattery. Power was everything. They had no room for cleverness or subtlety. Even that national treasure of an idiot (whose name I had forgotten by now) had boldly approached me just to get his horn snapped off.

In the castle, the only ones who engaged in the level of politics to mask their intentions behind fake smiles were the night elves and the dark dragons. Maybe times of peace caused even savages like these to grow soft. Regardless, I didn't care much how weak the Rage family turned out to be.

But, uh, there was still one issue.

"Why the long face?" Ante teased, able to completely see through my thoughts to know why I was bothered.

I mean, obviously I'd be angry, right? It felt like...they were underestimating me. While they never said as much...their eyes damn near screamed it. It felt like they saw me as nothing more than a meek child.

I could more or less guess why. These were the leaders among the Rage family that were coming to give greetings. A number of them were quite strong. They were all high ranked and possessed powerful magic. There were plenty of viscounts like me, as well as counts and marquises—all quite powerful.

While I held the rank of viscount, without **Naming** myself, my magic was relatively calm. Although they seemed impressed that at my age I possessed strength on par with Eizvalt beside me, it was like they felt they could still roll over me with little effort if it came to that.

And then there was my weapon. Being savages, even at a banquet like this no one was unarmed. Most of them had portable magic spears or at least a knife on their belt, but I carried my sword quite openly. There were more than a few who exchanged stifled laughter as they glanced at the weapon on my hip on their way up to greet me. Naturally, that level of rudeness didn't come across at all while they were actually speaking with me.

“Maybe he likes it because the blade is so big.”

“It’s just a shabby human weapon, though.”

Lots of small-minded laughter like that. Man, that pissed me off.

You guys wanna try it out for yourself? I’ll show you what this holy sword is made of.

As I thought that, the sword at my hip started to tremble.

Crap! Calm down! This is the worst possible time, Adamas! Not yet! We’re not ready yet! Go back to sleep! Go on, back to bed...there, good boy. Whew.

“Your stubbornness is at fault for demanding to bring it along,” Ante sighed.

I mean...if I didn’t, I’d be totally unarmed. Both physically and mentally. I was so skilled with the swordspike that I could go toe to toe with Prati on a level playing field. I had nothing to be ashamed about.

Speaking of Prati, I wondered how she was taking all this. Glancing over to her, I saw she was paying me absolutely no mind, instead having a friendly conversation with the chief.

Ah, so she’s leaving all of this in my hands.

Also, now that I looked in that direction, I noticed that at some point Lumiafya had disappeared. I guess she had run off somewhere while all the attention was on me. Well, if she was just going to sit there and look sour all night, her leaving was probably for the best. Both for her and the rest of us.

“Your Highness! It is an honor to finally meet you. My name is...”

Oh, here comes another one. What did I do to earn this torture?

But I kept my displeasure hidden, wearing the perfect mask of a perfect prince as I greeted each and every person that came to speak with me.

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“I hate this...”

Outside the dining hall, a young girl sighed as she sat under the shade of a tree. Of course, it was none other than Lumiafya Rage. While everyone else’s attention was on the prince, she had taken the opportunity to sneak out. If she

went back to her room, there was a good chance someone would just drag her back out. So she came here in search of somewhere else to kill time.

Now everyone will think I'm being shy around him!

She couldn't help but feel indignant that she was expected to care at all about some five-year-old brat who had just popped up for no reason other than the fact that he was a prince. Glancing into the dining hall through the window, she saw the demon prince Zilbagias lounging on his dais, trading words with the various leaders of the Rage family.

She clicked her tongue, scowling as she bit at her thumbnail. The prince didn't defy expectations as he was just as stuck-up and arrogant as she was led to believe, and while that did annoy her, what bothered her even more...

"Why are you acting so friendly with him?!"

Her beloved brother Eizvalt had been relegated to the far end of the table, as if he were merely decoration.

Lumiafya Rage had been raised with love. From her grandfather to her parents to even her brother who was nearly the same age as her, she was spoiled absolutely rotten. For a race such as the demons where bearing children was a tremendous feat, her being born only a few short years after her older brother made her akin to a miracle for their family. In particular, her brother felt a strong sense of responsibility as the eldest, always trying to take care of her. It was no surprise that she was always on his heels no matter where he went, relying on him for everything.

However, there was a reason he was so soft on her.

"They're so harsh on me," he murmured one day to the young Lumiafya as she rode his shoulders, shortly after he had returned from spear training while completely exhausted. *"I don't want you to suffer like that."*

With the expectation of one day taking over the Rage family, Eizvalt was treated strictly by their father and grandfather. As one of the few families capable of healing magic in the kingdom, members of the Rage family were often sought for their **Transposition** abilities rather than their combat prowess.

Even so, that did not give them an excuse for weakness.

As such, even before his horns grew in, Eizvalt had been trained in the ways of the spear. Him being beaten with training spears until he couldn't move was a common occurrence. He'd be dragged crying and screaming from his bed and told that they'd "beat the perseverance into him."

That constant abuse certainly served to make him "strong." But apparently it also made him fear that his beloved sister would face the same treatment. Of course, the expectations of the chief's children were quite different between boys and girls, so it was a needless fear.

"Someday, you'll be sent off to marry someone." The greatest shock of her life came from her mother casually sharing that one day.

"What? Sent off? Where?"

"Somewhere else. Not in the Rage family," her mother had explained with a soft smile...but there was almost a weariness to it.

To another family. Although she didn't fully grasp what that meant at the time, she knew enough to realize it would mean being taken away from the house and family that she loved—that was enough to bring her to tears.

"No! I want to live here with everyone forever!"

Her mother wrapped her in a big hug, holding her for a while...but she offered no words of consolation.

The blood of a demon made them strong—Bloodline Magic. Receiving a unique magic from their father's side and mother's side was a major factor in regard to the power of stronger demons. And in this case, "blood" didn't just mean a connection between immediate families—but between whole clans.

For example, if two members of the Rage family had a child together, even if they each possessed different Bloodline Magics from outside the family, their child would only inherit the Rage family magic—**Transposition**. In order to inherit two Bloodline Magics, both parents had to be from different bloodlines. So, in order to ensure he had strong children, Eizvalt would have to marry someone from another family.

And what about Lumiafya? The Rage family obviously couldn't just keep taking from other families. In order to receive, they'd also have to give. As a member of the chief's family, Lumiafya had an obligation to marry outside the family—to share their family's strength. Just like her own mother who was from another family and had been brought here to marry Ziekvalt.

"That's our role," her mother had said, stroking her hair. She knew firsthand the pain, sorrow, and loneliness of leaving one's home behind to enter a new family. That was why, for once, she couldn't offer any consolation. She knew that, as the daughter of the chief, that fate was unavoidable.

Once she grew up, she would be married off to a stranger. Lumiafya was terrified. She was already quite brusque with men outside her family, but the incident had only amplified her distaste for them along with her reliance on her brother.

I can't stand it...

In the garden of their residence, the merriment of the banquet behind her, Lumiafya leaned against a tree wearing a sulky look while watching the night sky. She was now thirteen years old. In two more years, she'd be an adult. She doubted they'd send her off the moment she turned fifteen, since the search for a suitable partner would take some time. Even so, every ten or twenty years that passed without finding one would greatly change how she looked in the eyes of society.

She wasn't so young that she'd break down into tears and throw a tantrum over it. It was an unfortunate reality that she had come to accept. As the daughter of a chief, it would actually be pretty aggravating if they *couldn't* find a partner for her after decades.

Long ago, she had decided she could just marry her brother so she would never have to leave. But even if that didn't have biological issues, the Bloodline Magics aspect made that option impossible. She wanted her brother to be a powerful warrior. His children needed to be strong too.

Once again, she glanced back through the window into the banquet. As usual, her brother wore that ingratiating smile. He was a great person. She wanted

him to shine brightest among everyone in the Rage family. And yet...

“That damn brat...!”

Right beside him, in the seat that should have been her brother’s, lounged that arrogant prince. Despite being so young, he acted like such a big shot. She couldn’t stand it. Logically speaking, she understood the prince’s importance to her family. There was no telling what benefits they’d reap in the future from having a prince in the kingdom loyal to them.

Even leaving aside her general distaste for men, the slight he was to her beloved older brother killed any chance of her warming up to the prince. But even then, there was nothing she could do about it. All she could do was sit here, biting at her nails in frustration.

“Good evening, Lumiafya,” a soft voice called out from behind her, causing her to shudder. Turning around, she saw a man with ash-gray hair standing behind her.

“Ugh...”

“That’s an odd way of greeting someone. What’s wrong? And why are you out here by yourself?” With a wry grin, he walked up to her side, acting quite a bit too familiar.

“Germadios...” With a bitter scowl, Lumiafya wrapped her arms around herself, as if to pull back from the approaching man.

Germadios Rage. At about eighty years old (she couldn’t remember precisely), he was decently strong when it came to magic and spearmanship.

“Why are *you* here?”

“I saw you walk out so I came looking for you,” he said with a smile.

Gross...

This man repulsed her. His eyes, eyes that seemed to see right through her, felt almost sticky as they passed over her. The grossness she felt lurking under that ever present smile disgusted her. After learning how upset Lumiafya was at the idea of being married off to another family, he had started making attempts to get closer to her.

Usually she avoided thinking about what exactly were his true intentions, as she was rarely in the mood for vomiting, but he was clearly trying to build some kind of relationship with her. Why? To restore the original family line.

Germadios was a member of the old chief family, from the time of the first Demon King.

In demon society, there existed the concept of houses. It was quite common for sons to inherit a part of their father's name, as could be seen in the names Zizivalt, Ziekvalt, and Eizvalt.

These names denoted houses, or genealogies. For example, Ziekvalt's son Eizvalt was part of House Valt, or the Valt line. Zilbagias was part of the Gias line, derived from the first Demon King Raogias.

And the man before her now, Germadios, was from the Dios line. House Dios once led the Rage family. But when the first Demon King Raogias's life had been claimed by holy magic, with his magic resistance being too great to allow healing, the Rage family were held responsible for his death. Thus, just like how the first Demon King took his final breaths, so did the Rage family chief. This resulted in House Valt taking up the leadership role of the family.

Since then, the Valt family had maintained the seat of power thanks to their own prowess and the favors they had earned in aiding Gordogias's ascension to the throne. Starting with Zizivalt's father Zidolvalt, the previous chief of the Rage family, and including others like Zizivalt's wife and Archduchess Pratifya's father, House Valt had suffered plenty of wartime casualties.

But House Dios was far from satisfied. From the sidelines, they watched the seat of power like hawks. All while constantly trying to establish connections with those in power and occasionally, when the opportunities arose, moving proactively to secure power of their own. House Valt found them to be a tremendous nuisance and, thanks to their long history, that made House Dios a pesky nuisance that was difficult to get rid of. And after the death of the first Demon King, they were useful as a scapegoat for the flood of criticism the Rage family had to endure from other families. That accomplishment, achieved by the suicide of House Dios's chief at the time, had protected the rest of the Rage family a great deal.

“We relinquished the chieftom out of necessity, but House Valt thinks they can just hold on to it forever...”

Despite House Dios constantly bringing that up, making House Valt fully aware of those sentiments, they couldn't come out strongly against the old chief of the family. That said, House Valt was doing well for itself, and had earned a lot of favor from the current Demon King for their recent accomplishments. There was no need for House Dios to push all that aside to retake the chieftom.

So the battle over the Rage family chieftom raged quietly under the surface, coming to something of a deadlock. And Germadios was one of those trying to throw a stone in that pond—to upset the balance.

Although, his plan of marrying Lumiafya was a terrible one. With the Bloodline Magic issue, no one aiming for the chieftom could afford to marry within the Rage family itself. Even if they had some sort of relationship—a thought that made Lumiafya gag—he would still need a wife from another family in order to have strong children. In other words, Lumiafya could never be anything more than a concubine to him. There was no way she'd accept that.

“You want to stay with your family, right?” he had once said to her.

“Go to hell,” she had replied.

Of course she didn't want to be separated from her family, but she was doing everything she could to accept that fate. His offer was insulting, as if he were spitting on her own resolve and treating her like nothing more than a child. It was excruciatingly annoying. And, above all, House Valt would gain nothing from accepting his offer. Germadios was constantly praising her, giving her gifts, trying to soothe and humor her, but it all just felt gross to her.

Men are always like this.

He kept talking, but she paid no mind to his words. Looking away with a sigh, her eyes drifted back to that annoying prince.

Oh. I have an idea.

Suddenly, a mischievous thought came to her. If they were all so annoying, why not pit them against each other?

“Hey,” Lumiafya said, turning back to Germadios.

“Huh? Oh, uh, what is it?” Considering how she usually ignored him entirely, her abrupt reaction took him entirely off guard.

“What do you think about the prince?” she asked, ignoring his confusion.

“The prince? Hmm...” At her question, Germadios turned to look at the prince through the window, his smile taking on a somewhat cold look. It seemed he wasn’t all that pleased with the prince’s presence either.

Well, that makes sense, Lumiafya snickered. Germadios was proud, confident, and unsatisfied with his lot in life. Seeing the prince being pampered like this no doubt left him feeling bitter. Germadios was a count and was apparently quite frustrated at being denied an opportunity to earn a promotion in combat. As rare as healers were in the demonic kingdom, even when deployed to the front lines, warriors of the Rage family were often delegated to the rear. Displaying healing feats could only get you as high as baron; it would take much more to reach higher than that.

Though the importance of healing was recognized, hierarchy among demons was still determined by strength. Without proof of one’s ability on the front line, moving up the ladder was a difficult prospect.

For the past few decades, the demon population has been on the rise. So with how slow they were pushing back the front lines, competition over who got deployments was becoming rather intense. Never mind leaving behind wartime accomplishments, it was difficult for most demons just to get involved in the fighting at all.

And yet, that prince had been all but guaranteed a spot in taking a capital city within the next year for his first deployment. It was impossible for someone like Germadios to be happy with that. That opportunity for fame had passed right over their heads, landing squarely in the lap of someone who hadn’t lifted a finger for it.

Even that aside, everyone pretended like he had killed a leader of the white dragons in single combat, causing him to jump in rank from esquire to viscount.

“I’ve heard many a rumor. He killed a dragon leader single-handedly. He

broke the horn off another viscount with his bare hands,” he said, making a show of lifting his hands like it was all some joke.

“After seeing him yourself, you think those actually happened?” Lumiafya asked, pointing at the prince with her chin. Personally, after meeting him in person, she had to assume they were all lies.

Maybe there was some truth in there somewhere...but it had to be greatly exaggerated. It was true enough that the magic he possessed was quite strong for his age. He had surpassed her beloved brother, and easily surpassed Lumiafya. But that was hardly enough to take on a leader of the dragons, or to break a demon’s horns with his bare hands.

“It is certainly questionable,” Germadios replied while playfully raising his brows. “With the Orgi family blood in him, **Naming** should strengthen him a little...but he is still just a child. He hardly seems like such a legend,” Germadios said, half laughing, half sneering as he glared at the prince. “But I suppose he has his own standing to worry about. They are probably just trying to add some decoration to his record.”

Lumiafya snorted. “So you think that too.” Frustrating as it was, this was the first time she had ever agreed with this man. “I think he’s acting a bit too stuck up,” she continued, looking down at her feet as if she were talking to herself. “I’m sure a lot of it has to do with him still being with his mom, but don’t you think he’s being arrogant?”

“Yes, I had a similar feeling. The position of a prince is no small thing, but”—a small crack appeared in Germadios’s pleasantly smiling facade—“I feel like he is somewhat lacking in respect toward those of us above him. At least, that’s the impression I get. I imagine the others feel much the same way.”

Lumiafya gave a thoughtful hum. Seeing that crack in Germadios’s guard, she found her way in. As much as it killed her to do so, she gave him a deep, suggestive look. “If you could go teach that prince a lesson...I might rethink my opinion of you a little.”

“Oh?” Germadios perked up, like a wild beast acting instinctively to a steak thrown in front of it. “That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. Honestly, I had been considering sticking his nose in it anyway.” He seriously tried to act as if he had

the same idea from the start.

But he had taken the bait.

“Why don’t I teach our sheltered little prince just how ruthless demonic society is? It is my responsibility as an adult, after all,” he said, giving his long hair a theatrical flip. With a wink (that almost made Lumiafya vomit), he told her to enjoy the show before walking off.

After watching to make sure he was gone, Lumiafya snorted a laugh as she leaned back against the tree.

What a moron.

But things sounded like they were going to go well. Either way, this *was* a show she would enjoy, whether it ended with Germadios getting beaten up or the prince getting taught a lesson. No matter the result, she’d be thrilled.

So she thought. For now.

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Hi, it’s me, Zilbagias. And my energy has been sapped thanks to all the people I was being introduced to. I could hardly remember their names anymore...

Ante, what was that guy’s name three people ago?

“You think I remember?”

Not really. But if you did, I figured maybe this was all just a dream or something.

“I’m not sure if I appreciate you putting it like that.”

Ow! Quit jabbing my eyes all willy-nilly!

My secret chats with Ante kept my spirits up.

And then that man appeared. A smug young demon with long ash-gray hair. In human terms, he looked about thirty, but at that point it was nearly impossible to tell a demon’s age from appearance alone. Their body stayed in this state for over a hundred years.

The best clue was in their expression. That unbridled ambition in his eyes spoke of a demon younger than a hundred. The calm composure of someone

like Ziekvalt beside me was nowhere to be seen.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lord Zilbagias,” he said, holding a glass of wine filled to the brim. There was no reaction from Ziekvalt, but Eizvalt on my other side suddenly tensed up.

Are they on bad terms with this guy? Well, no point bringing that up. I prompted the man to continue using my eyes without uttering a word. I still hadn’t heard his name or rank.

His eyes narrowed slightly, a faint pause, before he continued, “My name is Germadios, and my title is count.”

Dios, huh? I remembered that name. They were the ones that gave up the Rage family chieftdom after failing to save the first Demon King’s life. Apparently the family chief at the time had committed suicide after the Demon King’s death to try and relieve the Rage family of the pressure they were receiving from the other families.

As the ones who had once ruled the Rage family they were quite skilled with **Transposition**, and the family owed them much for their sacrifice, so they were quite a handful to deal with—at least, that was what Prati had said. I imagined he had quite a few thoughts about the current ruling family along with me due to my relation to them. There was also something about the light in his eyes that I didn’t like.

But I couldn’t just ignore him now that he had introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Germadios,” I replied casually.

“I have heard all sorts of rumors about you...” he said, giving a faint smile and nod that seemed more rude than polite.

“Oh? What kind of rumors?” I hardly cared, but asked anyway.

“Well, let’s see. You consistently show your unrivaled strength in combat and repeatedly earn high honors.”

Is that his way of saying I’m really violent and overly proud?

“Can’t say he’s far off the mark, can we?”

Well, I didn’t care. As long as they didn’t look down on me. But it seemed

rumors weren't going to protect me from much here in the Rage territory.

"Is it true you even defeated a leader of the white dragons in single combat?" he asked, leaning forward as if deeply interested in my response.

So he is looking down on me.

Glancing behind him, I saw the line of people waiting to meet with me had shrunk considerably. Though, now that I thought about it, this guy had cut to the front of the line. He must have been pretty strong if they let him do that. That meant trying to ignore him wasn't really an option. I supposed I could play with him for a bit.

"Yeah, that was quite a challenge. Though, I have to say, it wasn't like I *wanted* to fight him alone."

So I told him the story of going out hunting with a group of bodyguards, only to be greeted by a dragon hiding in an abandoned fortress who immediately attacked us with his breath. As I talked, Germadios gave some clearly affected hums and exclamations of shock. The fake smiles we wore made it look like some kind of poor drama performance.

"I see! I had heard the rumors, but that was how it all happened! I am quite confident in my strength, but even I fear I would struggle against such a dragon."

You really sneaked in a compliment to yourself, huh?

"I must say, I am impressed you pulled through such a dangerous situation at your age. You are really turning out to be quite the champion!" He gave an exaggerated laugh, as if he had just heard a hilarious joke.

How shameless. What exactly is he aiming for?

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the glass in his hand tipped over. The wine spilled out, drawing a beautiful arc through the air...right into my face.

Uh...what?

Wine dripped from Zilbagias's face.

"Wha..."

On either side of him, Ziekvalt and Eizvalt were struck speechless. Not only was he a child, he was royalty. As this was a family banquet, even a mistake of that caliber could potentially be forgiven...

"Oh my! What a blunder! I have been so exceptionally rude!"

...but with the way Germadios bowed in such a showy manner, with a clearly rehearsed apology, it was obvious to everyone that it was no mistake.

"While trying to toast to your bravery I seemed to have lost control of my hand. Please forgive me. I will even clean your face off myself."

While all the onlookers were still left stunned, Germadios quickly pulled out a handkerchief and started wiping at the prince's face. It was like he was taking care of a baby...and that seemed to be exactly what he was aiming for. Zilbagias remained perfectly expressionless, making no effort to stop him. As the prince stayed silent, Ziekvalt also couldn't say anything reckless either.

"There, all cleaned up." Ignoring the lack of response from Zilbagias, Germadios continued with his brazen display. "I am most deeply ashamed. The moment my hand slipped, I truly prayed to the gods that this was all some kind of dream...though really, if you were a warrior capable of slaying a white dragon on your own, I would have expected you to be able to dodge it— Ah! Perhaps it was impossible for you. Never mind that." He spoke loudly, ensuring everyone in the vicinity could hear him. "If I had been some ruffian with a knife, Your Highness would have been in grave danger. How about this? Perhaps it is not fitting to call it an apology, but I do have some skill in the martial arts. Shall I do a small demonstration for you?"

Did you really kill a dragon? Then why are you so slow? Why don't I teach you a thing or two?

"How dare you...!" Ziekvalt could no longer contain himself. This was crossing far too many lines. As far as he had heard from Pratifya, Zilbagias was no ordinary child. If he lost his temper, there was no telling what might happen.

"I see." Finally, the prince spoke. Tentatively glancing to his side, Ziekvalt was

taken aback. Zilbagias wore a bright smile. “What you say makes sense, Lord Germadios.” His aloof response had everyone, Germadios included, confused. “Man, I really let my guard down. Guess I unconsciously figured no ruffian would make an appearance in the banquet hall of my mother’s family. Thank you for the warning.”

In fact, he even gave a polite thank-you. The smiling prince seemed so cheerful, Germadios was starting to look disappointed.

“Maybe I can’t say this is in exchange,” he continued, smile widening, “but why don’t I teach you something I learned at the castle?”

His words were punctuated with a loud bang.

“What the?!” Germadios jumped back. A wall had rushed toward him. No, not a wall. Zilbagias had kicked up the table that stood between them. In an instant, Germadios brought his arms up to stop it, causing dishes from the table to clatter and smash to the floor.

“I’ll show you what they do to ruffians like that,” he finished in a low voice. A wave of dread washed over Germadios. On the other side of the table, the prince’s presence, the prince’s magic...

“My name is Zilbagias Rage!”

...began to swell.

“Seventh Demon Prince!”

Another deep bang filled the air, many times louder than the previous. Before Germadios’s eyes, the table shattered as Zilbagias’s fist punched through it—not even slowing as it slammed into Germadios’s face.

“Gaaaaah!”

The audience watched in shock as Count Germadios was sent flying with a spray of blood, his body drawing a beautiful arc as it fell to the banquet table below. The loud crash drew the attention of the other demons that had yet to notice the commotion. From behind the curtain, the band seemed to notice something was happening, their bright and cheerful music coming to an abrupt stop.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said a sarcastic voice, cutting through the silence of the banquet hall. Of course, it belonged to the demon prince Zilbagias. Wiping blood from his fist with a napkin, he stared down from the dais at Germadios’s sprawled body. “Since you said you were skilled in martial arts, I figured you’d be able to handle something like that. I never expected I’d get a direct hit.”

Germadios growled, angrily pulling bits of food from his long hair as he stumbled back to his feet, but Zilbagias continued unbothered.

“If you had been a real ruffian, I imagine you’d be dead by now. Lucky you.”

His words were like fingernails on the count’s skin. *I could kill you that easily.* He no longer even attempted to conceal his scorn. It was an obvious taunt.

Germadios growled again, hand reaching for his portable magic spear. Even if he had started it, no demon would put up with such mockery from someone younger than themselves.

“Oh, you wanna go?” Rather than getting flustered, Zilbagias only smiled wider, his left hand moving to the hilt of his sword. “I’ve heard you’re pretty good with a spear, sir,” he said, clearly not believing a word of it. “Sounds like just the exercise I need to help settle my stomach. Might I trouble you for a lesson, Count Germadios?” He was calm and composed—not possessing even the slightest doubt that he’d win.

Germadios’s eyes were locked on the prince. He had been punched in the face, then mocked. If he backed down now, he’d be a laughingstock for the rest of his life. However, Zilbagias had already used his **Naming**. This was no mere fistfight. This was turning into an all-out duel. And with the enhancement of **Naming**, the prince’s magic had easily surpassed that of Eizvalt beside him—now reaching the levels of a count. The same level as Germadios...no, even higher. If two warriors of that caliber fought, the amount of destruction they would cause was unfathomable.

“Wait—” As Zizivalt spoke up to try and stop them...

“Zilbagias,” a strong and clear voice called the troublemaker’s name.

Archduchess Pratifya. A sigh of relief could be heard from somewhere in the room. That’s right. She was the only one. She was Zilbagias’s superior in every

sense of the word. If anyone could get the situation under control, it was her. As everyone's expectations piled on her shoulders, she pulled out her fan and covered her face...hiding an almost feral smile.

"Don't kill him."

Another shock went through the room.

"Understood." Like mother, like son. Paying no mind to the others around him, the prince responded without even turning to look at her. And yet the ferocious smile on his face was very much like his mother's.

Zilbagias drew the sword from his belt—an entirely unremarkable, old sword. And yet, it came wrapped in a kind of ineffable terror. Bone ornaments around the prince's body began to move. They slithered like a snake as they melded together, fusing with the sword to form a spear.

The spectators, and Germadios himself, noticed instantly. His practiced stance, the magic resonating out to the tip of his blade, the violent power rumbling from him like an active volcano. The prince's spearspear was not for show, not a whim of the moment. This was a highly refined, first-class martial style.

"I've already **Named** myself. Feel free to use whatever Bloodline Magic you wish," the prince said, swinging the spearspear into a ready stance, the blade giving a satisfying whistle as it cut through the air.



“Your bloodline *used* to run the family, right? I’d love to see it in action.”

Germadios froze. A moment later, deep black magic roared out of him. He couldn’t ignore the scorn in Zilbagias’s voice.

“Then, by all means, watch closely...!” he said through gritted teeth, face darkening with anger as he pulled his spear from his belt. His magic activated.

“Requiesca.”

Cloak of Repose.

A black wind whipped up around Germadios. Threads of darkness wove together to form a cloak, fluttering in the wind behind him. This was the Bloodline Magic of his mother’s family, the Ombers. It offered a powerful ward against curses as the gods of darkness’ protection shielded and deflected any harmful magic aimed at him. In other words, any half-hearted curse was not even remotely a threat to him. This would be a battle of pure spearmanship.

It was hard to say whether he understood what he was seeing, but nevertheless the prince laughed at the sight of it. The violent bloodlust in his aura had the chief’s family behind him starting to shuffle away. There was only one who remained at the dais and held her ground with complete composure—his mother, Pratifya.

Taking ready stances, the two combatants shared glances. The other demons gathered on Germadios’s side of the room quickly started pulling away—none wanting to get wrapped up in their duel. One person accidentally knocked over some tableware, and a knife fell to the ground with a loud clang.

That ring marked the commencement of their battle. Zilbagias descended from the dais like a lightning bolt, Germadios in his cloak of darkness moving to intercept him. Remarkable strength and magic slammed the spearspear into Germadios’s magic spear, and a deafening roar filled the room.

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Germadios the Iron Wall. That was his nickname.

The Omber family **Cloak of Repose** mixed with the family spearmanship of House Dios had fused to make warriors capable of bearing any assault, magical or physical. Hence, the Iron Wall. Among the Rage family, he had virtually never tasted defeat. After all, against anyone of comparable strength, he could nullify all their curses and magic.

There's no way I can lose!

That was why, even today, he was certain he would come out victorious. The Demon Prince Zilbagias...even if his magic was incredibly powerful for his age, at the end of the day, he was still just a child—still just a viscount. And Germadios had been training in spearmanship for over eighty years. In a duel of spearmanship, how could he possibly lose to a child? No, it was impossible. Unthinkable. The only thing that could potentially throw the match into doubt was magic from a devil.

No matter, I'll leave that open for him, Germadios thought, attempting to be merciful. He could just imagine how good it would feel to sneer down at this prince, claiming on bended knee that he would have won if he used his devil's power.

The kind of devil the prince had made a pact with was still a mystery. Most devils had incredible powers. The number of times a devil's influence had caused a demon to slay an opponent much stronger than themselves defied counting.

However, as he imagined himself turning to the crowd and declaring “even that magic would have been nullified by the **Cloak of Repose**,” the prince leaped from the dais and charged him like a lightning bolt. His fantasies were all blown away in an instant.

He's fast!

Raised high, the spearspear came down as if intent on slicing Germadios's spear in two.

No, calm down! There's no reason to panic!

Germadios's own weapon was dwarven-made and reinforced by his own magic. Meanwhile, the old sword the prince wielded looked as though it was on

the verge of snapping at any moment—serving as the spearhead to an ugly weapon that was neither sword nor spear. His stance had been strong, but...

“There’s no way I’d ever lose...!”

To such a piece of garbage!

Germadios took the blow head-on, intent on smashing the prince’s weapon apart. For an instant, a thunderous roar filled the room, the impact shooting lightning through Germadios’s arms.

What strength! What force! The impact’s shock wave caused the chandeliers above to start ringing and made the hair on the back of Germadios’s neck to stand on end.

He’s overpowering me...?!

Impossible. Where in that tiny body did he hide such power?!

The prince roared, teeth bared like a wild beast as he swung the spearspear again. Germadios was thrown backward. His attempt at stabilizing was thrown off by another table behind him, sending food and dishware clattering to the floor again.

The crowd began to buzz.

“Incredible!”

“What strength!”

All words praising the prince.

Dammit!

To the onlookers, it may have seemed like Germadios had been sent flying because he was weak. But the truth was different! That had been a parry!

Besides, look at the prince!

The hand holding his spearspear was wounded. Right when Germadios had been sent flying, he struck with his own spear. Naturally, some in the crowd also caught onto this. Though the prince looked like he was overwhelming Germadios, it was closer to a draw.

“Ha. Dumb strength is hardly enough to—”

Germadios's attempt to sneer at his opponent was cut short—Zilbagias was on him. With another roar, the prince rushed in like a mad dog. The movements were too quick for Germadios to dodge, so all he could do was block. Planting himself with all his strength, he narrowly avoided the spearspear and delivered a counterattack. Once again, he landed a faint scratch on the prince.

I can wear him down little by little this way...!

A sadistic smile rose to Germadios's face. Using **Transposition** on the prince was all but impossible. He would tease and torment this brat until he was bawling on the floor. He would show that brat the true gap in their strength! The demonic hierarchy was a thing of strength, not of birth!

Another roar, and Zilbagias brought another attack. Germadios's whole body creaked at the impact, but he delivered another counter. Another roar, another impact, another counter, ignoring the pain in his hands. Another roar, another counter...with gritted teeth...

How long is this going to go on for?!

Internally, Germadios began to scream. The prince wasn't even breathing hard. In fact, his barrage of attacks were picking up pace. The repeated ringing as the spearspear struck the spear was driving Germadios mad.

Germadios's precise counterattacks were drawing blood from all over the prince's body, but the prince didn't even flinch. It was like all that bleeding was no more than working up a good sweat.

And the prince was smiling. A bright smile, like he was *enjoying* this.

Germadios felt a chill run down his back. The spectators began to cheer at Zilbagias's fierce onslaught. Germadios no longer saw an avenue to victory. And those with truly sharp eyes began to notice—every single wound Zilbagias had taken were ones he allowed to sneak through, each one superficial and harmless.

Germadios grunted as something slammed into him from behind—a wall. He had been driven back so far that now his back was against a wall. His desperation had been so great while defending against Zilbagias's onslaught

that he failed to notice. A wave of terror shook him at that realization.

“What’s wrong? Nowhere left to run?” Zilbagias smirked, finally pausing. The epitome of arrogance. The look in his eyes was as if he were looking down on a fly that had its wings and legs plucked off.

“You...”

You damn brat!

“Don’t look down on me!”

As he charged Zilbagias with a furious roar, a part of Germadios was still thinking calmly and rationally, trying to find a path to victory.

Gah, fine!

If he had been pushed back this far, he’d use anything available to him. With a flap, the **Cloak of Repose** billowed up in front of him as he charged. Though the substanceless cloak of magic absorbed all light, appearing pitch-black to others, in truth its wielder could see through it. It may have been a cowardly move, but it was still a proper utilization of his Bloodline Magic, so it was still within the bounds they had established. And if Zilbagias couldn’t see what he was doing, he’d inevitably hesitate. Germadios would slide in close and deliver an all but invisible attack, extremely difficult to guard against. And as Zilbagias tried to counter, Germadios would counter the counter!

Wordlessly, Germadios thrust with his spear. The spearhead leaping out of the **Cloak of Repose**...

“Ah, there?”

...didn’t faze the prince in the least. Like a hunting dog that had spotted its prey, Zilbagias’s face lit up with joy as his spearspear reached out and caught the incoming thrust. With a circular motion, he discarded the spearhead—effortlessly defanging Germadios’s attack. For the first time, after having spent their whole duel countering the prince’s attacks, Germadios had launched his own attack. He felt his arm being pulled away along with his spear. And through the **Cloak of Repose** he thought—for a moment—that their eyes had met.

“I am Zilbagias, the Hornbreaker”—a mad smile took to the prince’s face as

he closed into point-blank range—*“the one who smashes the pride of demons!”*

His presence swelled again. He was close. Too close. In one smooth motion, the prince regripped his spear and tensed his shoulders to swing.

“Die!” the prince roared, delivering an immensely powerful sweep.

I’m going to die!

In an instant, the banquet hall had become a battlefield. As irrational fear washed over Germadios, he lifted his spear in an attempt to block. The motion lacked any semblance of expertise. Gone were his decades of experience. In that moment, he was more like an amateur—more like a child. In contrast, the prince’s blade arced toward him with a savage beauty.

The blade flashed. A snap, far higher in pitch than any before it, filled the air. The plain, battered old sword sliced the dwarven-made magic spear in two. And just as effortlessly, the blade sliced through Germadios’s neck—

Or, it would have. At the last moment, the blade flicked upward, stopping a hair short. The **Cloak of Repose** dissipated like a cloud of smoke. Bent backward, holding his now headless spear up to protect himself, Germadios saw the reflection of his own pathetic face in the crystal chandelier above him. The spearspear had stopped perfectly beside Germadios’s head, aligned with his right horn.

“Lucky you,” Zilbagias declared proudly. “Just before I left the castle, father told me to not break any more horns.” Swallowing, Zilbagias shifted his attention to the crowd, before returning his gaze to Germadios. “But there won’t be a next time.” His voice was low and sinister—unlike anything one would expect from a child. “Try underestimating me again. I’ll snap those horns right off. I doubt father could get angry at me for—”

A strange crack filled the air.

“Huh?” Zilbagias made a puzzled expression as the tip of Germadios’s horn right beside his blade broke off and fell to the floor.

A gasp went through the crowd.

“Ah... Ahhhh?!”

With trembling hands, Germadios reached out and touched his now broken horn. His eyes darted between the broken horn fragment on the ground and Zilbagias's confused face.

"Ugh..." He immediately fainted.

"W-Well, uh, you see. I only took off a little bit." Zilbagias gave an awkward shrug. "I doubt father will be *that* angry with me."

+++

From outside the window, Lumiafya sat looking in at the banquet as all the strength left her legs. While Germadios crumpled to the floor as Zilbagias stood above him giving an awkward shrug, the rest of the room finally snapped back to reality and sprung into motion.

"Germadios?! What's going on?!"

"Your Highness, are you injured?!"

"Someone notify House Dios! Hurry!"

"My horn...my horn...!"

Wailing voices filled the air.

"No way..." Cold sweat poured from Lumiafya like a waterfall. She had no idea things would turn out this way. Her lighthearted challenge had taken an unexpected serious turn.

"Behold my beautiful horns. Don't you think their form is all but flawless? I have spared no effort in taking care of them..."

The pride Germadios had for his horns was annoying. And now one of the tips of that pride was just lying on the ground.

"That...that wasn't what I meant..." Still on her backside, she started scurrying back. "I don't know what's going on. It has nothing to do with me!" Lumiafya turned and stumbled her way out of the garden—the agonizing cries that chased her from the banquet hall were almost like they were from the depths of the Abyss itself. She ignored the servants' puzzled looks as she quickly returned to her room and dived into bed—trembling as she covered her head with a pillow.

Who would have thought the prince was that strong? Who would have thought Germadios would be so rash? And who would have guessed the result of their fight would be so...permanent?

What would happen to Germadios now? What would happen to *her* now? Not knowing what would become of her fate terrified Lumiafya.

While sitting in bed, those thoughts tormented her until well after sunrise.

+++

Albaoryl Rage was the eldest son of House Oryl. Slicked-back, ash-gray hair was his trademark look. Unusually cooperative for a demon, gossipers tended to view him as weak. In actuality, he was quite skilled. So much so that he was a core fighter among the Rage family's younger warriors. Quick to lend a hand yet slow to strike, the children and his own subordinates all looked up to him like a big brother.

"All right, everyone ready?"

"Yeah!"

"We're ready, bro!"

Together with two followers who had accompanied him through countless hardships, he had plotted to greet the new prince at his welcome banquet. After successfully escaping his initial encounter with the prince following the chief's rage at the trio greeting the prince before him—yes, this was that group with the banner—he made his way back home and was welcomed by a furious scolding from his own father. But undaunted by the backlash, he was back for more. The men and women of House Oryl were a tough lot. Mere scolding wasn't enough to keep them down.

However, they lacked the standing to actually participate in the banquet itself, so they opted to wait for the meal and first array of greetings to finish up before making their move.

"You're looking more stylish than ever, bro!"

"I'm glad you noticed." Albaoryl stuck his nose up proudly as his underlings praised him. Believing his usual attire would be a bit too plain, he had grabbed

something a bit fancier from his father's closet. "Okay, time to go make friends with the prince!"

"Yeah!" his lackeys cheered in unison.

And so, the trio boldly marched into the banquet hall...and then froze in shock.

The tables were a mess, like a huge fight had broken out. Servants were cleaning up the food and dishware littered all over the floor. Through hushed whispers as they knocked back drinks, the guests talked among themselves. It was a bizarre atmosphere.

"I guess someone started a fight?"

"At the prince's welcome banquet? What a jerk."

Albaoryl felt stirred up by his followers' mutterings. "Maybe we should teach them a lesson ourselves!"

"Yeah!"

Overhearing the trio, a number of the guests turned to look at them without uttering a word. Zilbagias on the other hand sat on top of the dais, being licked up and down by a pale, blonde woman. A woman with long pointed ears—she had to be a high elf. On top of that, she had no hands or feet.

"Hey bro, is that...?"

"Y-Yeah, that must be the rumored high elf pet!"

As expected, the three felt a little grossed out by the display.

"He's really got guts, showing off in front of everyone like that..."

"Yeah...I don't know if we can keep up with this guy!"

The prince was an exceptionally bizarre person, and here they were trying to earn a spot as his retainers. Steeling himself, Albaoryl set off toward the prince. But as he approached, he couldn't help but notice the tense expressions on the faces of Eizvalt and Ziekvalt—who were sitting beside Zilbagias—along with the archduchess deeply engaged in a serious conversation with the chief.

Something really went down, huh? No wonder the atmosphere is a bit rough

in a welcome banquet of all places, Albaoryl thought to himself. Luckily it seemed those who came to greet Zilbagias had all had their turn, so he was able to approach the prince directly.

“Your Highness! My apologies for my former rudeness. My name is Albaoryl Rage!” he declared as he knelt, ignoring the irritated gazes from the chief’s family.

“Oh, you guys? Kept your word and came to say hello, huh? You must be quite upstanding guys,” Zilbagias answered with a wry but not unfriendly smile. The high elf on his lap turned to look at the newcomers curiously but soon decided they were below her interest and returned to her previous business.

Even so... Huh. Albaoryl started to feel somewhat perplexed. Unlike before, Zilbagias’s clothes bore all sorts of tears and scrapes, as if trying to imitate damage taken in battle. *What a bold new style! Is that what’s popular in the castle these days?*

But he said nothing of it.

“You said you wanted to be my retainers, didn’t you?”

And what good luck! Zilbagias had brought up the topic himself. As Eizvalt gave a stunned expression, Albaoryl replied with a bright smile. “Yes sir! I am sure we can be of value to you! Please allow us to be your hands and feet!”

At his declaration, the banquet hall went dead silent.

“Hmm. Well, I guess it’s kind of hard to give you an answer right away,” the prince said after taking a moment to think it over, turning to Ziekvalt at his side. “But I will need some people. If there are no other candidates they’d be fine, right, Lord Ziekvalt?”

“Y-Yes...of course, that would be no problem. If there are no other candidates,” Ziekvalt replied with a bit of a strained smile.

Wait, seriously?!

It’s going to be that easy?!

The three hopefuls shared a joyful look. The up-and-coming prince of the Rage family provided a once in a lifetime opportunity for warriors of the Rage

family to make a name for themselves. They were sure the prince would be flooded with requests from fledgling demons begging to fight alongside him. They fully expected to be thrown out without a second look.

“But that’ll be after we spar a bit, just to get an idea of your strength.”

“Yes sir! Of course!” Albaoryl replied quickly and smartly, earning looks from everyone in the room. After briefly discussing the details of their practice match, Albaoryl and his followers left the banquet hall.

“We did it!”

“He loved you, bro!”

“It’s now our time to shine!”

In higher spirits than ever, the three marched home.

But...

Albaoryl’s high spirits were only tempered slightly by a single nagging question.

...why was everyone in the banquet hall looking at us with pity?

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“Whaaaat?! He broke the horn of the Dios boy?!”

Rogaios raged. He immediately resolved himself to teach the tyrannical young prince a lesson. Being an old veteran of the battlefield, Rogaios didn’t have the mind for politics. He lived by the spear, hunting at his leisure. But he was much more sensitive to the young spurning tradition than most. He had been told that the young prince had gone wild at his welcome banquet, breaking the horn of a man from House Dios. And to make matters worse, the act wasn’t carried out using a spear—the pride of demonkind—but with a human sword.

“Unacceptable! That kind of behavior’s entirely unfitting of one inheriting the king’s blood!”

After overhearing chatter about the other day’s events, he left home well before sunset to cross fields and mountains to make his way to the Rage family stronghold. In fact, it was his first time visiting in quite a while. While adorned

in rough furs and wielding an obsidian spear, he looked very much like a vagabond compared to the prim and proper appearances of the other demons.

“Lazy youngsters!” Seeing the young men and women dressed up in their fancy clothes, whiling the hours away with idle chatter, caused another angry outburst to erupt from him. “Hey, you! Wipe that cowardly look off your face!”

“Gah, it’s the old fossil! Run!”

“Wait! I’ll beat that lazy streak out of you right here and now!”

Though he chased after them, the youngsters were quick. With their powerful magic, they could reinforce their bodies quite well. In contrast, Rogaios had lived a great deal of his life before the first Demon King lifted the ban on entering the Dark Portal and swearing pacts with devils. He was one of the old guard, who was considerably weaker in terms of magical prowess. That on top of his age left him entirely incapable of catching up to them.

“Damn...good for nothing...but running away...!” he heaved, clinging to his spear to catch his breath. “I’m just some old washout. Not a single one stopped to challenge me. They all just scattered. Kids these days...” His cooled anger was replaced with disdain. He gave a sad sigh.

The youngsters these days were quite lazy. Hopelessly so. It set off all kinds of warning bells in his head. Very few demons could still say they remembered the days of living in their sacred ground—Rogaios was one of them. He was getting close to three hundred years old. Led by the first Demon King out of the sacred ground, they had certainly taken a fertile and prosperous land here.

But in Rogaios’s eyes, that prosperity had also brought a rot to demonic society. Though the demons of old certainly lived in abject poverty when compared to the demons of today, they faced life with a serious determination. The light in their eyes, the strength in their faces, was entirely different.

But now look at them! Look at the demons of today! Decorating their bodies with clothes and trinkets, while wearing the faces of slackers and sluggards!

“Unacceptable! Absolutely unacceptable!” he roared. Being in the middle of the street, the city-raised demons, as well as the beastfolk and night elf servants, all gave him a wide berth.

“Hey, you! Where’s the prince?!” ignoring their timidity, Rogaios called out to a young man nearby.

“Wha?! The prince? You mean Lord Zilbagias?”

“Zilbagias! Yes, that was his name, wasn’t it?!” His energetic nod earned a strange look from the young man, as if he was wondering if Rogaios was all there in the head.

“His Highness is staying at the chief’s mansion. If you go to the training ground you may be able to see him.”

“Is that so?! Thank you, youngster!” Clapping the young man on the back, Rogaios marched off. Unable to even hide how he felt about the old man’s unsanitary appearance, the young demon stripped off his jacket and brushed the back of it with a scowl before walking away.

As Rogaios made his way to the chief’s mansion, there was something about the flow of people coming from the other way that caught Rogaios’s eye. They all wore strained expressions, exchanging words with their friends as they left.

“Man, he’s dangerous.”

“That prince is a monster.”

“No number of lives would be enough to deal with that guy.”

Rogaios picked up from distant conversations.

“The prince has done something again?! Unacceptable!” Rogaios’s rage started to boil once more. In his head, the prince was nothing more than a selfish brat going on violent tantrums. Rogaios knew well that the first Demon King was a man who knew what it meant to live in times of peace. He was truly a demon among demons, a powerful warrior fit to rule. The current Demon King wasn’t bad either, but it was undeniable that he had a penchant for decorating himself that the first Demon King lacked. Children surpassing their parents wasn’t always a given, but this particular case made Rogaios feel how heartless the world could be.

However, if the first Demon King’s grandchildren were so vacant and hollow, that was a different story. No tantrum-prone kid who took a liking to human

swords over demon spears could ever be a good king.

“Gah, in that case...!” With what little of his life remained, he would risk all of it to set that prince straight! In the name of the late king, Raogias! Gripping his spear tight, Rogaios steeled himself.

And at long last he made his way to the chief’s mansion. The training ground was packed with people.

“Move it! Out of the way!” Forcing his way through the crowd, he made his way to the front...

“Wh-What is that?!”

...and was left stunned.

Two individuals drenched in blood stood at the center of the training ground. One, a woman with a transparent arm growing from her back, delivering a ruthless series of attacks with her three spears. Though her face had an undeniable beauty to it, her expression drenched in sweat showed she had been pushed to her limit—her hair becoming a total mess the more she fought. Her opponent was a young man, wielding a spear with a strangely long blade, undaunted by the three-speared assault as he retaliated. His face held features similar to the woman’s, his hair the same silver, and his expression was equally pressed as he fought ferociously to protect himself.

Sparks sprayed as their spears clashed over and over. Each strike boasted such tremendous force that Rogaios could feel their intensity from where he stood. The spectators had formed a wide ring as they watched, unable to draw any closer due to the fear of being caught up in the ghastly display. Although a somewhat late realization, he noticed three young men beaten ragged, splayed on the ground nearby.

Those are the weaklings from House Oryl, are they not? Alba or Amba or something or other. And that woman...is that Pratifya?!

He remembered that beautiful face. A true lady of the Rage family, taken as wife by the current Demon King. Which meant...that young man was the prince?!

“Hey, what are those two doing?!”

“What the—?! Oh, it’s just the old fossil,” a startled young man replied as Rogaios’s question pulled him from the reverie of watching the fight, clearly unhappy to be dealing with the older demon.

“Spit it out. What are they doing?”

“It’s crazy. They are training, like real combat practice. Those two have been at it since sunset...”

Their sparring was that intense?! For training?! No number of human slaves would be able to support training that harsh.

“Guh...!” the prince gave a pained grunt, matched with cries of consternation from the crowd. Returning his attention to the fight, Rogaios saw that Pratifya’s spear had impaled the prince. Nevertheless, the prince spat blood as he roared, swinging his spear—which Rogaios now noticed had a sword attached to it as a spearhead—only to have Pratifya mercilessly swat it away and punch her spear through him again. The prince gave a bloody sputter as he dropped to the ground, organs spilling out of his open wounds.

“What...?”

Though at a loss for words at the gory display, the strange barking cry and what it heralded stunned him even more. A woman! With no hands or feet! Crawling forward on four stubs, she ran up to the prince and started licking him. And with a hissing sound, the prince’s wounds—even the clearly fatal ones—rapidly closed.

“What is that woman?!”

“You didn’t hear? That’s the prince’s pet high elf.”

“Pet?!”

A high elf?! Now that he thought about it, he had heard rumors about the prince keeping elves or dragons or something in his care to assault on a regular basis. Rogaios had brushed those rumors off since the prince was so young it seemed unlikely he would have taken to his lusts. He had never expected something like this.

The prince took a deep breath. “Thanks, Liliana.” Back to full health, the

prince rose to his feet, patting the high elf on the head. She replied by shaking her rear and bobbing her pointed ears, clearly overjoyed at the treatment. It was a...bizarre sight, to say the least.

“Why is that high elf acting like a dog?”

“According to the rumors, the prince used magic to destroy her sense of self and made her think that she was a dog,” the young man from before whispered at Rogaios’s mumbled question. “Did you come to see the prince too, old man? The rumors don’t do him justice.”

That reminded Rogaios of his reason for coming to the stronghold in the first place. He had planned on beating some sense into the twisted young prince.

“Okay. Do you need any healing, mother?”

“No,” she chuckled in reply. “I am still fine.”

“As expected. Then let’s go again!”

Retaking their stances, the mother and son pair dived right back into their training. The intensity in which they fought was rare even among the demons of old. The prince using a spear with a sword attached instead of a traditional weapon irritated Rogaios greatly, but there was no denying the prince’s strength. And might made right. Upon closer inspection, the prince also possessed pretty strong magic. If he went toe to toe with the prince, Rogaios surmised he wouldn’t last more than a few seconds.

“Man, my back hurts today...” Rogaios declared to no one in particular, rubbing at his back.

This old soldier knew when to retreat.

The young man that had been explaining things to him gave him a quizzical look as Rogaios walked away.

“Hmm...kids these days... I don’t really get them,” he muttered as he walked. But seeing the way that prince fought was definitely a good experience.

“Maybe the future of demonkind is a bit brighter than I thought.”

With his mood slightly improved, Rogaios started on the long walk home.

Heir to the chief family of the Rage family, Eizvalt Rage stood shoulder to shoulder with the strongest of their warriors, training extensively day in and day out.

“As the chief of the Rage family, we must be strong.” Those were the words his father would frequently say with a stern expression while dragging the young Eizvalt to the training ground. His grandfather, the current chief of the Rage family, was the strongest warrior of them all, and his father was easily in the top five.

“One day, you too will attain that strength. Here I come, Eiz!”

That was the level of strength expected of Eizvalt too. So, from a young age, he had been subjected to the most brutal of training. His father and grandfather had been harsh, not permitting even the slightest whining. If he clung to his mother and cried, they would punch him and drag him back to the training ground against his will. His mother only watched with a sad expression, raising not so much as a word in his defense.

The training he had endured was so intense it left him vomiting blood, beaten into unconsciousness, wounded just badly enough that it didn’t warrant **Transposition**, and the constant pain kept him awake at night. He always felt alone. Sure, he was always surrounded by family. But that didn’t keep him from feeling isolated. Looking back now, he had been fairly closed off as a child, quite introverted. That wasn’t much of a surprise though. While other children his age were outside freely playing around while swinging sticks, he was inside, forced into training in the way of the spear using live blades.

After his sister was born, things improved. The unexpected blessing on their family softened his father and grandfather a little. Eizvalt doted on her just as much as they did. Any time he spent looking after her was time he didn’t have to spend training, and by having someone to protect, the strength he was striving to obtain gained a purpose. Although he initially took care of her for his own selfish interests, she really was cute.

And above all, she was a diversion for him. By believing it was all for his sister’s protection, he could bear the brutal training he was subjected to, and he

finally found the motive to push himself to be as strong as was necessary for the eldest son of the chief's family. He could now brag about that.

But... Eizvalt now felt all the pride he had built up in that regard was crumbling right before his eyes.

A bloodcurdling roar from a boy whose voice had yet to even drop filled the training ground. Sparks flew as the prince and archduchess traded blows in their true combat training. Heavy bleeding and broken bones were accepted as ordinary, and occasionally they would even lose limbs or take fatal wounds to critical organs. It was incredibly brutal training.

And yet, it was something Eizvalt knew all too well. It was the most vicious form of training in the demonic kingdom, using live spears and experiencing fatal wounds for oneself. This kind of training was to allow one to keep their composure even when sustaining heavy wounds on the battlefield so that they could still use **Transposition**.

But even here in the heart of the Rage family territory, access to human slaves to use for **Transposition** was limited. They all couldn't be wasted for mere training. At most, twice per week. That was the limit for how often Eizvalt experienced this training. In other words, they'd expend two slaves for him every week. That was only possible because he was a member of the chief's family. Without that standing or status, no other demon could have that kind of access. Even just once a month likely exceeded what they could afford. And of course, even in the most illustrious of families, not everyone experienced that brutal training. Like his sister, for instance.

Zilbagias groaned, vomiting a waterfall of blood as he dropped to the ground. In no time at all, his pet high elf scurried over on her stumps, barking and licking at his wounds to heal him.

Yes...this was the prince's edge. However he had managed to accomplish such a feat, he had tamed a high elf capable of providing him with unlimited healing. Zilbagias then took Pratifya's wounds, which were healed just as easily, before resuming their training without a hitch. Fighting until receiving a fatal wound then healed back to perfect health counted as one round. And Zilbagias was put through multiple rounds of this a day. The same brutal training Eizvalt went

through at most twice a week.

Coming to the training ground for his usual daily practice, Eizvalt unconsciously tightened his grip around his favorite spear as one emotion washed over him—feeling totally pathetic. The most frustrating part? He had considered twice a week to be quite a lot. For better or for worse, he understood that was a luxury. Even with his position in the chief family, he was only *allowed* to do it twice a week—by force.

That's what he had thought. No one *wanted* to go through such pain, right?

That notion would probably have his father and grandfather in laughing fits. *"If you don't like the pain, then get stronger. Become the one that inflicts the pain."* From the two strongest men in the family!

"Okay! One more round!"

But no matter how brutal the wounds he received, no matter how badly he was beaten up, the prince got back to his feet every time as though he didn't feel a thing. He was truly indomitable. His mother Pratifya smiling as she suffered the same fate was just as crazy, Eizvalt thought.

Her case was a bit more understandable, though. She was famous within the family, married to the Demon King, and above all, an adult. But he couldn't understand Zilbagias at all.

How are you okay with this?

For a supposed five-year-old, this was in no way normal. Those thoughts tormented him. Even if he had spent a great deal of time in the Abyss—where time flows differently—and had emerged looking entirely different from his real age, he was still a child. The very same training Eizvalt had faced dozens of times more often and hated, the young prince faced without even flinching.

The severe training he had to endure had been a source of pride for Eizvalt. Had been. Apparently that was all coming to an end today.

"Hey," a voice called to him from behind. It was his father Ziekvalt, arms crossed.

"Father..."

“So you’ve been watching too?” His sharp eyes were locked on the prince and the archduchess. Ziekvalt then gave a low grunt, the corners of his mouth turning down slightly. Aside from polite smiles, Ziekvalt’s face rarely changed. An expression of this magnitude was like an open scowl on anyone else. “Terrifying,” Ziekvalt murmured, watching the two fight.

Eizvalt could only nod at that.

“The level of intensity they are fighting with is so high. Even so, they are grasping at every opportunity to release and ward off curses. I can’t think of many soldiers on the front lines who could even fight like that.”

Before her marriage, Pratifya had apparently been a warrior on par with Ziekvalt. And this five-year-old was fighting on the same level as her...? Eizvalt couldn’t help but think...how would he fare against his own father? Or even more terrifying, how would he fare against the prince?

Something cold gripped at his spine. It was like all his work, all his suffering, had been pointless. Surely this display would fill his father with disappointment in him. Fearing that, he turned to look at Ziekvalt’s expression.

“Eiz, let me tell you something,” his father said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Compared to people like us, that boy is on a completely different level. This world just has some different people like that. So don’t take it to heart.”

“Yes...sir...” His father’s words left Eizvalt stunned, so unlike the usual stoicism he showed.

“What you are feeling right now, when I was young, I experienced something very similar. Though I suppose the person I compared myself to wasn’t quite so extreme.” The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. A wry smile on anyone else. “If only we could have seen this before the banquet...”

“No kidding.”

If they had, the nonsense that had occurred the other night could have been avoided. Though everyone had gathered at the training ground to witness the training, it was so brutal, so high level, and was lasting so long, it was starting to inspire something akin to revulsion among the onlookers. If he had displayed his skill upon his arrival, no one would have ever underestimated the prince.

“By the way, have you seen Lumia?” Ziekvalt asked, expression suddenly changing.

“Huh? No, not today. Is she in her room?”

“Hmm. She wasn’t there when I checked earlier.” Looking around to ensure no one else was around, Ziekvalt continued, lowering his voice, “A messenger came from House Dios earlier.”

Eizvalt tensed up.

“According to him, when Germadios came to...” His father’s face turned obviously bitter. “...he claimed last night’s incident was a result of Lumia putting him up to it. I want to hear the story from her, so please help me find her.”

Leaving him with that request, Eizvalt felt the beginnings of a headache coming on.

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In the end, anxiety kept Lumiafya from getting even a wink of sleep. Unable to touch her waking meal, she wandered outside to find something to distract herself. Since she didn’t feel like seeing any of her friends, she opted to wander around the place where she used to play with her brother—the forest outside the city. She climbed up a tree and spaced out.

What do I do now...?

She stared up at the stars with a dejected expression. She felt helpless.

As the night wore on her empty stomach, her body as usual acted in self-interest as it started rumbling—a clear reaction to Lumiafya not eating all day. So as time for the night meal approached, she wandered her way back to the mansion.

“Oh, Lumia, you’re back.” The members of House Valt were gathered around the dining table. Zizivalt was clearly relieved to see her. “No one saw you since morning, so we were getting worried.”

“I just went for a bit of a walk,” she said bluntly. The response caused everyone around the table to share a look, which immediately caught her attention. Without any further conversation though, the food was brought out

and they started on their meal.

“A messenger came from House Dios today,” Ziekvalt said out of nowhere, causing Lumiafya’s heart to jump into her throat. “He said that after Germadios woke up, he blamed you for putting him up to last night’s incident.”

With a clang, Lumiafya’s fork dropped from her hand to the table.

“I wanted to hear the truth from you. Could you tell us?” Ziekvalt said, his tone gentle. His demeanor kept his true feelings hidden which frightened Lumiafya even more. Even though she could’ve immediately brushed it off as nonsense, she had hesitated for too long, and now she could do nothing but hang her head in silence.

Silence filled the room, save for the ticking of the clock. Steam rose from the freshly cooked meal set before them, heedless of the looming drama.

“Lumia,” Ziekvalt spoke again. “At this stage, we can still forgive you. But this incident could make things much worse than you can imagine. Not just for you, but for the whole family.” Though gentle, his words were nonetheless heavy. “So I want to hear what happened from you directly.”

Another few seconds passed. Lumiafya couldn’t answer.

“If you refuse to speak, just because you’re my adorable daughter doesn’t mean I’ll go easy on you.”

Lumiafya let out a squeak. She couldn’t raise her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father cross his arms. Though his tone hadn’t changed, it felt like winter had suddenly fallen on the room. She began to tremble.

“Father...” Eizvalt spoke up at her side, unable to watch in silence.

“Eiz, no one can cover for her. Not even you.”

“No, that’s not my intention. But if you act so angrily, even if she’s willing to talk, she won’t be able to.”

“Ah.” Lumiafya heard a rubbing sound, like that of her father stroking his face while deep in thought, but she was too scared to look up and see for herself. No, it wasn’t just her father. Thinking about the looks everyone must have been giving her just terrified Lumiafya even more.

“Lumia. This isn’t about scolding you or us being angry.” Her grandfather Zizivalt sighed. “This could impact the future of your brother here. Please, just be honest and tell us what happened. Without knowing the truth, we can’t know what the right course of action is.”

At his calm and almost disinterested tone—on top of the threat of how her actions may negatively influence her beloved brother’s future—she finally, begrudgingly, started talking.

“And then...I told him, ‘if you teach him a lesson, I might rethink my opinion of you a little.’”

Her explanation caused the faces around the table to turn bitter.

“Give me a break...” her brother moaned beside her. Lumiafya squeezed her hands on her lap. That was harder than any scolding or yelling she could even imagine enduring.

“I see,” Ziekvalt said calmly, stroking at his chin. “Feeling threatened by the rise of the pretentious new prince, House Valt used Germadios to try and undercut the prince’s momentum. Lumiafya dangled prospects of becoming the next family chief in front of him to get Germadios to challenge the prince,” Ziekvalt said, like reading lines from a play. “That’s the excuse House Dios is going with. It seems they’ve already given up on Germadios. No doubt they intend to declare that we used you to carry out that cowardly plan.”

“What?!” Lumiafya’s eyes went wide. “No! That wasn’t what I meant at all!”

“Your true intentions matter little. The question is how they’ll go about spreading their claims and how others will react to their story.”

“B-But...really, I didn’t...!” Lumiafya looked around the table, grasping for support from anywhere she could. But both her mother and brother were silent, and her grandfather sat with a hand to his forehead—motionless like a statue.

The ticking of the clock was the only indication time was still passing.

“Someday, you will be sent off to marry into another family. So we’ve overlooked a lot of your actions,” Zizivalt finally squeezed out, “but maybe

we've been too soft on you." His voice was heavy with regret. Her normally kind and loving grandfather, who usually showered her with praise for every little thing, looked at her with unveiled disappointment. She was crushed.

"I'm...sorry..." Lumiafya shrank back, pushed down by the weight of regret and remorse. She just wanted to disappear. To make it so none of this had ever happened. She wanted to go back in time and knock herself out before anything stupid left her lips.

"What shall we do, father?" Ignoring Lumiafya's apology, Ziekvalt turned to Zizivalt.

"I cannot imagine there is much to do aside from telling them we were unaware of it," Zizivalt said with a new energy, scratching at his beard. "It's not like they possess any proof behind what happened. Germadios went wild on his own, and after punishing him, House Dios tried to turn it into an opportunity to drag us down. That's the story we'll have to go with."

"But it's true Lumiafya left partway into the banquet." The chief and his heir turned hard gazes on Lumiafya again, earning another terrified squeak from her.

"An empty seat on the dais stands out like a sore thumb," Ziekvalt said wryly, but Lumiafya could do nothing but snuffle.

Lumiafya had left, and then Germadios had come in and picked a fight with the prince. That was an unassailable fact. It made House Dios's claim strangely persuasive.

"However, it is possible someone witnessed the conversation between Germadios and Lumiafya. Well, whether they exist or not, all kinds of witnesses are sure to pop up. Likely all friends of House Dios no doubt," Ziekvalt spat. "Making it into a 'he said, she said' issue will be playing right into their hands, father."

"Hmm...true. Maybe the only way to deal with that idiot's fall is to drag out our own idiot."

Her grandfather referring to her so harshly had Lumiafya speechless, tears pouring silently down her face.

“Um...” Eizvalt then raised his hand.

“What is it?”

“Regardless of what statement we present as House Valt, shouldn’t our first order of business be to tell the prince and the archduchess and offer an apology?”

Zizivalt and Ziekvalt shared a look.

“Well...”

“I suppose so.”

House Valt’s reputation was both important and at stake, but before dealing with that, they needed to handle a far more pressing matter: a prince who could break people’s horns without a second thought—and his even more willful mother.

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“That is the situation. Truly, I am deeply sorry for the behavior of my idiotic grandchild.”

As the current chief of House Rage bowed his head, Lumiafya lay prostrate at his feet, squealing an apology of her own.

Hi, it’s me, Zilbagias. While enjoying postlunch tea with Prati, out of nowhere, the whole Valt family drowned us in apologies.

Man, that Germadios guy though. I was wondering what set him off to come at me like that. And now I know why. But an eighty-year-old demon going that far to show off for a thirteen-year-old?

“What an idiot.”

You said it.

Honestly, I couldn’t care less about the whole situation. Not gonna lie, kicking the crap out of someone felt great. Maybe I should have broken off more than just the tip. After all, I doubted anyone would have cared.

Lumiafya trembled and whimpered as she bowed face down on the carpet, but I didn’t really have much of an opinion of her. She was at a difficult age for a

girl, so I could understand her having an instinctual distaste for someone (who was claimed to be) as much of a womanizer as I was. I doubt she had expected her lighthearted little “go teach him a lesson” to end up with weapons drawn. Sure, I had egged things on. But Germadios was the one at fault here. If they told me it was all Lumiafya’s fault, I could really only shrug. Truthfully, having them here was more bothersome if anything. I’d prefer if they just left and carried on.

“I see. So?” I replied with a serious expression, keeping my true feelings from leaking out. What they were getting at made sense, but why should I care?

Before they could respond, Prati took over the conversation. “So, how does she plan on remedying this ‘situation’?” Prati said, crossing her legs while concealing an icy smile behind her fan.

Oh boy. Prati seemed furious. There wasn’t much point in having this whole conversation standing up, so everyone moved to the sofa. Well, everyone except Lumiafya who was made to sit in that tiny chair of bone that was a real pain in the ass—the seat of reflection. *Guess every family has one...*

Whether it was from embarrassment, shyness, or just because her butt was killing her, Lumiafya gave muted groans as her face seemed on the verge of tears.

“To return to the topic at hand.” But the moment Prati’s subzero gaze shifted back to her, Lumiafya’s face went white as a sheet. “That idiot from House Dios had his horn broken in the fight, so I think we can consider his debts paid.” Prati looked back to Zizivalt, fanning herself. “But, uncle, given the circumstances, merely having her bow and apologize is hardly sufficient.”

“I...suppose that’s true.” Zizivalt reluctantly nodded. Lumiafya meanwhile broke out in a cold sweat, the conversation going completely over her head. Folding his arms, Zizivalt wordlessly looked at Prati. His eyes did all the talking as it was clear he was attempting to appeal to her, saying something like “You *are* a part of this family, remember?” But Prati only responded with her usual cold smile.

Man, poor guy. This has to be quite the headache for him. He came here to make amends and to ensure Prati didn’t hear that Lumiafya was at the heart of

this from someone else.

“Even so, with the issue now out in the open, it will take great effort for him to earn forgiveness,” Ante commented.

Given their familial connection, he likely assumed a simple apology would suffice. Maybe it would have worked on someone else, but this was Prati. Looking down on her like that wouldn't resolve things in his favor.

“My son and I cannot afford to take this situation lightly, uncle,” Prati spoke slowly, heavily. “Regardless of how you handle the matter, inevitably word will spread that your granddaughter is at the heart of this. We can't allow a precedent like that to be set. A great deal of trouble will be waiting for us if people believe we are weak enough to forgive such a slight simply because it's from a young girl.”

Though her smile was fixed, the fan in her hand started to creak in her grip.

“If word of this happens to reach the castle, do you have any idea what will happen? Idiot after idiot will harass us, all while using some girl as a scapegoat in hopes of cheap forgiveness.”

Just thinking about it was irritating.

“Of course, this is Zilbagias we are talking about. Fending off such fools will be trivial. But the more he is forced to do so, the more difficult and annoying our situation will become. We don't have time to deal with every fool that comes knocking at our door.”

Feeling threatened wasn't the issue, but rather the resources required to deal with them.

“So when it comes to this matter, unfortunately, we must respond with severity.”

We had to make a show, both privately and publicly, that we wouldn't let anyone underestimate us.

“So you want to break one of Lumia's horns?” Zizivalt all but groaned, Lumiafya's eyes shooting open wide as she started to tremble. *Man, all that shaking probably makes the seat of reflection hurt way more. Glad that isn't me.*

Zizivalt's gaze was now more of a glare as he looked at Prati, while Ziekvalt beside him was completely stone-faced. Eizvalt standing behind the sofa looked to me, as if hoping I'd intervene...but all I could do was silently shake my head. Once Prati got on a roll like this, there was no stopping her. While I had no hard feelings toward Lumiafya, I wasn't going to stick my neck out for her. At that, Eizvalt looked visibly deflated.

"Break her horns? Don't be absurd. I am still a member of House Valt. Why would I ever want such a thing?" Whether that was her true feelings or rather her taking a political approach was hard to discern. "Punishing with too heavy a hand may seem as though we are siding with House Dios. And besides, that will complicate your search for her husband, no?"

Prati looked back to Lumiafya as she might look at a squirming insect. At the castle, Prati lived and breathed the war between women. Under the pressure of her gaze, Lumiafya began hyperventilating. It wouldn't have been a surprise if she collapsed.

"Ah, I have a good idea." Prati grinned, snapping her fan shut. At that moment, I was certain every person in the room thought the exact same thing: this was gonna be bad.

"Have a duel with Zilbagias," Prati said, looking directly at Lumiafya.

"Huh...?!" The girl could only blink dumbly in shock, though I probably had a similar look on my face as I did a double take.

Why?!

"No matter the truth of the situation, the rumors will claim a member of the chief's family incited a member of the former chief family to attack us. The optics would be rather problematic. It is behavior entirely too cowardly, entirely unfitting of the chief's family. Such is the criticism we can expect to receive." Her previous fake smile was nowhere to be seen as she looked coldly down at Lumiafya. "Things may be fine for now, but that's only temporary. Come the next generation, who knows how things will play out. The next time there is a contest for the chieftom, nonsense like this will spur on the other noble families to intervene, considering the healing quotas they have been forced to deal with." She turned her frigid gaze on the whole family. "Our goal was to

restore the honor that the Rage family had lost. Valiant struggles in factional warfare within the castle's walls will mean nothing if our support here is rotting out from under us."

"That is...understandable. But why the duel?" Zizivalt asked.

Good question! Gotta say, I'm wondering about that myself!

"Upset by the prince, Lumiafya left in the middle of the banquet, deciding she'd teach him a lesson herself," Prati spoke, as if reading lines from a script. "When Germadios happened to overhear her, he attempted to win Lumiafya's favor by getting to the prince first. As a result, the loss of his horn falls on no one but himself. Given their terrible position, House Dios attempted to distort the truth and use the situation to trip up House Valt."

Ah, now I get it.

"Germadios's violence was entirely born of self-interest and had no relation to House Valt. However, the fact remains that what spurred on the whole event were Lumiafya's words. So in order to take responsibility, while venting her frustrations with the prince and maintaining her own honor, Lumiafya Rage brought her own spear in challenge to him."

So they'd admit that Lumiafya said she didn't like me but claim that Germadios had acted on his own when he attacked me. And since Lumiafya really didn't like me, she'd challenge me directly to settle her grudge. *Man...talk about savages.*

Zizivalt groaned, while Ziekvalt beside him nodded as if impressed. Eizvalt had a distant look in his eyes, leaving Lumiafya and myself to be the only ones having difficulty accepting this turn of events.

"Fear not, he won't kill you," Prati said, giving the pale Lumiafya a gentle smile. "The pain might make you wish for your death, but you won't die. It will be a mark against your honor, but not one you can never recover from. Considering who you've picked a fight with here, I believe this is actually startlingly gentle punishment."

Staring into the eyes of the trembling Lumiafya, Prati's own took on a sinister glow. *"Be thankful."* She spoke in an exaggerated tone. *"Before being sent off to*

marry, you will learn what it truly means to pick a fight with someone.” It was as if she were layering curses on her. *“If you dislike someone, strike them down yourself. If you cannot, then quietly crawl back to your own hole. You acted above your station. Reflect seriously on your folly.* Learning this lesson now will serve you well in the future.”

Prati relaxed, leaning back into the sofa.

“Your answer?” she asked, voice frigid.

Lumiafya barely managed to squeeze out a “Yes ma’am.”

Prati gave a satisfied nod, while the chief’s family seemed entirely resigned to their fate.

So, uh...with everything settled, I don’t wanna stir things up...but what about my opinion?!

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The moon the following midnight shone brilliantly, illuminating the training ground.

“In accordance with her request, as Chief Zizivalt Rage, I acknowledge and permit Lumiafya Rage’s challenge against Zilbagias Rage for a duel of spearmanship!” Zizivalt loudly declared.

A disturbed murmur went through the crowd of demons around us. Two stood at the center of all the commotion. One being myself. The other being Lumiafya who was wearing a firm expression albeit still trembling, clinging to her spear for dear life.

How did things end up like this...?

“Because of your mother.”

Okay, I knew that.

Glancing to my side, it looked like the only thing keeping Lumiafya upright was willpower. She lacked the composure to maintain any focus on me.

“Wait, the little princess is still just an esquire, right? Challenging a viscount...and challenging *him* is way too reckless, isn’t it?” a voice came from

the crowd, half disbelief and half sympathy.

“I mean, look at her. She obviously doesn’t want to be here.”

“Looks like she’s being punished for something. Someone’s just trying to cut their losses.”

“Maybe there’s some truth to what House Dios said.”

The crowd continued to murmur, Lumiafya’s obvious discomfort casting a shadow over House Valt’s intentions.

“Nah, she got all worked up about him before anyone saw the prince’s training.” But there were some who had no inhibitions about talking down the skeptics. It was the three idiots, Albaoryl and his two lackeys. “Back then, she was really ready to tear him a new one.”

“Mr. G heard her and, well...you know how that played out.”

“She had already put up the challenge. No way she can back down now.”

The three idiots’ “inside scoop” seemed to be winning over the crowd causing a number of other demons to start raising their voices in agreement.

“Ah, if it was before we saw him training, that makes sense...”

“Even I thought the rumors were nonsense back then.”

“I guess she can’t back out now or she’ll look like a coward.”

The crowd’s gaze turned more sympathetic.

Meanwhile, Lumiafya moaned as she desperately fought back tears but not in control of much else. After that public declaration, and with this huge crowd around, she had nowhere to run. This “duel” was really more of a public execution.

Not that I was supposed to kill her.

With a small sigh, I thought back to my discussion with Prati.

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“I can’t really say I’m happy about this,” I complained after the chief’s family left.

"I imagine not," Prati replied, her expression composed. It felt like my words hadn't landed at all. I bet she hadn't even realized that was my attempt at protest. "But Zilbagias, there is one thing that has me concerned."

"Oh? What's that?"

What's she talking about?

"That you are very soft on women." She gave me a dour look. "Let's leave your taste in women aside...for now," she said, clearly struggling to swallow something. "But being soft on them is not good at all. If this had been a duel between you and Eizvalt, you wouldn't utter any complaint, would you?"

That's...hard to argue.

"I...don't think her being a girl is the issue. Even if I was fighting a boy, I'd hesitate against anyone around my age or younger."

"I wonder about that..." Prati replied, clearly doubting me.

"By the way, I agree with her," Ante added.

You too, Ante?!

"As your mother, I know fighting me is no issue for you. But I won't allow you to lower your guard when facing a beautiful woman," Prati declared, slapping her knee with her fan. "If you had no other options, could you kill a woman on the battlefield?"

"Of course," I replied quietly, staring—almost glaring—right back at her. "I'm not oblivious to the differences between daily life and the battlefield."

Whether man or woman, I would hesitate killing *anyone* from the Alliance. But I needed to play the part of a demon prince. If it was necessary, I'd kill anyone. I had long since accepted that fate.

So don't underestimate me.

"Is that so? Well, for the time being, let's leave it at that." Prati spread her fan, hiding her smile. "The duel tomorrow will very much be the battlefield, both of you should be prepared for any amount of pain or injury. If you can display not an ounce of mercy to a beautiful young girl from your own family, that will put my worries to rest. Because we are of the same family, there will be no

political ramifications. Having a new sparring partner is really something to be grateful for, don't you think?" She chuckled. *"Fight with the intent of killing her. Hold back nothing,"* she declared coldly.

"Okay." I paused for a moment as I was quite taken aback before responding while nodding.

"She hasn't forgiven the poor girl one bit, has she?" Ante muttered.

Yeah... I was starting to get the impression I needed to work harder to avoid Prati's wrath in the future.

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So it went.

"The duel will continue until one side is unable to keep fighting. All magic is forbidden. It will be a pure contest of spearmanship," Zizivalt stated, looking from Lumiafya to me as he stood between us. "Now...begin!" he roared, his face like stone.

The crowd watched with a silent nervousness. Ziekvalt was calm and expressionless, while Eizvalt watched reluctantly, as if not wanting to see but not being able to look away. Liliana, Garunya, and Layla were also present, but they all seemed like they much rather be anywhere else. The only one smiling was Prati, fanning herself as usual.

"Are you going to do it?"

Of course, I replied to Ante, turning to face Lumiafya.

Still shaking, Lumiafya pointed her spear at me. It was the most basic of stances. Apparently she hadn't been slacking when it came to training as both her footwork and center of gravity were solid. But...her nerves had her too stiff. Like a gentle touch could knock her over.

"If you had no other options, could you kill a woman on the battlefield?"

Prati's question kept ringing in my head. I considered the question seriously. Usually, I tried everything to avoid thinking about it, but...someday, I'd be betraying everyone around me. Prati, and all the other demons. The three

idiots, the ever serious Eizvalt, and finally the Demon King himself.

I'd kill them. Not just the demons either. The night elves that looked up to me as their master, Veene and Virossa. Even the beastfolk maid who had sworn unfettered loyalty to me, Garunya. I'd betray and kill them all.

"If you had no other options, could you kill a woman on the battlefield?"

But before reaching that point, I'd have to take up arms against countless comrades. In order to protect my position as prince...in order to gain the power of **Taboo**. And at the end of it all...I'd destroy the demonic kingdom itself!

I took another look at the girl before me. She was a demon, someone I should hate. Age? Gender? Who cares? She was an enemy.

"If you had no other options, could you kill a woman on the battlefield?"

Ha. What a stupid question.

Swallowing, sweat breaking out on her forehead, Lumiafya started unconsciously backing away.

"You challenged me. No matter how low rank you are, that means I won't hold back," I spoke quietly. Not expecting me to talk, my words made her jump a bit. "But even if I was told to go all out...using humans for healing for something as stupid as this seems like a waste of resources. I'd feel bad for the soldiers on the front lines. I'll probably have to take your wounds myself, just from a moral standpoint."

I made an openly bitter expression.

"But I don't really want to suffer more than I have to. Understand?" Tilting my head as I asked, Lumiafya responded with a halting "Y-Yes."

"I figured. So I've got a good idea." The tip of my spear...the holy sword began to tremble. "If you die, then I won't have to heal you, right?"

Lumiafya's eyes went wide at my bright smile.

I drew out magical energy and lunged forward. In front of me, the sheltered little girl was totally unable to respond, watching dumbly as my blade came for her.

“So die.” The holy sword swung for her defenseless neck.

“Wait—”

Ha, no real fight has time-outs.

The blade struck. Although Adamas looked worn, it cut through her slender neck with ease, slicing through arteries, and finally severing her spine...

“And done.”

...or it would have, if I hadn't stopped the blade a hair short.

Blood sprayed from Lumiafya's neck. Her eyes were vacant as she dropped like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“Me Ta Fesui.”

Holding my hands to my own neck with all my strength, I took her wound myself. The side of my neck split open and blood poured out.

“Lumia!” Ziekvalt dashed over as an expression finally took over his face. Eizvalt and Zizivalt trailed behind, faces pale.

“She's...not dead...yet...” I pointed at her lying on the ground, speaking hoarsely. Since I was still kicking, the same should apply for her. Though she probably thought she was dead.

Damn, is this what it feels like to take a blade to the neck? I could feel my face growing pale, my vision starting to shrink...

“Help...her...”

All strength fled from my legs. I couldn't even keep my hands on my neck wound. This was bad. I was losing too much blood.

I could hear Liliana's panicked barking in the distance. Glancing over without turning my head, I checked on Prati. She wore an exasperated expression.

Ha, take that. I went at her...just like I was going to kill her...

As I felt Liliana getting closer, like a snuffed candle, my consciousness slipped away.

Chapter 3: Training Days

When I next opened my eyes, it was bright outside.

I seemed to be in bed.

"You idiot."

Immediately, Ante's illusionary hand emerged from my chest and jabbed my eyes.

"Ow!"

"Ah, you're awake?"

Sitting on a chair beside the bed was Layla in a maid uniform, slipping her hands behind her back as she saw me wake up. I sat up. On the sofa beside the window nearby, Liliana was fast asleep.

"How long was I out?"

"About half a day," Layla replied, hands still hidden. Apparently I had been asleep for quite a while.

"Because you lost so much blood, you fool," Ante pouted.

Sorry. Making a wound that deep wasn't part of the plan, but I kinda got really into it...

"You should have just let the brat die," Ante continued, pinching at my cheeks.

I said I'm sorry!

"So, what happened after I passed out?"

"It was quite the commotion," Layla said with a wry smile. "Apparently the princess's heart stopped, so her family was quite desperate to resuscitate her."

Wait, seriously?

But Layla went on to explain that they got her breathing in no time, so it was all worked out. Apparently I had swung my blade with such intensity that the

crowd thought I had really taken her head clean off. So when they saw me casually take the wound for myself without batting an eye, they were quite aghast. It looked like I was making a name for myself here too.

“Have you been with me the whole time, Layla?”

“Yes, I suppose...” She gave a suspicious smile, hands still concealed behind her back. She had been sitting like that for a while now. She eventually stood but walked sideways to avoid showing me her back.

“What’s in your hands?” It was so suspicious, I kind of had to ask.

“Ah. Um...well...” She finally gave in, bashfully revealing what she was hiding—yarn and knitting needles. “I decided to start learning knitting, but...it’s not going well...”

As she said, the needles were in the middle of... What even was that? The tangled mess she had made was indescribable. Could you really say she had even “made” something here...?

“It will be getting cold soon, so I was thinking of making some socks...”

So they are supposed to be socks. Considering how they were turning out, it made sense she’d tried to hide them. I guess prying that out of her was kind of rude of me.

“At times, she can be quite the klutz, huh?”

I suppose. Sure, she had her moments of clumsiness. But she was a dragon taking on the form of a different species, so I figured it was maybe something all dragons had in common when in human form. Even Garunya had given up on trying to teach her self-defense. Yet even so, Layla’s ironing skills were flawless. Just thinking of how much blood, sweat, and tears she must have put into learning that made me want to cry myself.

But since she’s a knitting newbie, isn’t she making pretty good progress?

“Yes, I suppose so. Perhaps her passion to learn has helped her stay incredibly focused.”

Ah, I see! So she really likes learning! I’d heard that she had spent most of the ride here reading. I could probably learn a thing or two from her. But anyway,

winter was coming, wasn't it? From what I had seen, it didn't seem like a change in weather mattered much to dragons—they seemed to bathe in literal fire or ice water with equal comfort—but I supposed while in human form she'd start getting cold. With the temperature starting to dip, maybe her feet were starting to get cold. That was no good.

"If you're ever feeling cold, just say something, Layla. Getting you some warmer clothes won't be a problem."

"Huh? Oh...okay," Layla responded, looking rather confused.

"You idiot." Once again, Ante made a jab at my eyes.

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"Don't you get it?"

Get what?

"Gah...never mind. You'll figure it out eventually."

What are you talking about?

But Ante refused to say any more.

With a sleepy grunt, Liliana gave me a quizzical look before yawning and going right back to sleep.

+++

It's...bright...?

The young girl's eyes cracked open, still in a rather dreamy state. Her dark room's only source of light being the sunlight streaming in through a crack in the curtains. She could hear the twittering of birds outside.

Morning...?

Her first thought was to wonder why she had woken up at such a bizarre time.

Slowly but surely, her thoughts started to get in order...and she realized she was still alive.

With a sharp cry her hands shot to her neck. But there was no scratch to be found—her skin was perfectly smooth. She had been sleeping in her own bed

and was wearing silk pajamas.

Her outburst disturbed someone in the corner of her vision. Looking over, she saw her brother Eizvalt sitting on a chair beside her bed, roused by her cry. With sleepy eyes, he started looking around, finally meeting Lumiafya's gaze.

"Lumia! You're up! Are you okay?!" Eizvalt jumped to his feet, all but kicking away his chair as he grabbed her shoulders. She felt so warm. Both herself, and her brother.

"Eiz...what was I...?" The more she spoke, the more composure she lost. Vivid memories clawed their way up to the front of her mind. The feeling of a hot yet cold sensation burrowing its way into her throat. The feeling of warmth, of life, draining from her body... Lumiafya began gasping for breath.

"It's okay! You're okay!" Noticing her breathing becoming unstable, Eizvalt immediately wrapped her in a big hug. "It's okay! It's all over! You're fine!" Gently stroking her hair and rocking her back and forth, his warmth and the sound of his heartbeat slowly brought Lumiafya back to her senses.

And at the same time, relief swept through her like a raging torrent. Burying her face in her brother's chest, she began to wail.

"I was so scared...!" she sobbed, eyes and nose running like a waterfall as she clung to him.

I thought I was going to die!

Back then, she thought that was it—that she was dead. That was how terrifying the prince's attack had been and just how overwhelming his bloodlust had seemed. Leading up to the duel, she had assumed she was in for a world of hurt, but that at least her life would be spared. In that moment, it almost felt like she was being dragged down to Hell.

The most surprising part? No matter how much she wailed, as those horrific memories resurfaced, she didn't feel even a shred of anger or resent for Zilbagias. Her heart had thoroughly broken. She was much more terrified at the prospect of *him* being displeased with *her*. Why had she tried to spit on him like that? No answer came to her. What would happen the next time they met? She had no confidence she'd be able to avoid falling flat on her face.

I hate this...

She would relinquish the entire world if it meant never seeing him again. But, as a member of the chief's family, she knew the possibility of that was nil. And all fault fell on her. She couldn't even complain. All she could do was cling to her brother with all her strength.

"Have you calmed down a bit?"

"...Yeah."

After crying for a while, Eizvalt started to stroke her hair again as she finally quieted down.

"Good. Do you need anything?"

"...I'm thirsty."

"Okay, I'll get you something to drink. What would you like?"

"No, I'll...get it myself." She was thirsty, and needed to take a trip to the bathroom. Attempting to slip out of bed, she found her feet unsteady under her. Her brother tried to lend her a hand, but hobbling through the hallways in her brother's arms would be far too embarrassing, so she brushed him off.

"Then, here. Use this." Unable to leave her as unsteady as she was, Eizvalt grabbed something from beside the bed for her to use as a walking stick.

A training spear. As it was for training, the weapon had no real blade, but the moment its point entered Lumiafya's vision, she collapsed with a soft groan as her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Huh? What? Lumia?! What's wrong, Lumia?! Keep it together!"

Not understanding what had happened, Eizvalt began to panic.

From that day forward, Lumiafya Rage couldn't bear the presence of bladelike objects.

+++

I had spent about a week living at the chief's residence. After overcoming the obstacles that were the welcome feast and the duel with Lumiafya, things

finally started to somewhat settle down. Though now that I thought about it, the main reason we had come here was to get allies and to train our coordination ahead of my deployment in the spring. It was kinda weird that these little scuffles were keeping me busy. But regardless, I had more or less solidified my reputation here.

Today's training was focused on marching, so we had taken it outside. First was the three idiots led by Albaoryl.

"Pleased to work with you!"

Following him were his two lackeys. One being the modest and unflappable Okkenite.

"We'll do our best!"

And the other who always quickly got carried away, Seiranite.

"Thanks for having us."

These three made up the young soldiers in our group. Although there were a few young demons that had tried to join, they were the textbook definition of small fry. The type that went down in a single attack whenever we sparred, so we just sent them packing.

Even though Albaoryl's gang came off as a bunch of fools, surprisingly, they were pretty competent in spearmanship. They each survived three attacks from Prati and me. Plus, they weren't put off by my repeated live battle training. On top of that, they'd earned a bit of our trust as the attempts of some night elf maids to draw out information from them had proved unsuccessful.

For the record, the information they'd been trying to draw out was a piece of info about me we had insisted the three keep "secret." We had sent some night elf maids to see if they'd give that info up, but they'd dutifully kept it under wraps. It had been kind of a childish trick, but even some stronger than these three idiots had been quick to cough up the info, so they had been rejected out of hand.

Personally...I would've liked some weaklings that I could finish off with a single strike if it ever came to that.

“A shame you can’t vocalize that desire, can you?”

Yeah, as a demon prince, it wouldn’t really make any sense. Besides, Prati would never allow it.

Of course, we couldn’t just settle for those three when it came to battlefield companions. There was also a band of older demons to serve as my subordinates.

“We look forward to working under you, Your Highness.” Standing in full gear, a somewhat familiar man bowed his head in greeting, along with his four subordinates.

“Good to have you, Kuvital,” I replied with a nod, as a good king would.

Yep, it was the full band of soldiers that had failed to back me up in time during the Faravgi fight. After that little incident, it seemed enlisting was their hasty attempt to regain face.

Practically speaking, Kuvital was my second-in-command. Despite their utter failure, being unable to protect me while I took on the threat myself, he had still been appointed to a rather high position. It was a pretty uncommon sight in demonic society. Maybe Prati was having second thoughts about how harshly she had treated them after it all went down. After all, it was her who had ordered them to keep their distance.

For the record, Kuvital was a count, the four men under him being viscounts. With all of them on the verge of promotion, practically speaking, it was like a marquis leading a band of counts. Albaoryl himself was a viscount, same as me, while his two idiots were barons. Given their ages as demons, that was to be expected. These eight would likely be my party when we attacked the capital of Deftelos.

“For being royalty, your retinue seems quite small, does it not?”

Nothing I could do about that. And to be honest, I was happier with it that way. All because of your authority, Ante.

“The purpose of today’s training is to learn about each other.” In the forest outside the city, Prati clad in her (savage-style) riding clothes began giving us

instructions. “When spring comes, you must attack Deftelos’s capital as one. Your mission is to serve as outriders and support for Zilbagias, and if a powerful foe reveals itself, to exhaust your life in his defense,” she said, almost glaring at the group, tacitly saying she wouldn’t accept failure. Already standing at attention, the eight of them somehow stood even straighter. The three idiots were straining themselves so hard that they were on the edge of falling on their backsides, but Prati gracefully ignored them.

“Aside from Daiagias, who fights alone, the other heirs typically fight with retinues of at least thirty to fifty soldiers. In comparison, you are exceptionally small in number. But of course, that’s by design.”

At Prati’s urging, I took up the explanation from there. “I have a pact with a Devil of Constraint,” I spoke slowly, turning to face them. The three idiots swallowed nervously as I shared about my pact. Though we were in the presence of only family, we had erected a soundproof barrier as a precaution. “I can place powerful restraints on everyone within my vicinity, myself included. As for how strong...let’s just say even my mother had to struggle quite a bit to shake it off.”

The eight men shared looks of astonishment. An archduchess struggling against the curse of a viscount? That thought terrified them. Prati watched their astonishment with a smug grin.

“But seeing is believing, right? *Breathing is forbidden.*” I took them by surprise.

And just like that, all of us were unable to breathe.

Kuvital and his subordinates immediately reached for their throats, eyes blinking in confusion. Since they had already been clued in about my abilities beforehand, this wasn’t really a surprise to them. But as each of them attempted to throw off the curse, they found themselves entirely incapable of doing so.

And as the loud coughing fit suggested, if Kuvital and his men were at the curse’s whims, there was nothing the three idiots could do about it either. They were practically jumping around, covering their mouths and throats to try and hold in their strangled cries.

“So that’s what it’s like. I think you get the idea,” I said after releasing the curse. The three idiots immediately began heaving for air, while Kuvital’s viscounts seemed a bit frustrated they hadn’t been able to fight off the curse themselves. Kuvital himself was strangely calm. He probably felt as though if he had struggled hard enough he could have shaken off the curse but had held back to avoid making me look bad.

“We’ll need to keep an eye on this one,” Ante commented.

For sure.

“The farther away from me you move, the weaker the effect gets. I can maintain maximum strength for about thirty paces,” I continued, my expression blank. In actuality, my range was slightly greater than that. “Anyone near me will get caught in that magic, which is why my retinue consists of only a few elites. If I led a large force, my magic would throw everything into chaos.”

The three idiots nodded in understanding.

“Honestly speaking, I would have preferred to fight alone like the Third Prince, but it was decided that was too reckless for my first deployment.”

Judging by their faces, they all clearly agreed with that notion. *Damn...I really wanted to get to Daiagias’s level soon.*

“I believe you are already on par with him. Particularly when it comes to women.”

That’s not what I meant.

Anyway, if I ended up needing to use **Constraint** on the battlefield, my followers would need to retreat, so we explained the details of what that would look like.

“Any questions?”

One of Kuvital’s men raised his hand. “What kind of restraints do you expect to be using, Your Highness?”

“Against humans, mostly bans on swordsmanship and coordination, I imagine.”

“I-I see...” The demon scowled, clearly feeling that would be quite harsh.

“Huh? Don’t you use a sword though...?” one of the three idiots, Okkenite, muttered.

“Yes, this is a sword,” I answered him, patting Adamas in its sheath. “But *this* is a spear.” Fusing the usual bones together with the sword, I displayed my swordspears for them.

“A-Ah, I see. I know it’s kinda late to bring this up, but why do you use a human weapon as your spearhead, Your Highness?” Albaoryl asked.

“That is...mostly because of my **Constraint** magic. Due to the workings of the magic, I can’t go into detail. But whenever you see me acting strange in some way, you can assume that’s the reason. I’m doing what I can to nourish my power.”

“Ah, is that so! Understood.” Albaoryl nodded, satisfied with the magical explanation.

“Um, do you use that power against the Archduchess in your training?” the last of the three, Seiranite, spoke up, clearly quite interested.

“No. I don’t want the nature of it to become widespread, so I avoid using it when training.”

“Wow! That’s incredible, considering how much she uses against— Oh!” Seiranite clapped his hands to his mouth.

When training, even though her strength dwarfed mine, I only used **Naming** while she used all kinds of curses. Not only had he all but accused her of childish behavior but he’d done so while she was right in front of us, no less.

Prati chuckled. “That’s right and exactly why I’m so proud of him.” Prati’s smile widened, her eyes narrowing slightly. And maybe it was just my imagination, but it felt like the air around us also got a bit colder. “Your name was Seiranite, was it not?”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

“Perhaps we’ll give you some special training later. Now that you are one of Zilbagias’s subordinates, we have to ensure your skills stay sharp, no?”

Seiranite’s mouth flapped soundlessly as he started to break out in a cold

sweat. Some say the mouth was the source of disaster, and this little incident was proof to that claim. Being forced to spar with Prati after all the exhausting training we had done sounded like some twisted punishment for amusement. Even I would balk at that. Except I will probably have to be the one to heal him...

Please don't hurt him too badly...!

"I wouldn't count on that," Ante chimed in.

Yeah, I know...

With that, our coordination training began.

+++

"Take care."

As Prati saw us off with a bright smile, we started off into the wilderness. This training area was dense with foliage and had plenty of undulations in the land. The vegetation had been thoroughly maintained, so it wasn't like we were gallivanting through an uncharted jungle, but the darkness of night still made it quite a challenge to navigate. If I hadn't been a demon, I probably wouldn't be able to see a thing. Luckily, my eyes now could make out everything within the darkness.

A mixture of sounds could be heard—the thudding of our feet, the clanking of our gear and armor. Everyone was equipped for real combat. Being our first day of training, the details were rather simple. All we had to do was form a column and make it to the other side of the forest. That was all—

"Man, your armor is serious business, Your Highness!" Albaoryl turned back from his position at the lead, eyes glittering.

"Isn't it though? I'm pretty proud of it," I replied, running my hand down the scales. For the first time in a long while, I was wearing Syndikyos—the armor made from Faravgi's scales. The silver-white scales shone brilliantly in the dead of night.

In addition to that, I wore a small forehead protector in place of a helmet and

had my swordspear at the ready. Honestly, it was a pretty makeshift, so I'd probably be getting something more permanent once we got back to the castle.

Everyone else was wearing helmets. Similar in design to those of the beastfolk which allowed their ears to pop through, they allowed the demons' horns to do the same. When I muttered something about their horns being out in the open, everyone jumped a bit. It was kinda funny.

But anyway, I would probably need to give them a rundown on this armor.

"In order for the smith to make this with full effort, I swore not to harm any dwarves while wearing this armor," I said, keeping a careful eye on my footing to make sure I didn't get tripped up by any roots or changes in elevation. "So even on the battlefield, I plan to avoid fighting dwarves whenever possible."

"I see. Understood!"

"Your Highness, what happens if you break your vow?"

Seiranite didn't miss his chance to slip into the conversation. Earlier he looked to be on death's door upon learning he'd have special training with Prati, but it seemed he had already fully recovered from that shock.

"Its magical properties will disappear, of course. It'll just be a hunk of scales tied together. Basically garbage."

"Oh, that would be a big problem!"

"We cannot allow such a wonderful piece of workmanship to be reduced to garbage!"

"If any dwarves show up, just leave them to us!"

The three idiots lifted their spears, all but chanting.

"Killing dwarves is a waste anyway, so I'd prefer to avoid fighting them in the first place. But if we're forced to fight them in close quarters, I'll leave them to you." I gave a wry smile as I couldn't even begin to imagine how the three of them would fare against a unit of dwarves donning trueforged armor.

But it was kind of ironic. Thanks to this armor, I wouldn't have to harm any dwarves, but my own people, the humans... Each step forward in this training was like taking a step toward the day I'd have to.

With a small sigh, I tried to force my thoughts elsewhere. There was no point worrying about all that now.

Despite having been marching through the forest for quite a while, I still felt pretty light on my feet. As expected of dwarven-made armor, it was like it wasn't weighing me down at all. In fact, it more so felt like it was supporting me. Usually, marching in full gear like this would be draining for anyone...

"Man, I'm sweating like crazy..."

"Gah, I got caught on a branch!"

"Careful with your spear, man!"

...which was the case for the three idiots. Unlike me, those three didn't have high-quality gear, wearing (probably plundered) chain mail layered with bone and steel over it. With their helmets and spears on top of that, they were quite heavily burdened. So naturally, they were quite slow. Us moving through a hilly forest just made matters even worse. Apparently they had actual combat experience, but it was probably just their family going wild on the front lines on their own accord more than anything.

In contrast, Kuvital and his subordinates kept a tight ring around me, moving fluidly and carefully as a team. Though they were also in full gear, the only burden they showed was a light sweat they had worked up. Their difference in age and experience was vividly apparent.

"Let's take a break."

Walking a little bit farther, once the three idiots had been pushed to their limits so much that they couldn't hold a conversation, I called for a halt.

"Thank goodness..."

"I'm boiling in here!"

"Water...water..."

Stripping off their helmets and pulling out leather water bottles, the three idiots found trees to lean up against as they started to scarf down the water. Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I took a single mouthful of water

myself, enjoying it slowly.

“How boring,” Ante muttered. “All this walking and the scenery remains unchanged. Are we even making progress?”

No need to worry about that. We’ve got a compass and a night elf map.

My previous life had made me quite accustomed to using maps, and I had learned all sorts of new surveying and star-reading techniques in this life, so I knew we were on the right track. We’d be out of the forest in no time...or, so I wish I could say.

“Oh? You think something will happen?”

I mean, think about it. This is Prati we’re talking about. You think she’d give us training that amounted to little more than going out for a picnic?

“Absolutely not. So we are perhaps in store for some combat?”

Almost certainly.

+++

Kuvital Rage gave Zilbagias a casual glance as he took a drink himself.

Hm. I don’t sense anything suspicious.

Ever since they had stepped foot into the forest, the prince had continued to impress Kuvital.

“You are already aware that Zilbagias is a first-class fighter,” Prati had said, calling Kuvital out to discuss this with him the day before. “But his world is still quite small. Though he has no issues handling a spear, he has only done so on an open training ground. That is hardly sufficient preparation for real combat, don’t you think?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“The battle next spring will be urban warfare which will require special training. But, before then, I hope to give him all sorts of experiences. I have high hopes for you.”

“We will spare nothing, ma’am!”

And so, Kuvital's job was supposed to be pointing out all of Zilbagias's weaknesses.

But he already carries himself like a seasoned veteran.

Kuvital was in awe. He couldn't think of a single thing to criticize. The prince never lost his way, always keeping a straight path while constantly checking they hadn't gone off course. And despite the uneven and irregular terrain, his footing was sure and solid. His endurance left nothing to be desired as well. Even though he had built up a little sweat, his breathing didn't falter. He was being careful with rationing his water, and above all...

He's always watching.

That was the biggest thing. His guard didn't drop for a second. At all times, he was ready to jump into action at a moment's notice, keeping a firm grasp on his relative position to everyone else in the group. It seemed almost...unnatural. Like he was *too* cunning.

Is he really five? This is unbelievable...

Where had he learned all this? Even if he had picked it up from a book, that didn't make up for physically experiencing it for yourself. Was this a result of royal blood?

"What's wrong, Kuvital?" Zilbagias caught his gaze.

"No, nothing. I was just thinking your movements are quite sharp considering this is training."

"Ah. Yes, my mother has been training me hard. Something small like this isn't a big deal."

Kuvital gave a slight frown at the prince referring to this training as "something small." It seemed his subordinates got the same impression as they shared looks of disbelief. Just what had his mother put him through?

The three idiots of course just echoed thoughts of "Man, you're amazing, Your Highness!" and "I'm really starting to admire you!" Honestly, it seemed the bulk of Kuvital's job would be actually whipping those three into shape.

“But this training is only going to get a bit tougher from here on out, right?” Zilbagias suddenly said, leaving Kuvital at a loss for words. “So my hunch was right. You’ve already got something planned, huh?” The prince grinned, taking another sip of water.

“You really are sharp.” Kuvital gave a wry grin of his own. “If you’ve figured it out, there’s no point in hiding it. Yes, you’re right—”

Kuvital was cut off by the sound of something slicing through the air. Zilbagias twisted to the side, just in time to allow the arrow to strike the trunk of the tree behind him.

“It’ll be something like this,” Kuvital said, readying his spear.

“An ambush while we rest, huh?” Zilbagias murmured, adjusting his forehead protector. Kuvital’s four subordinates smoothly moved into formation, while the three idiots hurriedly put their helmets back on. They could hear footsteps from the depths of the forest approaching them.

The objective of this training exercise was to get from one end of the training ground to the other...*safely*.

“Here they come.” As the prince spoke, the air filled with the thrum of bowstrings.

+++

As expected.

A hail of arrows cut through the night from the undergrowth, aimed directly at us.

“*Piercing is forbidden*,” I murmured, and at once the arrows lost their momentum and fell to the ground. The demons around me “ooohed” and “ahhhed” at that. Naturally I would have gone all out if this were real combat, but since this was “training” even in my eyes, we were probably up against members of the Rage family. No point in hiding my magic here. Inspecting one of the arrows launched at us, I saw its head had been flattened. Clearly they were training arrows. With no miracles or prayers layered on them, **Constraint** magic was more than enough to deal with them. The curse combined with our armor made us all but invulnerable to their attack.

As that thought crossed my mind, numerous white shadows emerged from the undergrowth, rushing toward us. Armed warriors of the White Tiger Tribe. They wore light leather armor and wielded knuckles and claws for weaponry.

“We found them! It’s the demons!”

“Raaah! Death to the dark!”

“Prepare yourself Mas— Err, Demon Prince!”

In sharp contrast to the monotone recitation of their lines, their movements were quick and sharp. *Wait, Garunya is with them?* Seeing her in full combat gear instead of in her maid uniform was a new sight. Though the huge “Alliance Army” tags on their armor was a tad overboard.

As **Constraint** dealt with their ranged attack, the beastfolk vanguard quickly tried to close the distance between us, but their movements started to slow a little.

“Looks like this spot was the right choice.”

We had assembled atop a hill, where we had chosen to take our break. With a height difference of about two grown men compared to the beastfolk’s position, the incline leeched much of their charge’s momentum, making things quite easy for us.

“Wait, you even thought that far ahead?”

“Read about it in a tactics book,” I replied casually to Kuvital’s astonishment. After all, I couldn’t make a habit of saying I knew a thing or two from my past life, could I?

Meanwhile, the three idiots rushed forward to intercept the beastfolk.

“*Retreat!*” Albaoryl shouted a curse, causing the beastfolk in the lead to freeze up. Seiranite immediately tried to follow up with a thrust, but had apparently forgotten all about “piercing is forbidden” caused by **Constraint**, and ended up just freezing in utter confusion instead.

“Don’t hurt them too badly. This is mobility training, not combat training.” With that, I stepped forward to intercept Garunya.

“Hinyaaa!” Unlike her adorable little shout, her attack was brutal and heavy.

Instead of a thrust she punched, properly accounting for the **Constraint** I had used. But hand-to-hand combat would always come up short when it came to range. She couldn't accelerate beyond common sense like a Fistmaster, and was further slowed by the height disadvantage. With a quick sweep of my spear, I swatted away her fist and smacked her in the abdomen with the flat of my blade.

"Gyah!" With a dramatic death cry, Garunya collapsed to the forest floor. *Guess she's "dead."*

"Gah, we don't stand a chance!"

"Run!"

With their vanguard (deciding they had been) defeated, the remaining beastfolk quickly turned tail and fled.

"What should we do?" Kuvital asked, expression serious. Honestly, this was making me kinda nostalgic for the days when I first started training to be a hero.

"Pursuing runs the risk of running into a trap or even their main force," I answered, pointing to where they'd retreated with my chin. It was a tactic often used by the Alliance. But they could have fortified their position from another angle by anticipating we'd try to sneak around them, or could have guessed we'd see through that plan and set up for a frontal assault instead, or be waiting to ambush us again once we started moving. There was no telling what they really had up their sleeves, so it was difficult to devise a strategy.

"Can you feel their magic?" I turned to one of Kuvital's subordinates. If I remembered correctly, he was skilled in detecting magic. It was him who had first noticed Emergias approaching back during the Faravgi incident.

With a wry smile, as if not expecting me to go directly to him, he answered, "I sense five powerful sources of magic in the thicket. One is likely the referee, but the others appear to be a unit of heroes and priests."

So this is the big prize they're dangling in front of us, huh? It made me nauseous. The referee he mentioned was probably Prati.

"Tactically speaking, beelining for them sounds stupid," I said, before turning to Kuvital. "But as a demon prince, would I be expected to take them head-

on?”

“If this were a larger scale engagement, that may be something to consider. But this is a chance encounter in the forest. I do not believe you need to mind such political issues.”

“I see.”

The three idiots watched our exchange with unveiled awe.

“Then...a head-on attack it is.”

Which quickly crumbled to confusion at my next statement.

“Just as quickly as they attacked, the beastfolk were swift to retreat. There shouldn’t be much in the way of obstacles in that direction. The standard play would be for us to try and take them from the side, which means they’ll be ready for us to try and find another way around. On top of that, the fact we didn’t immediately pursue means they likely don’t expect us to attack at all. A head-on attack seems like it will yield the least resistance.”

My instincts told me that they’d be lying in wait to our left. To our right was a large depression in the land, so they probably assumed I’d keep my distance from it to avoid fighting at a height disadvantage. After I picked this spot for our break, they should have anticipated I would be taking the landscape into consideration.

“If anyone has opinions on the matter, let’s hear them.”

“No objections.” Kuvital nodded, an intrigued smile on his face.

“Though, if this had been a real battle, I would have preferred to pull back and make contact with our night elf scouts,” I said. “We really need their expertise.” That thought made me want to spit. Unfortunately I couldn’t underestimate the night elves’ abilities.

“Well...” Kuvital’s expression clouded a bit. “As the leader of a unit, that’s a wise decision on your part. I doubt my lady will find fault with you for that.” Kuvital turned a meaningful gaze on the thicket. “But I can’t begin to guess how those ‘heroes’ will react to that.”

How our “guests” would take my decision? Man, this is becoming a pain to

think about.

“Always shackled by status, huh?” I shrugged, adjusting my forehead protector. “Guess it’s decided, we’ll launch an all-out attack. Let’s crush those heroes.” The fake ones, that is.

We ran. Enhanced by magic, we cut through the forest at lightning speed. Despite the awful terrain, even the three idiots didn’t so much as stumble. Our momentum carried us through the thicket and into the enemy’s unprepared lines. Once we reached the clearing, we could see that they had in fact been arrayed to protect against an attack from the left, and were now moving to accommodate our head-on assault. A wave of arrows came for us, but were struck down by my **Constraint**.

“Flee!”

“Kneel!”

“Be crippled!”

In answer to the failed volley, a wave of curses lashed out from my subordinates. Of course, they were all holding back. Albaoryl’s curses caught the beastfolk, while Kuviltal stomped and kicked, throwing countless rocks and pebbles up into the air. The sounds of the dull impacts resounded together with cries of pain as the cloud of debris washed over the beastfolk. Even though I was sure they hurt like hell, if this were a real fight, instead of dull impacts they would have been razor sharp cuts.

“Eat this!”

“Burn!”

The Nite brothers unleashed a wave of fire magic but kept it fairly weak to avoid starting a forest fire, meaning it was mostly just for show. If this had been a real battle, the blaze would have been much greater.

“The beastfolk are down by half! Those struck by curses and magic directly are unable to keep fighting!” a familiar voice called out—Prati. She stood at the edge of the battlefield, wielding a large metal megaphone. Still in her riding gear, she wore a tag labeled “Goddess of the Battlefield.” In other words, she

was the referee. “From this point on, curses are forbidden! Consider them sealed by the enemy priests!” Prati motioned to the rear of the fight, where a certain red-skinned devil with sword and armor shouted holy verses.

“Oh great blessings!” I then noticed she had a label saying “Priest” on her chest.

Hold up, that’s just Sophia!

As our eyes met, Sophia flashed a faint smile and shrugged.

“Gah ha ha! You’re finally here!”

“We’re sick of waiting, demon scum!”

Arrayed around her were four demons, burning with a desire to fight. It seemed the five “powerful sources of magic” detected before hadn’t included Sophia. Maybe a midlevel devil like herself didn’t make the cut.

The demons variously had “hero” and “priest” written on their filthy armor. As demons pretending to be members of the Holy Church, instead of spears, they wielded swords and shields. They even had a worn out flag of the Church that must have been pilfered from some battlefield somewhere.

“What’s wrong, demons? Bring it on!”

“We’ll make cups outta your skulls!”

“Gods of light, get off your butts and protect us!”

The heroes clanged swords and shields together as they laughed.

Damn bastards. I’ll kill every last one of them.

“Quite the overzealous bunch, aren’t they?” Ante gave an exasperated sigh while I was starting to boil over.

But as the party of “heroes” stole our attention, a shadow emerged from the forest to strike at the drop in our guard.

“Seira, dodge!”

My warning was too late. “Huh? Whoa!”

“Apologies.” A sword flashed, slicing cleanly through Seiranite’s spear which

he had desperately raised to defend himself. The sword stopped just short of the demon's neck before its wielder leaped backward to return to the trees' cover—the Swordmaster Virossa.

“Seira is dead!” Prati declared.

“My spear! Nooooooo!” With a sorrowful wail, Seiranite dropped to the ground.

“So that’s the rumored night elf Swordmaster!” Albaoryl swallowed nervously, raising his spear into a guarded stance. The quiet intensity of Virossa (in his human form) was enough to overwhelm an ordinary demon. That level of respect was earned by anyone who possessed strength within the demonic kingdom. Albaoryl’s gaze didn’t hold the slightest hint of contempt. The look in his eyes was more akin to fear.

Damn, now I’m starting to get an idea of what it means to be an enemy of the Alliance. A Swordmaster with magical protection is a real pain in the ass!

“Kuvital! Hold him back!”

“Yes sir!”

At my orders, Kuvital advanced. Without our curses, he was our best bet against a Swordmaster. With a magically infused stomp, Kuvital sent another wave of countless stones from the ground up toward Virossa. But this time, there was only a dry swipe to signal the barrage being slashed clean out of the air.

The two faced off, neither able to move recklessly...and while they did, I led the others to take on the heroes.

“Oh, you wanna go?!” a large demon (dressed like a hero) said, raising his shield with a wild grin.

Who even is this guy? One of Prati’s relatives? And what the heck is that stance? It’s full of holes!

Releasing my **Constraint**, I drove my spearspear directly toward him.

“Aha!” The fake hero responded by holding his shield straight out like an idiot, blocking his own vision. The moment he did, I pulled my spear back and

delivered a kick to the shield using the full force of my body. “Whoa?!” Knocking him off-balance, I then used my spear to sweep his legs out from under him, ending with the point of my blade just a hair’s breadth from his throat.

“Hero Regorius is dead!”

“Ah, I’m finished! Gah ha ha!” he roared with laughter, spread-eagle on his back. He would have been perfect in an amateur stage troupe.

Man, can this be over already?

“Take care of the priests!”

I ordered my subordinates to deal with Sophia and the other priests. Since the scenario had them protecting the other soldiers, taking them out should mean we would regain the ability to use curses.

“Like hell they will!”

One of the heroes lunged for one of Kuvital’s men. Despite being outnumbered and using an unfamiliar weapon, he was handling himself surprisingly well.

This guy’s probably a terror when wielding a spear.

“Death to the dark!”

Sophia declared in a tone so flat you could have used it as a cutting board, lifting her sword. She also presented a surprising amount of skill with a sword. Beyond just the standard swordsmanship techniques, she had even adopted some of Virossa’s style. Her movements were crisp and clean, almost textbook. Her observations on the battlefield probably helped her pick up standard swordsmanship, but Virossa’s techniques must have come from her watching my training. Led to carelessness by our numbers advantage, Okkenite gave a strangled choke as Sophia’s sword jabbed at his neck, falling like a stuck bird.

“Okkenite is dead!”

Guess instead of watching everyone else fight, I need to focus on the fight in front of me.

I glared at the final hero.

This guy...

“Clearly an expert, isn’t he?” Ante commented.

Yeah. His stance was so strong even someone as slow as Ante could keep up.

“Who are you calling slow?!”

We both know I’m not wrong.

The “hero” had a heavy build and was covered from head to toe in armor. His helmet obscured his entire face, leaving only a single identifiable feature—his horns.

This guy was good. Really good. The way he held his sword and shield displayed a real sense of purpose and understanding. He wasn’t using standard human swordsmanship, but he was still clearly an expert.

Without warning, the masked hero surged forward. Still in the middle of my charge, we closed the gap between us in no time. His first attack wasn’t with his sword but with his shield, a gust of wind striking my forehead protector.

Damn! This guy’s no slouch! Choking up my grip on my spearspear, I brought my blade gently down against him. He brought his sword up to block, falling cleanly into my trap.

With a shout, I twisted the spearspear, flicking his blade away. With the hero’s posture broken, I drove the point of my spearspear forward...

“Ha ha!” The masked hero gave a hoarse laugh, instantly tumbling backward to avoid my strike. *That voice... It sounded like...*

“Very good! Yah!”

The hero then followed up by tossing their sword at me, attempting to prevent me from pursuing after their evasion. Using the time that bought, they recovered their posture and...

“Eat holy steel!”

...dark magic billowed out around the hero’s hand. It expanded and solidified, turning into an obsidian-dark blade before swinging toward me.

“You’ve gotta be joking!” I couldn’t help but cry out. *This is Prati’s Bloodline*

Magic!

Even in a state of shock, I didn't stay stationary. Keeping an eye on the blade's path, I tilted my head to the side, avoiding its edge by a hair's breadth. Spinning my weapon around, I lashed out with the butt of my spear, which naturally was blocked by the hero's shield. But, at the same time, a faded holy sword reached out over top of it. I had split Adamas off from the swordspike, now wielding it on its own in my right hand.

Through the hero's mask a pair of shocked eyes stared back, glaring at the blade now inches away from their throat.

"Ha ha ha! You got me! I lose!" The hero laughed, dropping their guard.

"Guwah!"

"They got us!"

At about the same time, Sophia and her band of priests finally caved under the pressure of numbers.

"The heroes' party has been wiped out! The beastfolk and forest elves have broken and are routed! The demon prince wins!"

At Prati's declaration, the battle came to an end.

The masked hero before me pulled off their helmet, revealing long silver hair that fluttered in the wind and the sharp, wild features of a middle-aged woman. So it *had* been a woman.

"Well done! I heard a whole lot about you from Prati, but I guess she wasn't just blowing smoke!" She gave a pleasant laugh as she eyed me up and down.

Hold on...acting buddy-buddy with Prati and not referring to me by my title?

"Like I would ever exaggerate such a thing." Prati shrugged with a sigh as she approached us. "You should know that by now, mother."

Mother?! That means she's my...

"Ha! Maybe so, but there are some things you have to see with your own eyes!"

The woman—my grandmother—snorted another laugh, turning back to me with a grin.

“I’ve been dying to meet you, Zilbagias. I’m your granny.”

She puffed up proudly as she introduced herself.

“Gorilacia Dosrotos!”

It was the Pratifya’s own mother.

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Gorilacia was apparently a descendant of the Dosrotos family’s chief. She’d married into the Rage family at forty, had Prati at eighty, and was now a hundred eighty years old. Honestly, she still seemed quite spry and youthful. Although her features were strikingly similar to Prati’s, Gorilacia was a bit more solid, a bit taller, and wrinkles were starting to form at the corners of her eyes. And if you looked really closely, you could see a faint scar on her right cheek that appeared to be from a blade.

“Wow, the rumors don’t do you justice!” Stomping along beside me, Gorilacia gave a hearty laugh. “I kept hearing you were oh so strong, but I never expected this! You’re even better than Prati was. What’s your secret? Is it just the king’s blood?” She went on and on, ruffling my hair as she laughed. Meanwhile, the creases in her gauntlet were snagging my hair. It was actually quite painful.



Anyway, despite wearing what would be classed as heavy armor, she was more nimble than I was. This old granny was a tough cookie.

“I never expected to face off against my own grandmother either,” I replied casually, shaking off Gorilacia’s hand as I looked up at her. Honestly, this was way too much of a surprise. Prati had brought her name up before, but I’d never met her until now.

Rumors not doing me justice? I could say the same thing about you. I knew Prati’s spearmanship was heavily influenced by the Dosrotos family, but I never expected her mother to be such a juggernaut.

Maybe Prati’s savage side came from them and not the Rage family?

“For better or for worse, the Rage family certainly gives more of a refined air, does it not?”

True. From the moment I’d entered the city, the Rage family had defied my expectations by how cultured everything had been. Well, defied what I expected from savages. In contrast, this old lady was the spitting image of a savage warrior one might dream up in their head.

“Do you have some experience in swordsmanship, grandmother?”

“‘Experience’ might not be the best word. I like to dabble in a bunch of different weapons, so I mostly just try and copy what I’ve seen. I do martial arts and archery too!”

She’s that good from copying techniques she saw? I had fully expected she was training under someone. Assuming there was anyone crazy enough to teach swordsmanship to a demon aside from Virossa.

“Speaking of people I wanted to meet, you there!” Gorilacia shouted, turning to the very night elf Swordmaster that had just crossed my mind. “As I expected, your skills are incredible! I’m all but falling in love! We need to spar later, spear versus sword!”

“If you so wish...” Virossa replied with a dispirited bow. Apparently he had already surrendered, not even giving me a glance to come to his rescue.

“Also, Zilba, quit this ‘grandmother’ nonsense. That’s just manners for others.

Call me Gori! Like I'm your sister!"

"Gori?" I did a double take. No matter how young she looked, there was no way she was young enough for us to be siblings!

"What's wrong? You got something to say?" She glared down at me.

"No, nothing at all, Miss Gori," I replied instantly. The last thing I wanted was to get into a pointless fight with her here.

"How pathetic. What happened to your hero spirit?"

Shut it, you ten-thousand-year-old hag!

"Excuse me?!"

Gah, leave my eyes alone! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

"You can call me Uncle Regorius! I'm not quite as old as my sister, but unlike her, I'm not bothered by my age!" One of the "heroes" was apparently Gorilacia's younger brother who spoke up while pointing to his own face...

"Shut up."

"Gah!"

...shortly before the back of Gorilacia's hand struck it. Regorius was sent tumbling back with a clang...but don't think I didn't notice. Just before her hand reached his face, black blades emerged from his neck to block it. That was the Bloodline Magic of the Dosrotos family, *Repida Skias*, the **Void Spear**. They could condense dark magic into a physical form, making a temporary obsidian-looking blade. And, apparently, it had some defensive applications as well...

"I quite like kids that are good listeners!" As if nothing happened, Gorilacia went back to ruffling my hair while also ignoring my attempts to shake her off. "Not much like Prati in that respect, are you?" she followed up with an ironic smile.

"It's impossible for anyone you raise to ever be a 'good listener,'" Prati responded to the jab with a fed up expression. "For starters, I decided that Zilbagias would never go through the things I hated that you had done to me. Always explain the meaning behind choices you make! Don't throw a tantrum just because you are upset! Trust them even as a child! And so on!" Prati's

agitation seemed to just boil more as she went on. This was a side of her I had never seen before. Maybe not dangerous, but the atmosphere was certainly getting strained.

Gorilacia gave a pout of sorts, seemingly more hurt than ashamed. “What do you expect from me? The finer details can get lost on little kids. Gotta teach them young or they’ll grow up weak.”

“Right there, one of your bad habits. That arbitrary thinking. Zilbagias is anything but weak!” Prati snapped a glare at her mother. “As you are *well* aware! Proof that my education was not at all mistaken. There is no room for your criticism in that regard.”

“Fine, fine. Don’t get so worked up.” Tapping her sheathed sword against her shoulder, Gorilacia looked away, her gaze now locking back on me. “Any complaints about your mother?”

“None that come to mind.” Another instant response. “She always explains why she does something, and regardless of my actions, she is always willing to listen to my explanation as well. No matter what, she’s always supportive. So I really am quite...thankful. I really have nothing to complain about.”

There was truth in that too.

“Really. As long as you’re strong, I guess it’s fine. You seem to be just as logic-driven as your mother.” Gorilacia gave a quiet sigh, almost as if disappointed. Looking back to Prati, she was wearing a rare expression of clear displeasure. Honestly, I likely had the same look on my face. If I had been raised by this old granny, I would probably be a narrow-minded brute focused solely on killing the Demon King—just like in my previous life.

So anyway, as we enjoyed some good old family bonding while on our stroll, the end of the forest came into sight. At the same time, something of a pleasant, tasty aroma took to the air. As we approached, I could see that the servants had set up something of a barbecue beyond the tree line. Even Layla was there, looking to be thoroughly enjoying roasting some meat, with Liliana at her side. As she noticed me, she gave a faint smile and a small wave, which I responded to in kind.

“So that’s the rumored girlfriend, is it?” Gorilacia whispered, her tone playful...but her eyes lacked even a hint of amusement. She was definitely trying to gauge Layla’s worth.

“Yes, she’s a white dragon,” I said, patting Syndikyos. “These scales came from her father.”

“You’re pretty levelheaded, huh?” It seemed Gorilacia was a bit taken aback by my composed response.

Ha, take that. Our bond is much deeper than you think!

“Regardless, good work on your marching training. We have some matters to discuss, but for now, let us eat,” Prati said, turning to us as we lined up.

“Hooray!”

“I’m starving!”

“Meat...!”

In great celebration, the three idiots started stripping off their armor.

“Ah, not you, Seira,” Prati declared coldly.

“Huh?”

“Is your mind elsewhere? You have some special training to do. Before we eat, let’s spar.”

“What...? Huh...?” By the look on Seiranite’s face, one might be forgiven for believing the world was about to end.

“If you prefer, we can proceed after you eat, but I think that would just be a waste of good food. So?” Prati immediately deployed her magic spear, taking a ready stance. Prati seemed determined to get this out of the way before eating.

Seiranite, meanwhile, broke out in a cold sweat. “U-Umm...my lady...it is quite a great honor, and I appreciate your kindness...but during the training, my spear...!”

“You can use one of my spares. It’s a good one, so take care of it.”

“Ah...th-thank you. Wow...this really is a good spear...” Taking the spear from a night elf maid, Seiranite seemed as much in awe as he was in despair.

“Then, let us begin.”

“Ah, yes ma’am...”

So the two departed for some open space. Albaoryl and Okkenite looked a bit jealous of Seiranite’s new spear as they compared it to their own, but they kept their mouths shut tight. They knew one careless word might result in them facing the same fate as Seira.

“All right, let’s get to the food,” I said, snapping the two out of their reverie.

“Yeah, good idea!”

“Man, I’m starving!”

Ignoring the screams and cries from Seiranite behind us, we shed our armor and set off for the barbecue.

+++

“Whoa! As expected of royalty!”

“This meat is fantastic!”

The two surviving idiots kicked up a big fuss over the pile of barbecued meats laid out before us. Their fallen comrade had been forgotten in a flash. It was a shame I would have to end up healing him.

“Bark! Bark!”

“Good girl, Liliana. Here, have some food.” With her imaginary tail wagging furiously, I put a plate of roasted vegetables down in front of Liliana. Eating it off the ground would be kinda tough for her, so I put some furs underneath the plate for her.

Man, I sure am clever! That’s royalty for you! Wah ha ha...but seriously, I’m really sorry, Liliana. Really...

Her only reply was another happy bark around a mouthful of vegetables. Seeing her ears bobbing up and down so happily caused misery to stir within me.

When will I be able to set her free?

“Here you are, dear,” Layla said, handing me a plate. She had started calling

me that for show after learning the truth about me from Faravgi.

It was a high-level, political maneuver. Being able to ride on Layla was one of my top priorities, but no one would hear me out. Maybe they still had lingering suspicions that she was waiting for an opportunity to avenge her father. Virossa and especially Prati certainly thought that, but even Garunya, who got along with Layla quite well now, was quite unhappy at the prospect of me riding her. I guess from a common sense perspective, my desire to ride on the back of a dragon whose father I had killed was the strange part of the equation. After all, I was the one waiting for an opportunity to kill the Demon King.

“Without a spell as a precaution against falling to your death, their concern is understandable.”

Yeah... Apparently not even the Demon King’s protective magic could spare his life from a high-altitude fall. Seemingly the law of nature stating those without wings fell to the ground was just too obstinate. If, for example, I were to say *“falling is Taboo”* the moment I was thrown out into the air, I would still sink a little. Very much in the same way that the volley of arrows lost its momentum but continued to fall toward us when I said *“piercing is forbidden.”* But even that small downward motion would count as me breaking the taboo I had set, thus nullifying the magic entirely. It took quite a while before I could use the same taboo again, so I would end up just slamming into the ground and dying.

So riding on Layla’s back and flying was just too risky. That was the prevailing opinion. Unfortunately, under normal circumstances, they would be right. So in order to do away with that impression, we decided to pretend to be quite intimate with each other. It was Operation “Pretend to Be a Couple!” Maybe it won’t bear any fruit, but it sure beats not trying anything.

“Thank you, Layla.”

“You’re welcome.”

I took the plate of barbecued food from the brightly smiling Layla. A variety of well-seasoned meats, roasted vegetables, fresh fruit...it was like a plate covered in treasure. I could already feel my stomach demanding I hand over the goods. Together with Layla, I started stuffing my face.

Man, this is good. Eating while standing up is not bad every now and then.

By the way, while we ate, everyone else gave us anxious looks. Though it was known that we were on good terms, it was the first time they'd seen me interacting with Layla so boldly while donning the armor made from her father's hide.

There was Zilbagias, nonchalantly wearing armor made from white dragon scales. And there was Layla, serving the guy who had killed her father, and by all appearances doing so quite joyfully. It was no surprise that everyone thought there was something strange going on between us.

"This is so good! Everything's been cooked flawlessly. The meat already had no rankness to it, but the way you've done these spices...it takes the flavor to another level."

"I'm glad you like it." Layla chuckled as I indulged. Unlike me, digging in vigorously, she was eating in a more elegant manner. She hardly looked like a dragon.

"I never expected you guys would have a barbecue set up for us," I said as I polished off my first plate and set out to acquire seconds. Even though I was starving, I had assumed I wouldn't get any food until returning to the mansion. The aroma of food cooking that filled the air was a delightful surprise. Though there was one among us who had a difficult time enjoying these pleasures, being thoroughly thrashed as he was.

"All the while Alba and Okke indulge in these delights, not a thought to spare for Seira." Ante gave an exasperated sigh.

Quite a difference, huh? Though apparently, Alba had been forced to carry the "remains" of Seira and Okke back with us, thus he had been carrying huge rocks the entire way here. So I could understand where he was coming from and why he was famished himself.

"This barbecue was to simulate field cooking," Layla explained.

"Wait, seriously?" I took a second look at my plate.

This was field cooking?! With all this quality?! Okay, I was royalty, and demons used magic as easily as they breathed, so the circumstances weren't

exactly identical, but they were eating like *this* while I was munching on crackers in the Alliance camp? I could feel my anger starting to boil up within me.

Meanwhile, Layla gently laid a hand on my arm. Her gentle, compassionate gaze immediately cooled the anger building in my chest.

“Thanks...”

“Think nothing of it...”

My rage was probably written all over my face.

“You had quite the dark look in your eyes, yes.”

That wasn’t good. I needed to be more careful.

“Mind if I join you?” a voice called out from behind us. It was Gorilacia, mouth stuffed to the brim with barbecue as she stomped over toward us.

“Who is this...?” Layla turned to me, looking for relief from Gorilacia’s brutal appraisal.

“This is my grandmother. Is something wrong, Gori?” Layla did a double take at that name.

“No, not really. Just...you,” she said, turning to stare at Layla. “What’s your opinion of Zilba?”

Wow, straight to the point, huh?

“Huh...?” Layla’s eyes widened slightly. “What I think of him...? Well...” Her cheeks flushed as she averted her gaze.

“Ah, never mind. I got it.” Gorilacia stopped her, lifting her hands in defeat. It was as if she had witnessed something quite contrary to her expectations, or maybe like what she saw at a glance irritated her.

“You gave up on that pretty quickly,” I commented. If that was her attempt to size up Layla, didn’t she back down a bit too quickly?

“I can tell that in her mind, she has no hostility toward you,” Gorilacia replied, biting off another chunk of meat. “My mother’s Bloodline Magic was *Effusura*,

the **Eyes of Insight**. This girl doesn't have the slightest shred of hatred in her." Gorilacia shrugged with a smirk. "Not like you at all."

I felt every blood vessel in my body tighten at once.

She can see my feelings?!

"Aha," Gorilacia laughed, grabbing another skewer of meat. "Don't be so grumpy. You have a rare talent there. Something every strong person needs."

The way she grinned so casually...maybe she hadn't figured it out?

"That sourness of yours reminds me so much of Prati when she was younger," she continued, a distant look in her eyes as her gaze shifted to the "training" Prati and Seira were engaged in. *Oh, he was sent flying...again.*

"Since I could read her emotions, I thought I could lead her around by the nose..." Gorilacia snorted.

"Has she misunderstood your hatred for childlike rebellion?"

Maybe. That was dangerous though.

"I imagine a five year old with a desire to kill everyone here is impossible for her to anticipate."

I guess there's truth in that. Man, that really scared the crap out of me. Really can't let your guard down for even a second around these demons...not like I have any way to combat something like that. Well, except for maybe sealing my memories like when I saved Liliana.

"Anyways, I'm glad you and Prati get along so well," Gori said, patting me on the head. Luckily she had taken her gauntlets off, so my hair was safe this time. For a woman, her hand was quite thick and heavy. "The color of your feelings toward Prati are quite...pretty. All right, my gut's full, about time I pay that Swordmaster a visit." With that, she walked off.

Pretty...? My feelings toward Prati were? Toward a demon?

"That really hit the spot. Oh, are these leftovers? Can I take these home with me?" Alba said, grabbing a rolled up sheet filled with food from one of the maids.

But I had been struck silent. And I was stuck like that for quite a while.

+++

My feelings toward Prati were “pretty.” That’s how she saw them. Worst of all, I couldn’t bring myself to deny it.

“Why does that upset you now? You should have realized long ago how her affection had moved you.”

As I took a seat after retiring to my room in the mansion, feeling crushed by the weight of my shame, Ante saw an opportunity to tease me and seized it, appearing like a ghost beside me as I sat on my bed.

“I assumed you were aware of it the whole time.”

“Aware of what?”

“That your relationship with your mother was going splendidly, of course.”
Brilliantly colorful eyes peered into mine.

Me and Prati getting along? Don’t make me laugh. That was merely to maintain appearances. Sure, she was pretty understanding for a demon, and gave me a lot of freedom to do what I wanted. In a way, I was grateful for that courtesy.

But she was still a demon. And not just any demon but a leader of the Rage family. Someone who used humans like fuel. There’s no way I could like a person like that, and the notion that I would made me sick to my stomach.

And above all, I already had a mother! And only one! She wasn’t some pampered queen. She was bright, cheerful, simple...but she had a strong heart. Even after taking multiple night elf arrows in the back, she kept running all night to ensure my safety!

But as I tried to remember her face...I froze.

I couldn’t.

“What...?”

The best I could manage was a rough impression... What did her hair look like? What color were her eyes? What did she look like when she smiled?



I started to panic. *No way. This has to be some sick joke. How?! How could I forget something like this?! I was able to remember her clear as day when I was first reborn, right?! I gritted my teeth, staring into empty space, trying desperately to draw her image out of the depths of my memory. But the deeper I dug, the blurrier the image became...*

“This isn’t strange at all,” Ante said with a small sigh. “Even when we first met, your soul was in tatters. It hardly resembled its original form. You having any emotion about your past life is nothing short of a miracle. It wasn’t that you forgot,” Ante declared. “From the moment you were reborn, your past memories became a colorless, transparent, weathered picture. And now, as you continue to acquire memories in this current life as Zilbagias, the vividness and starkness of the new will cause you to gradually lose sight of the old.”

Those words shook me to my core.

Then...no matter how hard I try to remember...no matter how hard I try to hold on to those memories, someday...

“They’ll grow even more faint. There is no other way of putting it.”

My current, vivid memories were mercilessly crushing the memories of my old life.

Ante reached out an illusory hand and laid it on my cheek.
“However...those memories may grow faded, but that doesn’t change the events of your previous life. You are still Alexander, the human hero.” She stroked my face, looking at me with both pity and compassion.

But...she was right. Even if I forget everything from my past life, that doesn’t mean none of it ever happened. That was what was most important.

“Besides...she is still your mother in this life. Is it not natural for you to feel affection for her?”

“What?” Ante’s nonchalant statement made me blurt out in shock.

“As a human hero, I understand the idea of taking a liking to any demon must seem utterly ridiculous. However, that woman is still your caretaker. She is still doing everything in her power to support you. Rather than forcing your deep-

seated hatred to continue burning, would it not be healthier to accept the good this relationship provides?” Ante chuckled, before adding, “In particular, if there happened to be someone among your relatives present capable of seeing your true feelings.”

That...was true. That entire situation had really scared me. Thanks to the honest gratitude I had toward Prati—yeah, I could admit that—Gorilacia had been deceived.

“Precisely. This is necessary for you. So, from now on, it would be in your best interest to play the part of a good son. Besides...have you forgotten?” Ante whispered. “The closer you grow to her, the more you like her...the more power you will gain from striking her down.”

A chill ran down my spine. The piteous, compassionate smile of the devil god remained only in its shape, its color replaced with something much more sinister.

“It is truly the greatest of delicacies... Parricide! Among the greatest of taboos in any culture! The power you would obtain from such a crime is beyond your wildest dreams!” Her laughter resonated deep, like it had come up from the pits of the earth.

The devil god embraced me, wrapping herself tightly around me. Constricted like a snake, her breath was hot on my face.

“Remember: What is your goal?”

To defeat the Demon King, destroy the demonic kingdom, and save humanity.

“Then it is your responsibility to ensure you have enough power to accomplish such feats. That should be your top priority!” The devil god laughed. *“So I will allow it. Love her as much as you like!”* Her iridescent eyes, twin pits of chaos, had taken a firm grip on my soul. *“There is no need to worry. Struggle and suffer under the weight of those feelings to your heart’s content. That is the source of your strength.”* Her words were cruel as her hand gently stroked my hair.

At some point, the devil god disappeared. She had returned to her hiding place in my soul. With a small sigh, I straightened up.

My worries had been thoroughly dispelled. But my heart still felt like freezing,

burning memories had torn it to pieces.

I'll admit it... I thought to myself, staring at the holy sword propped up against the wall. Right now...as I am...I do love Prati...as my mother.

+++

The capital of Deftelos, the city of Evaloti.

The nation had managed to avoid the flames of war for centuries, but now its luck had finally run out. Evaloti lacked walls to accommodate travel in and out of the city. The hastily constructed earthen ramparts for its emergency defense looked poor and shabby in contrast to the rich and prosperous cityscape they defended—proof of the defenders' desperation.

Nonetheless, it was a capital city. It wasn't like they had no semblance of battle preparation. Surrounding the capital stood multiple small fortresses, forming a protective layer of sorts. In the event of an emergency, these fortresses could band together to repel any invading force—or at least, that was the plan. At any rate, they were better than having nothing.

At one of those fortresses...

"Cheers for today."

"And for our bravery tomorrow."

Two wooden mugs of ale struck together.

"We are in for some pretty fancy food tonight."

"It's amazing there's this much stuff left!"

The Swordmasters Barbara and Hessel looked with big smiles at the table between them. Withered apples, moldy cheese, and discolored sausages. And to top it off, a thin wheat porridge that seemed to be more boiled water than porridge.

"We sure are lucky. Never thought we'd still be eating meat." Enormous two-handed sword leaning against the wall behind him, Hessel kicked back in his chair, popping one of the sausages into his mouth. "Hm...not terrible."

"It being edible at all is a luxury." Ignoring how Hessel froze up for a moment

after having a taste, Barbara bit off a chunk of sausage for herself, relishing in the flavor.

They had successfully evacuated the fortress on the front line. Reconscribed into the next defensive line as elites, the two had been stationed in one of the fortresses around the capital, waiting for the unpredictable yet inevitable next assault.

Washing down the sausage on the verge of spoiling with a mouthful of ale, Barbara found herself once again thankful for the robust gut her parents had blessed her with.

Winter's going to be pretty rough, huh? she thought to herself, staring out the window at one of the soldiers' campfires. The anticipated demons' pursuit upon their retreat from the front lines never came, meaning all their casualties had come from Leonardo's assault group. It was a miracle they hadn't even left behind a single wounded man.

But...it felt very much like they had been *allowed* to run. Barbara's grip on her mug tightened. Rather than pity, it was as though the demons were mocking and spitting on their resolve.

And, of course, not everything was flowers and rainbows. Even with treatment, plenty of soldiers wouldn't be up and ready to fight in time. They were now a burden Deftelos had to bear.

Though once a nation with rich and robust agriculture, the Demon King's invasion had stripped away much of their food producing territory, severely crippling their resources. Support from their allies to the east had started to dry up—likely the work of enemy collaborators and spies—leading to whispers in the city that the arrival of winter would also bring starvation.

That was likely something Barbara wouldn't need to worry about. As an elite soldier, she'd be given high priority on what little food remained. Regardless of whether she liked that or not. She had survived yet again and eating helped ensure survival.

When she remembered the faces of Leonardo and his group...she couldn't help but feel miserable, like she didn't belong here at all.

“Why the long face?” Hessel joked, struggling to nurse his portion of ale.

“I was just thinking, the best of us always die first, don’t they?”

“True enough.” Hessel nodded sagely. “Only losers like us survive.”

“That’s not very nice,” Barbara retorted, giving Hessel a kick under the table.

“Ha ha. We *are* losers since we’re pretty unlucky, right?” he said, completely ignoring her kick.

“Wording it like that makes it seem like the old master is unlucky too,” Barbara murmured with a small laugh.

The assault group only had a sole survivor—the old master, Dogasin. After having assumed the entire assault group had been annihilated, Barbara and Hessel had been overjoyed at his return...

“To my great shame, I have made it back alone...”

...but Dogasin himself was anything but. In the end, he had been forced to abandon his comrades and flee. His escape had been in an effort to return with information regarding the fourth demon prince but that did little to assuage his guilt. And, either way, he was still an elite. He was stationed in another fortress, likely rejuvenating his spirits. Barbara wanted to check up on him and share a drink, but unfortunately she had no drink worth offering.

“How’s Char holding up?” Hessel asked, dragging Barbara out of her thoughts.

“She’s...not good. We should really send her back before the fighting breaks out.” Barbara shook her head listlessly, leaning back in her chair. “Not that I think you could get her to move if you tried.”

“True enough.” Hessel gave a dejected sigh, as if the answer just confirmed his suspicions.

Char, the priestess Charlotte. Driven to the brink of insanity upon the delivery of Leonardo’s right arm, she had been like a lifeless doll as they retreated from the front lines. However, within three days, she had spent every waking moment healing the wounded. Seemingly she believed the best path toward her revenge was assuring there were as many soldiers opposing the Demon King’s army as possible. Normally a healer like her would be a godsend on the

battlefield, but her desperate drive and bloodshot eyes were intimidating the soldiers more than raising their morale.

“She said as long as she’s breathing and has magic, she’ll keep healing. But once her magic runs out, I bet she’d just charge the demons with her staff.”

The look in Char’s eyes left no doubt she’d be willing to go that far. Barbara also knew that she kept an urn in her room—the ashes of Leonardo’s arm.

“People from the Church are all like that, aren’t they?” Hessel muttered, taking another gulp from his mug.

“Weaponmasters aren’t much different. Everyone’s got their own circumstances,” Barbara added, taking a drink herself. It somehow tasted much more bitter than usual.

“Hey, Barbara. Did you hear about that attack on the Demon King’s castle?”

“The one seven years ago? Yeah.”

Though it wasn’t made public, apparently the Church had partnered with the white dragons to launch an attack on the Demon King’s castle. It had been a literal suicide mission. But despite such a valorous attack, word of it had never reached the public. Evidenced by the fact the war had not come to an end, the attack must have been a failure.

If they had inflicted even a minor wound on the Demon King, it probably would have resulted in shouts from the rooftops. However—as if in defiance of their attempt on his life—in the aftermath of the attack, the Demon King himself had taken to the front lines as if to show off his heartiness. So the entire assault plan had been kept a closely guarded secret.

“One of my pals was part of the attack. Once it was all over, I got a letter from him, delivered to me by the Church.”

“Really? What a coincidence. Me too.”

“Wait, you did? Well, I guess we’re both pretty famous.” Hessel gave a wry smile. Both of them were renowned Swordmasters, and only the greatest of elites were included in the assault on the castle. It wasn’t much of a shock that

they both knew a participant in the attack. “He made it sound like he was just going out on a stroll or something. ‘We’re leaving now, see you around,’ he said.”

“Heh. The letter I got was much the same. ‘I’m gonna go slug the Demon King right in the face, so this war will be over by the time I get back,’” Barbara recounted, a nostalgic, yet mournful expression on her face.

Hessel froze in the middle of pouring another mug of ale. “Wait, hold on...” He sat up. “Your friend wasn’t a guy named Alexander, was he?”

This time it was Barbara’s turn for a look of shock. “The Indomitable Sacred Flame?”

“Yeah, it was the same guy!”

After sharing a brief look, the two burst out laughing. What a coincidence. After spending so much time together, they only now learned they had a mutual friend. It was just too funny...and at the same time kind of sad.

Their laughter faded into a solemn atmosphere.

“We fought together,” Hessel said, biting into a withered apple. “While defending the northern line, we became friends. We lost contact for a while after a redeployment. Leaving behind letters like this, quite the honest guy.”

“Right? He was a huge help to me back when we were fighting for my homeland. Granted, I was just a little girl back then.”

“You? A little girl? Hmm, can’t really picture that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She gave him another kick.

“That guy was quite loyal. Always meddling.” Face scrunching in pain, Hessel looked away as Barbara propped her head up with an arm on the table.

“It was really a casual, simple goodbye. His letter even came with a bunch of money saying, ‘it’s not like I’ll be able to use it anyway.’”

“What?” Hessel exclaimed. “I didn’t get anything like that!”

“Huh?”

The two shared another look.

“He just said, ‘I’m gonna go slug that Demon King in the face and end this war, see ya.’”

“So he just sent that to me?! No wonder the last line felt so tacked on! He had ended it with ‘Consider this an early wedding gift. Find a good guy soon.’ That bastard!”

Barbara ranted, pouring herself another mug of ale.

But Hessel didn’t crack a smile as his face turned quite serious. “Hey, Barbara?”

“What now?”

“Could you take Char and pull back from the front?”

Barbara could feel the corners of her eyes start to twitch. “You’re telling me to run? Now?”

“Not run. But...” Hessel’s reflection in his ale stared back at him. “The next one is going to be on another level. We’re not gonna make it out of that one.” He then turned a strong gaze on Barbara. “A good woman like you getting killed over nothing seems like a waste.”

Once again, Barbara’s foot slammed into Hessel’s shin.

“Don’t look down on me,” Barbara said quietly, putting her mug down on the table. “I’m here because I want to fight. As a Swordmaster, a soldier of Puroe Refshi, as a member of the da Rosa barony, the responsibility falls on me to continue fighting for those of my old homeland who no longer can!” Her eyes burned. “Even as a knight of a fallen kingdom, even as a woman, I still carry this sword for the sake of my homeland and all of humanity! I won’t let you make a mockery of that!”

Hessel swallowed. At that moment, the woman sitting before him was not the older sister other soldiers looked up to, nor the legendary swordswoman. She was the proud noble of a fallen kingdom. Hessel found himself getting lost in her scarred, dignified face...but the steadily harsher look in her eyes snapped him back to reality.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.” Hessel bowed his head. “It wasn’t my

intention at all to make light of your resolve. I'm well aware of your determination. But...that's all the more reason..." Hessel looked up at her as if pleading. "I just don't want you to die."

Hessel's voice, almost like a whisper, sapped the intensity from Barbara's eyes.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you." She gave a quiet sigh. "However, retreating is not an option. And I don't plan on dying anytime soon." Her eyes were burning with determination—not a hint of despair in sight. "A little bird told me we might be getting reinforcements from the Church. One month, at the latest."

"Really?!"

"Besides, after what he did, I won't rest until that damn prince gets what he deserves. So you better keep it together too! There's a big difference between going in prepared to die and going in expecting to die!"

Hessel responded with a wry smile. "True enough! Guess I kinda dropped the ball. Man, when did I get so whiny?"

"Ha ha, you're going to crack everyone up."

The two shared a smile and raised their mugs once more.

"For everyone who's come before us."

"In memory of our mutual friend."

Another toast.



After coming to terms with a number of things, my days of training continued. I watched myself around Gorilacia, but it didn't seem she was particularly vigilant around me. Apparently, *Effusura* could only see your emotions in the moment, and so it wasn't exactly efficient at seeing through long-developing schemes. Or...maybe I just hadn't solidified my resolve yet. In any case, what mattered was that I was going to be able to make it through this predicament.

My stay in the Rage family territory would last for a little over a month. Apparently when I'd leave for the castle, Gori would be making her way back to the Dosrotos territory.

"But why are you going there?" I had asked out of curiosity one time while sharing a meal. She had married into the Rage family, and at one time had gone by Gorilacia Rage, but even so she was returning home.

"Because this place is boring," she had replied, heedless of the many Rage family demons around us. *"It's probably obvious, but I'm pretty old-fashioned. The 'cultured' lifestyle here doesn't suit me very well."*

When she stripped off her armor, underneath were not the clothes of an aristocrat, but rather furs similar to the demons of old.

"And my husband's gone too," she'd sighed, a small measure of loneliness had been present in her voice. Prati's father was Zizolvalt Rage. He had taken the side of the current Demon King during the battle for succession and lost his life in the conflict.

"When we first met, that guy was really stuck up. But after I kicked his butt during training, that seemed to light a fire under him." Gorilacia had let out a chuckle while reminiscing. In the end, he had sharpened his skills to the point of fighting her evenly whenever magic was permitted, apparently. Regardless, for a member of the Valt family to be killed in the succession battle, it must have been pretty intense.

"If the current Demon King is brought down, I imagine the next one will be equally as fierce," Ante had whispered with a snicker.

Yeah, no doubt.

And so after being widowed (though I couldn't think of a person who the title suited less appropriately), with her daughter having been married off to the Demon King, she had returned to her old home.

"Anyway, I'm glad you've got quite the fighting spirit," she laughed, ruffling my hair again. *"It makes training you worth it!"*

And exactly as she said, the training began.

"One, two! One, two! Run! Run! Like you're being chased by Swordmasters!"

"Hey, three idiots! Keep it together! Aren't you ashamed to be losing to a five-year-old?!"

We found ourselves running around the mountain trails while being faced with the one-two punch of Prati and Gorilacia on megaphones. Not only were we in full armor, but we were also burdened with heavy bags of "food" and "water." Even though I was used to training that mimicked real combat, this was pretty brutal. However, things were even worse for the three idiots who seemed to be on death's door every day due to their neglect of endurance training.

But Kuvital and his men were running along with us, hardly breaking a sweat. Prati and Gorilacia were also in their gear while keeping up and shouting at us as we ran without so much as losing their breath. So when they said it was just insufficient training, I couldn't really argue.

Prati was wearing lighter armor similar to mine, so I could understand in her case...but Gorilacia was in heavy armor. How was she able to sprint around all this foliage like this? What kind of monster was she? The difference in our stamina was clear as day.

Speaking of freaks of nature, some members of the Dosrotos family, including Gorilacia's younger brother Regorius, were joining us in the training. Though by joining us, I meant that they occasionally launched surprise attacks on us. Sometimes while we were resting, sometimes when entering areas with poor visibility, sometimes right when we started to relax after scaling a particularly large hill. Every case had one common element—attacking us when least convenient. Initially they held back from seriously injuring us, but after learning about Liliana, they happily ramped things up.

“Well, they have no reason to hold back with a means of healing without using human slaves,” Ante commented.

I guess not. Assuming, of course, you didn’t mind how much pain it put me through!

The three idiots received the brunt of the punishment. I couldn’t tell you how many times I regretted letting them be my retainers so easily. But after the repeated ambushes and being “killed” over and over, those three really started to pull together and shape up. They no longer let their guard down while we were resting, and they were even starting to build up some stamina. Though, of course, it’d take more than a day to pick up actual combat prowess.

“Come on kid, put your back into it!”

“Gaaah!”

Regorius’s shield sent Seiranite flying. While he was full of energy thanks to the new spear Prati had given him, that didn’t make up for fundamental ability. This was how he fared even against Regorius using a sword and shield. To be fair, going toe to toe with Gorilacia’s younger brother would give any young demon a rough time. I at least had my combat experience from my past life.

Seiranite had a pact with a Devil of Strength, so he could draw out a lot of raw power, but he had difficulty in refining his technique. Recently, Gorilacia had seemingly given up on him, claiming all he was good for was hunting small fry.

In contrast, there was his brother Okkenite. To put it positively, he had a good grasp on things, and to put it negatively, he had a tendency to use cheap tricks. Pacted with a Devil of Analysis, he excelled in picking out his opponents’ weak spots. But even so, you could say he lacked in forcefulness, so he was quick to fold when backed into a corner. Honestly, if you combined them both, you’d have a nearly flawless, formidable warrior.

“Wouldn’t both their negative traits just drag them into utter mediocrity?”

Okay, that was a reasonable possibility. And between them...

“Your Highness! Let’s do it!”

The leader of the three idiots, Albaoryl, was making great strides in his

training. Quick on his feet, he danced around the swords and shields of the Dosrotos warriors...wielding a spear with a sword attached to the end as a spearhead, just like mine.

“Got it. *Slashing is forbidden.*”

In answer to Albaoryl’s call, I unleashed my **Constraint** magic. Unable to slash with their weapons, Regorius and his men gave surprised grunts as their swords froze in their hands.

“Ha! Here I come, gentlemen!” Among them all, only one could move freely—Albaoryl with his swordspear.

“Dammit, that’s cheating!”

“A win is a win!”

Unable to fight back, the Dosrotos warriors were forced onto the defensive as Albaoryl delivered blow after blow.

He was pacted to the Devil of Abandon, Elpheria. He gained strength by fighting wildly, unfettered by rules or tradition. Coincidentally, it allowed him to entirely ignore my **Constraints**. Thanks to me, with the combination of him shrugging off my **Constraints** and being able to forgo traditional demon spearmanship by using a swordspear, his magic grew constantly.

“Watch your feet, kid!”

“Whoa!”

That said, the difference in experience between him and his opponents was insurmountable as he soon found himself falling victim to their counterattack. He was still very much a greenhorn. But...

“*That one will be quite the threat, won’t he?*” Ante observed coldly.

Yeah. The same thought crossed my mind. Though maybe not in the near future, if he continued growing at this rate, he’d be my natural enemy.

I’d have to get rid of him sooner rather than later.

Chapter 4: The Hero's Story

Lord Zilbagias's training was brutal. Albaoryl had been quite dedicated to his spearmanship training, being quite personally fond of it, but this was the first time he had been subjected to training that really strained his body.

On top of that brutal training, Albaoryl and the Nite brothers were constantly being beaten to a pulp by the (supposedly) five-year-old prince along with the prince's mother and grandmother. Even though those beatings took them nearly to their breaking point...

"It's so good!"

...the barbecue after training revitalized them enough to keep going. Thanks to the prince's healing, they didn't have so much as a scratch on them as they set about greedily devouring the meal before them.

Initially, they had been astounded by the food's high quality for what was supposed to be battlefield rations, but their monster of an instructor had told them it was intended to bolster their motivation and coordination.

"You guys are quite lucky!" Gorilacia had laughed as they made a quite spirited attempt at finishing off the meat. *"Only those serving royalty on the battlefield get to eat like royalty!"*

Due to his combat experience, Albaoryl was well aware of that. He knew meals in the field were usually much simpler affairs. But more than that...

You don't get to eat meat of this quality that often!

Albaoryl's face shone brilliantly as he bit into the juicy, seasoned sausage.

While the demonic kingdom was set up to model an aristocracy, in truth the only real aristocrats were the royalty, family chiefs, and a few select landowners. The rest lived as commoners. At least, that was the impression Albaoryl got from the few human books he had read.

As for how those common folk lived, the general idea was that the kingdom

paid everyone a wage according to their rank. On top of that, some bonuses were handed out due to feats in battle, or, in the case of the Rage family, healing efforts. Those with low standing but large amounts of land were often involved in agriculture. Of course, not personally. They'd usually have beastfolk carry out the actual labor for them.

In other words, demon commoners had to work to live. A man with no family to care for could scrape together a modest living as a baron, while one attempting to support a family would face significant difficulty if they were anything less than a viscount. If they wanted a larger family, luxurious food, or high-grade weapons and equipment, they needed to push that rank even higher. To do that, they needed to prove themselves on the battlefield. That was why demons were always itching for deployment opportunities.

“Man, that was good... Oh, are those leftovers? Wrap them up for me like always, please.”

“Understood.”

After confirming everyone had eaten their fill, Albaoryl gave that instruction to one of the maids. Though she wore the steel-faced expressionlessness of every night elf servant, he didn't think he was imagining the cold scorn in her eye. “What a pig,” she was likely thinking.

But Albaoryl didn't mind in the least. With Lady Pratifya and Lord Zilbagias giving their tacit consent by not intervening, he had no qualms contravening standard etiquette when it came to demonic customs. That was one of his greatest strengths. It was the perfect way to exercise the authority of the Devil of Abandon. Even that maid's veiled scorn caused power to well up inside him.

“Please excuse us for today!”

“Scuse us!”

With a sharp bow, Albaoryl and his comrades bid farewell to the prince and headed home.

“Man, today was rough, wasn't it bro? Though it kinda feels like the harder the work, the better it pays off!” Seiranite said with a bright smile, shining spear in hand.

“Right?! We’re definitely getting way better. Real deal training like this is great!”

Albaoryl nodded heartily. Thanks to Zilbagias having unlimited access to healing, the Dosrotos warriors were going all out as if they were engaged in live combat. It may have been the best training available in the entire Rage territory.

“Ah, this is for you guys.” On that note, he pulled out two smaller bundles of wrapped food and handed them over to the Nite brothers.

“Awesome!”

“Thanks for always doing this!”

As the two brothers celebrated their new snack, they bid farewell, and Albaoryl hurried home by himself.

House Oryl found its residence on the eastern side of the old city. Even in the times of this area being a human city some two hundred years ago, it had been called the old city. In other words, it was horrendously dilapidated.

Though some had collapsed and had to be rebuilt, plenty of stone buildings had survived since the days humans called this place home. The higher-class families had secured the abodes in the best conditions. House Oryl didn’t have much social standing as they were basically a branch family of a branch family of a branch family. Despite this, their capabilities with **Transposition** meant they were still a rather blessed bloodline.

“I’m home!” Door creaking as he went, Albaoryl stepped into the small, slanting house.

“Welcome home! How was today?” His mother, doing sewing work in the living room, looked up as he entered. Albaoryl lived together with his father, mother, and sister...or did, until his father was dispatched the other day to aid the front lines as a healer, so now they were living as a family of three.

“I’m beat. One of the Dosrotos priests ripped my arm off. I really thought I was a goner.” Albaoryl sighed, earning a wide-eyed look from his mother.

“That sounds very painful. I’m sure it’s difficult, but keep doing your best.”

“Of course. I’ve gotta become a big shot!”

His mother rolled her eyes with a laugh at his playful wink.

“Ah, here. I brought some for you.”

“Again? I really appreciate it, but I’m starting to get worried it will spoil our appetite for normal food,” his mother replied, taking the wrapped up food to the kitchen to be stored. After watching her go with a smile, Albaoryl made his way up to the second floor.

“I’m home, Mari.”

“Welcome back, Alba.”

He found his older sister Marinfia, though not older by much, spinning thread in her room. She turned to greet him with a bright smile...her eyes covered by a thick black mask.

Albaoryl’s sister was blind. Normally, any illness was treatable, especially for a member of the Rage family. But she had the unfortunate fate of having been born with no eyes. It was outside the means of **Transposition** to heal something that was never there.

On top of that, power meant everything to demons. Those born with a handicap like that were generally disposed of quite early. But after struggling for so long to have a child and finally being blessed with Marinfia, their parents had refused to let her go. There was no way they could lift their hand against the child they had been waiting so long for. So they took the rebellious route and raised her against the rest of the family’s wishes—knowing full well that meant severing ties with their family and consigning themselves to a life of struggle.

Then, a few years later, Albaoryl would be born. Being raised alongside his sister, someone who should never have been allowed to live, had shaped Albaoryl’s personality.

“I smell something good,” she said, sniffing at the air and lifting an eyebrow.

“I figured you’d notice. I brought back some sausages as a present for you!”

Albaoryl replied, pulling out yet another small bundle from his pocket containing some grilled sausage.

“It was made with loads of herbs, so it’s super tasty. I thought it would be nice to share it.”

“Wow, it really does smell good. I was just getting hungry too.”

She happily dug into the food he had brought back, though it had cooled somewhat on the journey home.

“Wow! This is so good!”

“Right?”

“I’m so glad you found a superior who feeds you like this.”

“Seriously. Though our training is brutal enough to make up for it!”

While she ate, they chatted idly. He told her about what they did in training today, how the Nite brothers were doing, and so on.

“Ahhh. That was so good. Thanks as always, Alba.”

“Don’t mention it!”

“As much as I’m grateful...I feel like all of this might make me fat.”

Albaoryl couldn’t help but give a sad smile at that. Being a bit of a shut-in, she had little opportunity to exercise.

“Why don’t we go for a walk? There’s still a bit of night left.”

“Hmm...sure. That’s probably a good idea once in a while.”

“Good. I just have one last thing I have to go and do first!”

“You sure are busy these days. Take care.” As she waved goodbye and whispered another quiet thank-you, Albaoryl made his way back outside, heading quickly to an even more rundown alley of the old city.

“Ah, Alba!”

As he approached a particularly shabby building, a child in dirty clothes jumped out with a wave.

“Yo! I’m back!”

With a quick greeting, Albaoryl headed inside and handed over another bundle of food. Just like the present he had given his sister, it was all precooked food that could be eaten right away.

“Wow, that looks great! Mooom! Alba brought presents again!”

“Again? Thank you so much, Alba. You always do too much for us.” A woman, a bit too thin, stepped out and bowed apologetically.

“It’s nothing. Just looking out for my cute little bro!” Albaoryl flashed a grin, ruffling the boy’s hair.

Not everyone in the demonic kingdom lived a life of luxury. Those with a rank could secure a minimum standard of living, but esquires and knights earned virtually nothing. Raising their rank was the only way to guarantee a meal for any given day. If they wanted to improve their rank, they needed to fight. If they wanted to fight, they needed strength.

And what was strength? Spearmanship, weapons, armor, magic...all things passed down from parents or other relatives to their children. So what would happen if, by some circumstance, those teachers were lost?

Albaoryl watched with a strained expression as the mother and child joyfully partook in the meal. There was nothing they could do. Strength meant everything in the demonic kingdom, so this was what became of the weak.

Families left behind by casualties in war received a condolence stipend, but it was only temporary. Eventually they were forced to fend for themselves. For a wealthy family that was no problem, but poor families were typically of lower rank. This meant the stipend they received was less than others, making it not sufficient to live off of.

On top of that, most demons despised the weak. It was their own fault for lacking strength. If they hated it, they should just become strong. That was the prevailing attitude. No one ever stopped to lend a hand to those who were weak and struggling.

There was some logic to that line of thought, but, when it came to children and the young, Albaoryl felt an exception had to be drawn there. Demons that

had lived for decades and still ended up weak due to negligence in training was one thing, but no one was born with immaculate strength. It took some kind of support to go from being weak to being strong.

“Hey, Alba... I wanna make a pact with a devil!”

Yes, just like this child. After finishing the meal, the boy’s face turned serious.

A pact with a devil was the quickest path to strength. If they could make a pact with a devil whose authority didn’t involve battle, they could get stronger just by living their life. If they could grow visibly stronger, they could jump ahead of others and get others onto the battlefield or begin climbing the ranks as healers using **Transposition**.

There was only one problem with that—passage to the Dark Portal wasn’t free. The fee would be unbearable for any impoverished family. Despite being somewhat of an outcast, and climbing up the ranks to viscount, Albaoryl had a way.

“Do you now?” Albaoryl frowned. The boy’s horns were still quite small, and he only came up to Albaoryl’s waist. “I think you should wait ’til you’re a bit older.”

“But I heard the Rage prince went when he was only five...”

“Yeah, he’s a bit of a special case.” Albaoryl gave a wry smile as the boy started to pout. He wanted to say the prince was an exception among exceptions, but at the boy’s age, that wouldn’t make the reality any easier to swallow. “The prince is super big, you know. He’s already this tall.”

“Wait, really?” The boy’s eyes went wide at the height Albaoryl indicated.

“Yep. So...well, I don’t think you need to be *that* tall,” Albaoryl said, making a small mark with his knife on one of the house’s pillars. “But once you get this tall, I’ll take you to the Dark Portal.”

“Really?! How much do I need to grow?!”

The boy quickly lined up against the pillar so Albaoryl could measure him, indicating how much he had to grow with his fingers.

“Man...I hope I grow fast...”

“In that case, you’d better eat a lot of meat. I’ll make sure to bring some tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Alba!”

Albaoryl ruffled the boy’s hair again as the boy squeezed him in a big hug. Behind him, the boy’s mother gave another deep bow, tears in her eyes.

Not all demons were that strong. Some couldn’t find devils they were compatible with, others were just bad at fighting. After losing her husband in battle, she had lost her source of income. She had no means to support herself on her own.

Of course, demonic society wouldn’t put up with its people starving to death. It would be a mark against their honor. So they provided those people with the bare minimum needed to live...but in that sense, they were spared nothing but starvation. It was a small mercy.

One might think that, being a demon, they should just find a way to use magic and work. But that presented its own challenges. The Rage family had **Transposition** at their disposal, but that was still a curse that would be resisted by those magically stronger than the user. Without some measure of strength themselves, they couldn’t act as healers. Perhaps they could heal beastfolk and night elves since they were not as magically inclined as demons, but those who were actually powerful could do that too. With the limited availability of work opportunities for healers, there was no reason to hire weak ones.

In that case you might say they should just find some other magic, but there were vanishingly few kinds of magic that could be used to make a living. With the Corvut family’s earth magic for construction, or the Vernas family’s ice magic for preserving food, one could manage something even if they weren’t particularly strong...but not many demons had the luxury of possessing two Bloodline Magics.

Marrying between families required a considerable amount of connections, without which one could only marry within their own family. In those cases, their children would only ever possess one Bloodline Magic.

By the way, Albaoryl had in fact inherited another Bloodline Magic from his mother’s side, but it was only one that imbued thread with a small protective

power. His mother and sister could use it to make some money on the side, but it didn't have much use outside of that.

At any rate, the path to greater strength was easier for those already strong, while those who were weak were scorned and despised, growing ever weaker. That was how life in the demonic kingdom worked.

"All right, see you tomorrow!"

Waving goodbye to the boy, Albaoryl left their house. He still had plenty of food left to hand out to all the boys and girls he felt bad for.

For those who had sworn pacts with devils that would help them fight but were never given an opportunity to do so. For those like his sister, who were born with a handicap that prevented them from working. For those families who had lost their breadwinner right after their children were born.

They're not weak. They're just unlucky, Albaoryl thought, holding tight to the bundled food he had left. *If they were just given a chance, if they just had a little support...*

They'd become strong. They'd grow. Within demonic society as it was, that was an unacceptable premise.

As a viscount, there was only so much Albaoryl could do to help them. So he needed to get stronger. He needed a higher rank so he could do more for them. So...

I've gotta make it big.

Running down the night streets, Albaoryl renewed his vow to himself.

+++

Hi there, it's me, Zilbagias. Just like always, I'm training from sunset to sunrise during my time in the Rage family territory. The moment the sun set I'd get out of bed and do some light hand-to-hand training, my first meal would be followed up with exercise, then marching or battle training in the forest. There'd be a barbecue to reenergize, a short reprieve to bathe, then study in tactical theory. That was what every day looked like.

“That’s all for today!”

Or so I had come to believe, when today things ended with a short jaunt through the woods. We hadn’t even been going for an hour yet.

“What’s up, Gori?” Training wrapping up early seemed too good to be true.

“Starting tomorrow we’ll be moving your training to a ruined city we’ve prepared,” she replied, tapping her spear on her shoulder. “Urban combat training. It’ll be pretty rough, so we’re giving you plenty of time to rest beforehand.”

I let out a small groan without thinking. “Rough” to Gorilacia likely meant “brutal” for almost anyone else. Even Kuvital and his men, usually breezing through training hardly breaking a sweat, started to scowl at the thought. The three idiots just made stupid expressions like they were completely clueless. *Ah, right on schedule. Despair is starting to sink in.*

“So that’s it for today. Make sure to pack enough clothes since we’ll be staying there for three days!” Gorilacia left with a casual wave.

“Gaaah, this is going to be awful!”

“Just when I thought I was getting used to this...” The Nite brothers all but collapsed, heads in their hands.

“No barbecue today, huh?” Albaoryl sighed, sweeping a hand through his slicked-back hair. “Guess I’ll have to do some hunting,” he muttered to himself. *Man, is this guy addicted to meat or what?*

So feeling a bit like the rug had been pulled out from under us, I made my way back to the Valt house.

“*Should this moment of reprieve not be cause for celebration?*” Ante commented nonchalantly, something she could only do as a spectator to our gruesome training. With the promise of hell to come tomorrow, there was no joy to be found in a vacation today. Honestly speaking, I hadn’t really been able to relax since I came to the Rage lands.

On that note...

A squeal filled the air as I bumped into a certain girl in the hallway—Lumiafya.

That strained expression, those wide eyes, I could all but hear her screaming “of all times, why is this guy here?!” Normally I didn’t make it back until after lunch. Though she froze for a moment, it wasn’t long before reflexes took over and she dropped face-first to the floor.

“I-I-It is a p-p-pleasure to see you, Y-Y-Your Highness...”

With a nod and a quick hello, I left her behind to go back to my own room. After all, it wasn’t like any prolonged conversation between us would be fruitful.

Ante, on the other hand, was really enjoying herself—rolling with laughter. *“Serves the damn brat right!”* She always got a kick out of anytime we crossed paths with Lumiafya, but I was a bit uncomfortable being the villain of the situation. And by a bit, I mean a lot.

The other day, I had heard her shouting from another room *“Eiz, stop it! Let me go!”* In response to her desperate pleading, a rather intense Eizvalt had shouted back, *“Stay still! Stop struggling!”* Once she had started screaming, *“Stop! Someone help me!”* I found myself barging into the room without thinking, and had shouted, *“What are you doing?!”*

And what I saw was Lumiafya tied to a chair, with Eizvalt pushing a spear toward her.

“Okay seriously though, what’s going on here?!”

“I-It’s not what it looks like! There’s a good reason for this!”

While I stared in shock and Eizvalt began desperately trying to make excuses, Lumiafya had totally conked out. It was a confusing situation, to say the least.

I later heard from Prati that after her duel with me, Lumiafya had acquired a phobia of sorts when in the presence of pointed and bladed objects. Of course a daughter of the chief family being unable to wield a spear was unacceptable, so they were working hard to help her overcome that fear.

But...it honestly looked like their efforts were having the opposite effect. With each passing day, Lumiafya seemed to be getting weaker and weaker. But it wasn’t like I had any reason to speak on her behalf, so whatever.

After all, technically this mess was my fault.

So anyway, though I had returned to my room, there wasn't actually anything for me to do there. All I could really do was pet Liliana to kill time.

"Shall we do something?" Layla, appearing to be equally as bored, looked over to me. Back at the castle her time was taken up with work, but she had nothing of the sort here. So that had left her kind of adrift with tons of free time and nothing to spend it on.

"Hmm...oh, yeah. I guess it's been a while since you've flown, huh?"

"I...suppose so."

Back at the castle she was practicing flying more or less every day, but coming to the Rage territory had put a pause on that. There was no telling how the local population would react to the sudden appearance of a white dragon, so she had to refrain from using her dragon form.

"Why don't we go out after lunch?" Leaving the city meant very few people would be around to see us, and even if someone did, my presence while overseeing her should be enough to quell any complaints. "The moon is quite pretty today. I think you'll be able to enjoy a good flight." I could already picture her scales gleaming in the moonlight.

"Okay." Layla nodded, a bright smile on her face. And if we were going out anyway, it was the perfect opportunity to check out the town. I'd been so swamped with travel and training that I hadn't had a chance to see much yet. Plus, we would likely stumble across something of interest.

So after our mid-night meal, we headed out for a walk. I worried that bringing Liliana with us might draw too much attention, but as if to say, "You guys should go ahead and hang out as a couple," Liliana had hopped onto my bed, curled up, and passed out after we ate. So I was able to leave her behind with a clear conscience.

We didn't have much of an escort with us. We were in the heart of the Rage family territory. And truth be told, this place was safer than even the castle. There were only a small handful of people around here of comparable strength

to me. Just for propriety's sake, we did have Veene and a group of other night elf servants following us around.

The Rage capital at night. Two hundred years ago, this was the city of Delma, capital of the human kingdom Venandi. The kingdom had been conquered by the Demon King's army, and the Rage family had taken the city for themselves. They now called it the Rage capital, a name completely lacking in class. Apparently it had originally been a fortress city with a set of rather sturdy stone walls, but they had proved to be little more than a nuisance to the demons, and so they had demolished them. It was separated into two sections: the "new city" built around the chief's residence, where the buildings were built by the demons themselves, and the "old city" that still maintained the visual style of the old human kingdom.

"A demon city, huh?" Walking down the main street felt kind of weird. It reminded me very much of my time in my previous life strolling down the city streets of human kingdoms. Not much was different outside the fact it was nighttime instead of daytime and most people on the street had blue skin and horns.

Being past lunch, the city was bustling with activity. Even these savages had set up legitimate shops here. Most of them were run by a demon owner with night elf employees. Very few beastfolk were around, probably since they weren't nocturnal like the rest of us. I heard that while we were all asleep during the day, the beastfolk were up cleaning the city and working the farms.

"There are all kinds of stores, aren't there?" Layla said, her attention captured by the crystal glass display windows as we walked by.

"Good point. Layla, is this...?"

"Yes, my first time walking in a town! I've never seen stores like this before..."

I guess that made sense. Honestly, it was a pretty stupid question on my part. It wasn't like she had the freedom to walk around like this until fairly recently.

So this is her first time seeing shops like this, huh? I couldn't fault her for being so excited in that case. I remembered there being a general store in my hometown as a kid...or at least, I think I did. How had I felt upon first seeing rows and rows of things beyond my comprehension?

“Want to do some shopping?”

“Really?!” Her eyes shot open wide as if she hadn’t even considered the possibility. “But...I didn’t bring any money with me...!”

“Ah.” Now that she mentioned it, I didn’t have any either. Shooting Veene a glance, she quickly produced a small leather bag with a nod. *Guess we have some funds after all. It pays to have friends in a pinch, huh?*

“Okay then. Do you mind tagging along while I shop?”

“Not at all!” Layla made no attempt at hiding her excitement; the sight also brought a smile to my face.

But what was I going to buy? Even with all the shops that lined the main street, here in the demonic kingdom, an abundance of accessories and the like were seen as a sign of weakness. Although the Rage territory was somewhat more cultured in most regards, “strong and robust” remained the prevailing theme.

The first ones we came across were stores for everyday goods like cookware. After that was a clothing store selling (a savage’s impression of) clothing for nobility. Oh, they even had a public library. I’d have to remember to tell Sophia about it. Though actually, there was a good chance she already knew about it.

The biggest store on the main street—unsurprisingly—was the weapon store. Behind the polished glass display window was an array of dwarven-made magic spears, illuminated by a set of lamps above them. More than a few passersby glanced into the window with longing. *Dwarven gear is like a major status symbol around these parts, huh?*

“Wow...”

“They’re so cool!”

“I’m gonna buy this spear someday!”

Among them all, a group of demon children huddled around the window, excitedly gawking at its contents. Their innocent, childlike wonder made a stark contrast to the threat I knew they’d pose to humanity when they grew up. Watching them caused complicated feelings to stir within me.

“Huh? Who’s this guy?” One of the kids noticed me. “Don’t recognize him. He looks like some punk.”

And so it started.

Look who’s talking.

But before I could even worry about this situation turning into another pain in the butt, the kid’s companions began to rain punches down on him, faces turning pale.

“You idiot! Don’t you recognize him?!”

“He’ll break your horns!”

“Run!”

Dragging their aggressive friend in tow, the group of kids fled. At least they weren’t so heartless as to leave him behind.

“It appears your reputation precedes you.” Ante sighed.

Yeah...not like I care much about the opinions of demons anyway.

Glancing over at Layla, I could see she was looking down, keeping a restrained expression. She was probably too used to expecting punishment for anything that could be construed as looking down on demons and so was doing everything she could to suppress her reaction.

So anyway, after all that, we ended up making our way into a grocery store. Walking into a shop run by demons was just really weird. Unlike accessories or general stores, food had nothing to do with being weak or strong, so thanks to their ice magic to keep food preserved for stock and transport, they had a huge variety of items for sale. *Of all the things a random store in town could sell, the last thing I expected was something like ice cream...*

Together with the businesslike smiles of the night elf employees, it was a bit of a culture shock. It was also noteworthy how they shrank back a little bit upon seeing Veene and the other servants. Night elves probably had a similar hierarchy in place to the demons.

“This looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, maybe I’ll bring some back for Garunya...”

Taking our time with some trivial chitchat, we eventually settled on some baked sweets.

Huh. For some reason, this was kind of fun. Now that I thought about it, even including my last life, this might have been the first time I’d ever gone shopping with a girl.

“You truly led a miserable life, didn’t you?”

I mean, it wasn’t like I had time for stuff like that. If memory served me right, one time a female Swordmaster swiped the last bit of jerky from a merchant supplying the army before I could get to it, so I guess if that counts...

“No...that’s...definitely not the same.”

Yeah, I guess.

While stuffing our mouths with sweets, we stepped out of the store. “S-So this is...sampling the local food...” Layla murmured excitedly. It was kind of funny to watch. So anyway, we enjoyed shopping and walking around for a bit.

As we made it out of the heart of the city, the atmosphere changed drastically. We were now in the old city. Most buildings erected by the demons were built by the Corvut family. Their Bloodline Magic *Concreta* allowed them to manipulate stone freely, making the act of building houses and castles no more complex than a child building a heap of mud. Mixed with the demonic penchant against decoration and the seriousness of the Corvut family, the buildings they made tended to be flat, smooth, and unrefined in appearance. So even in the Rage capital, the cityscape could be described as “functional” at best, and “monotone and dull” at worst.

But the old city was a different story. In a sense, you could say I was quite familiar with the scenery: a place that still looked every bit like a human city. The road was made from mosaic-patterned stone tiles. Houses were built using a combination of stone and brick. With no way to shape or meld the stone, each building had to be constructed by hand. The style was pretty old too. Even though the demons had taken it over two hundred years ago, the cityscape had been preserved. It didn’t seem like they were doing much in regards to upkeep

as many of the stone walls were cracked or had collapsed, and more than a few houses were starting to lean. In contrast to the liveliness of the city center, the atmosphere here was quite depressing.

The noise of the new city seemed so far away. All of a sudden, I felt completely out of my element. The food in my mouth abruptly tasted far too sweet.

“This place has quite a different atmosphere, doesn’t it?” Layla said, half bewildered and half curious as her gaze looked over the area.

“You can say that again...” I responded mechanically. It seemed... Well, “boorish” wasn’t quite the right word. Maybe “desolate” was better. Though it certainly wasn’t popular, it also seemed like it was lacking a sense of being “alive.”

“Your mind isn’t playing tricks on you,” Ante spoke up. “The heart of the city is filled with people who possess powerful magic. But that is not the case here.”

Ah, I see. So the magical pressure...

“Is basically zero. From a cursory look, it seems there are no formidable demons in the vicinity.”

I gave my horns a pat. Though I had become quite accustomed to detecting magic thanks to this body, times like this really drew out my human senses. I wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

But with so little pressure, it made me question if any demons were living here at all. The servants like the night elves and beastfolk lived farther out of the city, so this wasn’t their area either.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“The old city,” Veene responded with a serious look.

Okay come on, I knew that much.

“I was actually hoping for a more detailed explanation.”

“Apologies, that was a joke.”

Liar. You were dead serious. Why else would the other night elves be elbowing

you?

“When the Rage family captured this territory, the surrounding area of the current chief’s residence took a considerable amount of damage. I am told the Corvut family was brought in to reconstruct it,” Veene began to explain, expressionless. *So that was the new city, right?*

“Of course, houses built by *Concreta* are much stronger both physically and magically. Naturally, they were quickly claimed by the more powerful households. Those with nowhere else to go had no choice but to come here. The duties of repairing the buildings here were left to the human slaves,” she continued, choosing her words carefully.

Simply put, the strong got the fancy new houses in the city center, while the weak got the leftovers. That really explained things. In other words, the old city was populated by the descendants of the Rage family’s small fry. Seeing the difference between the two was quite the reality check.

On top of that... “the human slaves,” huh? Those words made my chest tighten as I remembered the human “farm” we had visited. Considering the current ratio of humans to nonhumans in the Rage territory, what fate had become of those slaves wasn’t difficult to imagine. Made me wonder how they had felt in the end.

With that thought in mind, the old city looked less like a desolate town and more like a graveyard. And the dense population was not composed of humans, but of parasites calling themselves demons.

I took a deep breath. If I was by myself, I could let out all my anger, but...

“Let’s go.” Pulling myself together, I gave Layla a smile. I didn’t want to spoil the mood for her first time out.

“What about me?”

Yeah, of course I know you’re always with me.

“Hmph. Well, as long as you understand...”

Taking Layla’s hand, I started walking again. She said nothing while only replying with a somewhat sad smile, squeezing my hand—as if hoping that little

bit of strength in her fingers could help prop me up.

All right, it's time to put this rundown city behind us. Thinking that, I started walking faster—

“Ah, Your Highness!”

At which point I ran right into a familiar face with some familiar curly horns.

“Oh, hi Alba.”

It was Albaoryl, spear on his shoulders. *Why is he in a place like this?*

“Nice to see you. What are you doing in a place like this?” he asked.

“I wanted to ask you the same thing.”

“I mean, I live here, so...”

What? Setting aside what I said about parasites for now...that would kind of explain why he seemingly got looked down on unjustly. They judged him poorly because of his underlying family situation. *Damn, maybe I shouldn't have asked Veene to give me a rundown on this place. Gonna make navigating this conversation a bit difficult.*

“Oh, I see. I was just out for a bit of a walk. I've had a lot of training since coming here, so I never really had a chance to look around the capital.” Careful to not rush out my words, I explained what we were doing. I then put an arm casually around Layla's shoulders. “Also...since she's been stuck in human form for so long, I wanted to give her a chance to spread her wings. So we're on our way to the forest outside town.”

I wanted to say, “So please excuse us” to move things along, but...

“Oh, you're heading to the forest too! What a coincidence! I was just about to go hunting myself! Allow me to accompany you!” Alba's face lit up in a bright smile. Nothing but pure goodwill and loyalty. *This guy doesn't have a shred of artifice in him.*

“S-Sure...” Unable to object, we let Albaoryl tag along.

“This way is a bit of a shortcut. That road might look like a straight shot, but it actually curves right at the bottom of the hill, so it'll take you away from the

forest.”

And, as expected of a local, he was a great guide. He didn’t so much as hesitate to slide into small back roads, the likes of which I would never touch if I was on my own. From time to time, as if to try and avoid letting me see it, he’d pick up or kick aside some garbage left behind on the street.

Occasionally we came across local residents, but they seemed much more shabbily dressed than the people we came across in the new city. I was kind of astonished to have discovered there were those poor and destitute even among the demons. Wasn’t everyone in this kingdom supposed to be nobility? Though, thinking about it logically, there were those in the Alliance who were quite poor despite being nobility—basically noble in name only.

“There are a lot of poor people living in this area. Someone of your standing in a place like this is pretty rare,” Albaoryl murmured as we made it to the edge of the old city. Though his eyes looked straight ahead, it was clear all his focus was on me. “Your Highness...what did you think of it?” There was a tinge of nervousness in his voice. “About those poor, weak people?” Albaoryl’s usual eternally bright and upbeat attitude had been replaced with seriousness.

“You mean, the demons specifically?” Judging by the way things were going I assumed that was what he meant, but I wanted to be sure. Technically it was possible he wasn’t talking about any race of people in particular, but about the idea of the weak and the poor in general.

“Yes, exactly.”

But I was wrong. It was just about demons. *Weak and poor demons, then? Guess I can’t just say, “Let them all die.”*

“Hmm...”

I bought some time by appearing to sink into thought. What kind of answer was he looking for? It didn’t sound like he was encouraging me to make fun of them. For a demon, Alba was pretty gentle so that didn’t seem like him. And he had waited to bring it up until after we were basically out of the city, likely to ensure no one could listen in on the answer. Plus, the fact he was asking a demon prince about it...

“Perhaps his attempt to bring this problem to your attention, no?”

Maybe. At the very least, I could safely say he was keeping a close eye on my behavior. The longer I took to respond, the more nervous he got.

“Is there any reason to give this so much thought? Does his opinion of your answer even matter?”

Well, Ante had a point. Rather than trying so hard to find the “right” answer, I was probably better off giving my honest opinion and seeing how Alba responded.

“To be honest, I was unaware there were demons living in conditions like this.” So I gave him my absolute honest thoughts. *Weren’t all demons supposed to be nobility in this kingdom?*

“I...see.” Alba’s face fell a little, as if discouraged at how far behind I was in the discussion.

“After all, I was raised in the castle. I was surrounded by demons of the highest class.” They oppressed the other races, wielded their magic and authority like clubs, and wrapped themselves in what only a savage could consider noble clothing. “So if you ask what I think...I’d have to say I’m surprised. What happened to put them into poverty like this?”

Living here meant they were members of the Rage family, right? In the demonic kingdom where healers were a rarity, how could members of such a valuable bloodline be living in such dire straits?

“Well...there is no one answer of course, but they all have their reasons...” Alba scratched his head, choosing his words carefully. “For example, those families that lost their provider before their children had a chance to inherit their skills and knowledge.”

I suppose that makes sense. It was a scene I’d seen more times than I cared to count back in the Alliance.

“Some make pacts with devils specialized for combat, but since they never see deployment, their magic never has a chance to grow.”

Isn’t getting a pact with a devil at all a luxury in itself, though?

“Why can’t they get deployments?”

“Without the right connections, it’s nearly impossible to get someone to take you to the battlefield. The only real chance they have is for their first deployment, which is allowed unconditionally, but making a name for oneself under those conditions is very difficult. So in the end, that glory is usually reserved for the strong and their friends...”

“I see...”

As a prince, I’d received special treatment left and right. And now I was beginning to understand just how shallow my understanding of the standard demonic military was. I knew that the front lines push rotated, and the different families were constantly warring with each other over who got to take charge of those advances, but I knew little about how the family that won that privilege actually mustered the strength for their campaign.

“If my understanding is right, is it correct for me to say bringing someone to the front lines with you means paying for all of their expenses to get there?”

“That is right. From the bone horse fees, to food and supplies...so of course, it’s impossible to take everyone who wants to go.”

Ah, that explains all the stealing quotas talk.

“But even if no one was willing to sponsor them, they could go by themselves...” I began to say, but trailed off partway through the thought—realizing the root of the issue. “Ah. They’re too poor to manage those expenses on their own.”

“Precisely.” Alba nodded quietly.

“The rich get richer, while the poor get poorer. A tiresome cycle that always plays out the same. A shame the demons fell for the same trap,” Ante said, a mix of exasperation and mockery in her voice.

“Would making, say, counts and higher pay their own expenses not solve the issue? The leftover quota could then be funneled down to the younger demons.”

“I...suppose that’s true,” Alba responded, seemingly a bit taken aback by my

simplistic solution. “But it’s hard to imagine those of the higher ranks will take kindly to such a suggestion...”

“Yeah...” *Not a chance in hell.*

“But maybe...if Your Highness were to insist...”

Okay, quit looking at me like some beacon of hope! Why does raising new soldiers for the Demon King’s army have to be my problem?!

“Unfortunately, as I am a prince, I am not in line to inherit the Rage family.” So I gave a sigh, scrounging up the only plausible excuse I could. “Interfering too much could cause a lot of internal discord. My mother is always warning me against trying such things.” So don’t get your hopes up, I insisted without so many words.

“I...see. I suppose that makes sense...”

“Why don’t you try bringing it up with the chief yourself?” Alba’s bitter expression said it all—he’d already tried that. “No luck, huh?”

If I was really a member of the Rage family, this was the kind of problem that would drive me crazy. But in reality I was a prince, and beyond that I was a human. This was none of my concern.

If I could make it happen...restricting transport quotas for the skilled soldiers to fill the front lines with untrained recruits would probably help out the Alliance on the battlefield. In that sense, my involvement might actually be beneficial...

“On the other hand, you run the risk of awakening otherwise dormant talent in the demons. Quite the conundrum.”

Exactly. The scariest part of the whole equation were devil pacts. There was no telling what would cause one of them to experience sudden and explosive growth. And besides, even if I managed to get more of the young and poor on the battlefield, that wasn’t a surefire way to change the quota prepared for veterans. All that would accomplish was adding greenhorn demons on top of the already strong ones. And in turn, make things harder for the Alliance. So that route wasn’t an option.

“What about you, Alba? Why do you bring it up?” I asked, seeing Alba slump. “I’m sure you’re well aware there’s no simple solution here. So what do you want to do?”

“I...” Alba lifted his face. “If possible...I want to help them.” A strong light shone in his eyes, his grip on his spear tightening. “I get it if you want to call me pathetic for wanting to lend the weak a hand, but everyone was born a baby, and all babies are weak, aren’t they? Without someone to help them, not one of them could grow up to be strong!” Albaoryl spoke, clearly struggling to keep his voice steady.

“Of course, those actually weak who slack off on their training reap their own rewards. But there are those who truly wish to be strong and just haven’t been given the opportunity. I wish to give them that opportunity. But I’m only a viscount with no connections, my hands are tied. That’s why...” Alba turned to look at me. “That’s why I want to make it big. That’s why I asked you to take me with you. By making a name for myself and becoming someone important, I can help those people.”

How very noble of you, Albaoryl. But I’m afraid you’re barking up the wrong tree.

That said, this guy was quite a weirdo. How did the proud and arrogant demons produce a guy with this kind of personality?

“Why are you willing to suffer so much just to help others?” I asked out of genuine curiosity, earning a flinch from Alba. *Ah, he thought I was criticizing him.* “Oh, don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to mock your goals. Really, I’m impressed. I just thought all demons were stuck-up jerks who just looked out for themselves, and couldn’t be assed to care about the people below them.”

I heard a stifled grunt from behind me. Probably Veene trying to suppress her laughter at my wording. I imagined the next stifled thumps were her companions smacking her.

“I might even think of you as something of a philanthropist.”

“A philanthropist, huh?” Alba tilted his head to the side, seemingly not fond of the word. “I just...find it irritating. People taking this entire situation for granted rubs me the wrong way.” Alba hesitated a bit. “I... I have an older

sister.”

“Oh, really? I thought you were an only child.”

“I get that a lot. My sister, she...she can’t see.”

In...the Rage family?

“She was born without eyes.”

Oh...

Alba continued, heedless of my loss for words. He told me about his parents, how they protected their daughter who “never should have been,” and what it had cost them.

“I think that probably had a big influence on me. Even now I can’t imagine a life without her. When I think about that, I can’t bring myself to accept that the weak should just be left to die. So I can’t just ignore them... Of course, that’s all just my personal feelings! Sorry, that’s just how I am.” Alba gave a small, joking bow. As much as he laughed, I could see a resolute light in his eyes still, not willing to concede an inch on this issue.

Ah. So he’s strong-willed just like any other demon.

I felt a kind of hollowness that was really hard to describe. A demon being so considerate? How was that possible? I felt my heart growing cold. Because throughout the whole conversation, the natural question slowly made its way to the front of my mind.

So, what about humanity? If you replaced “demons” for “humanity,” then there was a lot we could agree on. We were just alike, he and I. But Alba only saw the demons. That was natural enough. It felt like an impenetrable wall had been built between us, a racial barrier.

Besides, even the poorest of demons were at least esquires, so they wouldn’t starve. Compared to that, did he have any idea how much the humans suffered? Did he know how many fathers and mothers the war had taken? How many struggled against starvation every single day?

They can’t catch a break because no one will take them to the front? Man, what a luxury. What about those human soldiers conscripted and dragged to

the front against their will, forced to fight against the invading demons? Go to hell.

The hollow feeling in my chest was gradually boiling. That was not good. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to keep my feelings under wraps.

At that moment, I heard a familiar melody in the air.

"What's that...?"

Isn't that the same song that was played at my welcome banquet? Looking ahead, I saw a huge stone structure built by *Concreta* on the edge of the city, right before reaching the forest.

"Ah, that would be the residence for the skilled slaves," Alba explained.

So that's where the humans live? It was my first time seeing one in the capital.

"I'm surprised they're in the middle of the city." I gave my honest opinion. Since entering the Rage family territory, all the human slave settlements—"farms," as they called them—had been kept a fair distance away from the rest of the populace. I never expected to see one in the heart of the city like this. Though with walls that high and iron bars over the windows, it was clear they were still going quite over the top to prevent anyone from escaping.

"That seems about right for performers, don't you think? Keeping them too far away would prove inconvenient whenever they wanted to host a party on a whim."

I suppose that made sense.

"Ah, that's true. It's been quite a problem recently." Alba gave a bit of a strange response to me calling this "the middle of the city," but otherwise gave a complex expression. "Recently the population of demons, beastfolk, and night elves in the capital has been steadily increasing, so room in the capital is getting tight."

Now that I thought about it, I had been studying demographics with Sophia a little bit. "The population of the whole kingdom is on the rise, after all. I guess this place isn't an exception."

“Yeah. But this residential area is in an unnecessarily good spot. Which is making things difficult to keep pushing development into the forest, so it seems there are plans for demolition and to rebuild smaller.”

“I see...” I responded absentmindedly, listening to the far off sound of music. The repetition of the melody likely indicated they were practicing. There was something decidedly sad, decidedly tragic about the sound. I had no doubts that those who couldn’t perform up to snuff weren’t kept around for long. Not here in the Rage territory.

Why...? What had humanity done to deserve this cruelty?

“To get back on topic—Alba.”

“Huh? Oh! Yes!”

“The unlucky, the weak, the poor, and your desire to help them. I understand how you feel. However...we demons aren’t the only ones living in this world,” I pressed as he blinked in surprise. “What about the others? Beastfolk, elves, dwarves...even our sworn enemies, the humans. There’s no shortage of unlucky people among them. Those longing to be saved. An abundance of those who lost their father or mother to the war and are now destitute. What do you think about them?”

For example, what about the people trapped in those stone walls? What about humanity? If he said he didn’t care, he’d be no better than the other demons leaving the weak to die.

“Uh...” Alba put a hand to his mouth as if in surprise. “Honestly...I’ve never thought about it. I mean, I’ve heard about issues beastfolk and night elves have when it comes to things like healing quotas...” he trailed off, very much aware of the presence of Veene and the other night elves behind us. “But...I suppose unlike the ones on the farms here, the humans in the Alliance have families too, don’t they?”

Alba put a hand to his head, looking up at the sky.

“That...kinda makes it hard to fight them, doesn’t it? Ah, sorry. That sounds pretty pathetic, huh?” He laughed with a troubled smile.

“Okay, I’m off to do some hunting then! See you again tomorrow, Your Highness!” As we reached the forest outside of the city, Alba hefted his spear and made his way into the underbrush.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.” As I saw him off, I couldn’t help but feel unsettled—I had severely underestimated this man.

Since he was a demon, I had figured he didn’t care one way or another about whether humans lived or died. If that had been the case, I’d have no qualms killing him when the time came. Despite being asked by a prince, he showed no regard for that fact as he displayed clear sympathy for the humans of the Alliance. And yet he didn’t seem to care one way or the other about those raised in the farms.

My dissatisfaction was exceptional. Though it wasn’t like I had any real strong opinions about what became of “unlucky demons.” In that respect, his attitude seemed appropriate to me. *Mercy and sympathy are really only applicable to one’s own, right?*

“True, regardless of one’s race,” Ante said, entirely uninterested. “It is even worse among devils, you know. After all, they lack any sense of camaraderie with each other and only care for longtime friends and those they have sworn pacts with.”

Well...technically, devils aren’t really living things in the same way humans or demons are, so it’s not really an apt comparison.

“I suppose that is true. But, in any case, this is hardly a matter worth your concern. You are ordinary, that man is ordinary. What separates you two is that your definition of who is an ‘ally’ differs from the norm, as well as your core values. Fatally so.”

Fatally? I guess it would be. If he had been born as a human, Alba would probably turn out to be a fantastic hero. However the fact remained, he was a demon. He wanted to lend a hand to weak demons, but his sympathy for the Alliance was only surface level. On top of that, he couldn’t care less about the slaves within the demonic kingdom.

“If he’s going hunting, does that mean there’s something in the forest to hunt?” As if trying to draw me out of the storm brewing in my chest, Layla

spoke up, trying to change the subject.

“I guess there has to be. Kinda wonder what.” Thankful for her consideration, I replied as I stared off at the foliage Alba had disappeared into.

Unlike the heavily maintained forest we trained in, this area appeared to be untouched. This was evident by how the trees and underbrush here were much thicker. That said, we were fairly close to the city, so most of the large animals had likely been hunted long ago. The only ones left were probably birds or deer.

That thought gave me pause. I guess I was not much different. The thought of harm coming to the people of the Alliance made me furious, but when it came to birds or deer, I felt bad for them but never upset. Heck, I ate meat all the time.

Was that the same way Alba felt about humans? Humans being raised on farms were just a matter of course for him, so he didn't feel anything in particular. But for those on the front lines, he felt sympathy because he could imagine they had families and community. But that sympathy wasn't enough to stop him from killing them.

Just like I had stuffed my belly with meat the day before. Whether as a demon or a human, I primarily ate meat. If an animal confronted me seeking revenge, I wouldn't really have room to argue, would I?

“I don't believe any sort of argument would be necessary. You are an avenger as well, are you not? Should another such avenger show themselves, battling fair and square would suffice.”

Easy for you to say. But...it's kinda funny, isn't it?

“Indeed. Worrying over all this is pointless. Besides, you lack the time required to attempt filling the bottomless trench between your two peoples, no?”

True enough. That wasn't the kind of thing willpower alone could change. And demons lived for two or three hundred years anyways. Even if by some miracle they were able to change, the Alliance would be long gone by then. Honestly, just destroying the demonic kingdom was the faster approach.

Sorry, Alba. I feel kinda bad for you. Just like how your guilt won't stop you from killing humans anyway, I won't stop until I achieve my goal.

“That was quite the funny story, huh?” I said, finally relaxing. In contrast to my smile, Layla looked rather concerned.

“It was funny?”

“Yeah. At least, after giving it some thought.”

“In that case...I’m glad to hear it.” She gave a relieved smile.

“Anyway, I totally forgot we came out here so you could do some flying. Sorry.” Between the shopping and the surprise encounter with Alba, it had completely slipped my mind.

“Ah, don’t mind me... I’m happy as long as I can spend time with you.” She giggled, twiddling her thumbs shyly.

“Same for me, I guess,” I replied. Spending every waking moment surrounded by enemies made any opportunities to be alone with Layla or Liliana worthwhile moments of reprieve and relaxation. It really made me glad that Layla accepted me for who I was. “But don’t you find it stressful to be stuck on the ground for so long?”

I looked up at the sky. A brilliant silver moon hung in a perfectly clear sky of stars. There was a proverb in the Alliance that went “the sun shines on us all.” No matter the circumstances of your birth or upbringing, it treated us all equally. I suppose the same goes for the moon.

“The moon is really bright tonight. I bet your scales would shine beautifully on a night like this.”

“Well...” Layla covered her mouth with her hands, her golden eyes going wide. It was the first time I’d seen her blush so plainly. “If you say things like that...then I won’t be able to stop myself...!”

She immediately undid the ribbon tying her clothes together. As I looked away, still a bit shy, she impatiently slipped out of her uniform. My gaze fell on the night elf maids. Even the eternally steel-faced night elves alongside Veene huddled around in shock.

Cut it out! Nothing inappropriate is going on here! She just can’t transform with clothes on! Stop it, Veene! Quit winking like that!

After shedding her clothes, Layla's form quickly began to distort, both her body, her magic, and her overall presence burgeoning outward. In the blink of an eye, she had been replaced by a stunning silver-white dragon.

"Okay then. I'm going to go flying for a bit." After stepping away a little so the backwash from her wings wouldn't hurt us, she spread her wings wide. With a quick hop, she launched herself into the air, the gust of wind from her wings rattling the surrounding branches. The silver dragon soared upward.

"That dragon seems almost unrecognizable, doesn't it?" Ante murmured, her tone impressed.

Seriously. When we had first met, the best she could do was brief glides and that was after a running start. Now, she could really fly—she was weightless, free. I bet being back up in the air felt great to her. Spinning in the air, doing loops in the sky, it was like she was doing aerial acrobatics. It was as if she were swimming in a sea of stars. Even in the dead of night, to my demonic eyes, it was like she was glowing.

Just as I was enchanted by the performance, she seemed to lose all sense of time as she absorbed herself in her flight. After the moon had sunk quite a bit, Layla finally returned to the ground.

"Ah! Looks like I had a bit too much fun." Although her voice was somewhat more metallic than usual, the inflection was the same as her human form—that familiar hint of shyness. The way she put her front legs up to cover her face, just like she had done so many times with her hands, felt so much like her—adorably so.

"You were beautiful. You've really become a splendid dragon, haven't you?" I said, stroking the bottom of her chin. Layla rumbled a low purr, her golden eyes locked on me. *The freedom that flying gives must feel great.*

"Flying is great. It feels so free up here."

Prati's words suddenly came back to me. It was something she had said when we were flying en route to the Dark Portal.

Everything suddenly felt so silly.

"Hey, Layla. That little bit of flying wasn't all that satisfying, right?"

“Um...yes, that’s right.”

“In that case, I have a request.” *It’ll be fine, right?* “Can I come up for a ride?”

Layla’s golden eyes shot open wide. The faint, knowing grins on the night elves watching turned to shock, like they had suddenly been drenched in ice water.

“Lord Zilbagias! You can’t...!”

“Mother won’t allow me, right?” But honestly, the relationship between Layla and I was far beyond that. At least on the surface. “To be honest, my trust in Layla more than outweighs that. If she really wanted me dead, there would be no need to do so in such a roundabout way like dropping me from the sky. She could bite me right now and get it over with. We’re not even slightly on guard when around her, are we?”

“That is...true, but...”

“And she’s seen me stark naked without even a knife on me. Nothing was stopping her from turning into a dragon and just killing me whenever she wanted. Why are we worrying about that now?”

“That’s...also true...”

Layla was groaning with embarrassment behind me. *Sorry. The naked part was a stretch since we’ve never done stuff like that before, but I needed a good cover story.*

“So that’s it. You told me not to, and I ignored you. For the time being, please leave it at that.” Though it seemed like they still wanted to protest, my argument had clearly won them over somewhat as they looked away in frustration. So I turned back to Layla. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Please, go ahead.” Layla lowered herself to the ground. “But...are you sure? We don’t have a saddle...”

“Ha, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit scared. So please, be gentle.”

“I-I’ll do my best.”

And so, with me on her back, we flew together for the first time—unfettered into the endless starry sky.

My first experience flying with Layla—

“Aaaaaah!”

Among the glittering stars—

“Gaaaaaaah!”

Glittering, wavering—

“Guh! Ahhhh!”

No, it wasn’t the stars wavering, it was me. It felt like I was gonna fall off at any moment! As I screamed, I desperately clung to Layla’s neck for dear life to avoid being flung off every time she flapped her wings. The wind howled in my ears as we shot through the night sky.

Meanwhile, Layla was giggling to herself the whole time. She seemed to be pretty happy I was flying with her...but maybe she was getting a bit too lost in the moment!

“Lay— Layla! Layla!!!” I shouted, doing my best not to bite my tongue in the process.

“Ah, yes?!” She turned her head back to look at me, spreading her wings wide and entering a smooth glide, saving me briefly from the turbulence. “How does it feel to ride on my back?!” The anticipation in those pure, innocent eyes momentarily had me at a loss for words.

“It’s uh...surprisingly scary with all the shaking!”

I had totally underestimated this. Sure, riding the white dragons during the assault on the Demon King’s castle had been an horrific experience, but I figured Layla would be a bit more careful so it wouldn’t be even half as bad. But those expectations didn’t match reality, which made riding on a berserk horse sound like a pleasant joyride. Every time she flapped her wings, her body moved vertically quite a bit. The constant jolting of being thrust upward before dropping back down was really testing my upper body strength.

“Ah, I’m sorry! Was I shaking you?”

“Y-Yeah, a bit!”

A look of guilt washed over her face, the expression was so obvious considering I could see it on the face of a dragon. Thinking back on it, her knowledge of flying had come from the prideful Faravgi. I seriously doubted he ever considered how a passenger might have felt. And I could hardly complain about something she had learned from her father. It would be like a human asking a person to carry them, then complaining that they shook too much as they ran. That would be just plain rude.

“Guess the no-frills approach was a bit too reckless. Layla, do you mind if I use my bones to make a loop around your neck? I think that’ll help!”

During the assault, we had used ropes to tie ourselves to the dragons’ backs, but right now I didn’t have anything like that. I was just holding on with my bare hands which was quite dangerous.

“Of course! Please do! Do whatever you like!”

With her permission, I shaped the bones I had on me into something like a necklace for her. I felt like I heard the voice of an old soldier muttering something like *“I guess if I have to...”*

With that, I was a bit more secure. This was much better. On top of that, Layla was gliding without flapping that much. I finally had the composure to actually take it all in.

“Whoa...!”

Under the moonlight, I could see the entire Rage territory. Despite being denizens of the dark, they still had so many lamps hanging throughout the city that it seemed more illuminated than a human city during nighttime. And looking down from above, Alba had been right. The dwelling built for the skilled slaves really was enormous. I could see how it was putting pressure on the rest of the capital.

Far below us, the night elf maids watching us so nervously looked like ants. *Falling from this high up would really kill me, wouldn’t it?* But as much as that scared me, I felt moved. It wasn’t the first time I had ridden a dragon, but it was the first time I had ridden on Layla. Since being reborn as a demon, this was the

most free I'd ever felt—for once, not in the presence of anyone loyal to the dragons or to the denizens of the dark.

“Layla! Thank you!” I shouted despite myself. “I feel like we could fly anywhere in the world!” How good would it feel to forget everything and just fly away?

Layla gave a cute laugh. I'd never seen her so carefree before. “I feel the same way!” If she really wanted to, she could take us anywhere. But instead, we remained above the Rage capital. “It's going to get a little shaky now!”

Our altitude had decreased quite a bit, so Layla started flapping her wings again. I tightened my grip on the bone loop, keeping myself low. Yeah, I had started getting used to this. However, I still felt myself thrown up into the air and slamming back down every time she shook from her wings flapping. In the future, I'd definitely need a saddle or harness.

“It's so beautiful.”

Having reclaimed some height, she returned to a glide. We were high enough that it felt like I could reach out and take the clouds in my hands. Even the birds flying at nighttime weren't up this high. It was just me and Layla, together with a cold night wind and a clear, empty sky.

“To tell you the truth, this is the first time I have flown this high.” Layla's excited voice cut through the sound of the wind. “Though, my father...in his memories, he went even higher. But really...flying feels so good, doesn't it?!” The emotion in her voice was palpable.

It was hardly a surprise. I was just tagging along for a ride and I was experiencing similar exultation. It really reminded me that she was, in fact, a dragon. And with that, I remembered the terrible misfortune that connected us—from my “relationship” with Faravgi to the circumstances of our first meeting.

“I'm so glad we met.” As I placed my hand on her shining silver scales, I could feel the strength and energy rippling through her back. My actions couldn't be absolved by apologizing, no matter how adamant. Faravgi was still gone. However, obsessing over that was just selfish, and it was rude to Layla. All I could share out loud was my gratitude.

“Me too...! I am so glad we met!” Layla’s voice was trembling.

At that moment, I felt a drop hit my face... Rain? In this clear, cloudless sky? It took only a moment for me to notice the glistening trail running across Layla’s face. But the wind howling by us carried it away into the sky in an instant...like I was watching stardust floating past me.

For a while after that, neither of us said a word. But I didn’t think anything needed to be said. Our hearts were as one. Layla continued to glide in wide circles, slowly descending. Feeling her warmth beneath me, I stared out at the horizon. The lands of the Alliance which had always felt like an entire world away...suddenly felt so close.

Since I had impulsively asked to ride on Layla’s back without bothering to consult Prati, I was certain I would face her wrath soon enough. But with this, my freedom would grow by leaps and bounds. Even when we went back to the castle, I could add “going for a fly” to the list of things I did in my spare time. The amount of possibilities was tremendous. While exciting, it was also a bit scary. After all, I was wading into unknown territory.

But it had to be done. I was a hero. No matter what anyone said, I was a hero. And one day I was going to defeat the Demon King and save humanity! All I could do was keep making steady progress toward that goal. Now that I had gone on a successful flight with Layla, even Prati wouldn’t be able to complain.

So, as we returned to the chief’s residence...

...I was immediately put in the seat of reflection.

“So, how do you intend to explain yourself?” Prati said, unhappily tapping her hand with her fan as she sat on the sofa across from me.

I take it all back. She very much would be able to complain.

“We went out for a walk, and I just sort of got swept up in things...” What more could I say? “So I asked her to give me a ride.”

“Swept up in things? Are you sure you don’t mean swept up *by her*?” Prati’s

eyes turned cold. She leaned forward, snapping her fan shut. “I seem to recall you making me a promise. Wherein you wouldn’t fly with her until valid confirmation that you two have unwavering trust.”

“Yes, but I felt as though our trust had surpassed that point”—Prati’s gaze instantly grew sharper as her temperament swiftly deteriorated—“but I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about it first.”

Prati snorted as I dropped my head.

“I’m coming in,” Gorilacia announced as she swung open the door and stomped into the room. “I heard what happened. Kind of an interesting development.”

“It is nothing of the sort, mother,” Prati replied with obvious frustration.

“This isn’t like you at all.” Plopping herself down on the sofa beside Prati, Gorilacia leaned back as she watched me with open amusement. “What are you so up in arms about? What’s wrong with him going out for a flight with his cute little girl?”

“There is plenty wrong with it!” Prati shouted angrily, glaring at me the whole time. “If anything went wrong, he’d die! From that height, magical strength doesn’t matter, one slip up could be fatal. That doesn’t just go for him or anyone else, but even the Demon King himself!” Her expression softened a little. “Zilbagias, please don’t misunderstand. It is not my intent to put meaningless constraints on you. But this incident very well could have taken your life. No amount of training makes up for your lack of wings. If you are thrown into the sky without any support, you will be helpless. I’m worried about you.”

“I...understand that. Again, I’m sorry.” *Man, will she quit looking at me all concerned?* “But as much as I said I got swept up in things, it is true that I have absolute trust in Layla. Besides, it’s not like she would need to fly if she wanted to kill me. If she really wanted to, she’s had countless opportunities to kill me already.” Honestly, Prati getting *this* upset caught me off guard. It felt like she had missed the boat. “And besides, as bad as I know it sounds, I *didn’t* fall to my death. I made it back alive, so...”

“I agree.” Gorilacia nodded, crossing her arms behind her head. “I took a good

look at this Layla, and she honestly looked at Zilba here with the same eyes a young bride has when looking at her soon-to-be husband. I can hardly imagine her trying to hurt him.”

Awesome! Good job, Gorilacia! I never expected such perfect support! Prati made a bitter expression. It would be hard for her to keep protesting against someone with *Effusura* giving their stamp of approval.

“That’s...true, but...”

“Just admit it. You’re just nervous about your son being out from under your thumb.” Gorilacia gave a mischievous grin, poking at Prati’s cheek. *Quit while you’re ahead and stop poking the bear!*

But Prati just gave a defeated sigh. She was obviously not happy about it, but nevertheless sank back into the sofa.

“If you say so, then I suppose she is safe. For now.” But she continued, clear suspicion on her face, “But *Effusura* can only detect emotions in the moment. That doesn’t rule out the possibility of things changing in the future.”

“I suppose so.” Gorilacia frowned, propping her head up on an arm. Prati had a point. After all, despite recognizing my hostility, Gorilacia was the one who said I had no ill will toward Prati. “But to that end, you have to be wary of everyone, right? There’s no telling when someone will stab you in the back.”

“Betrayal from a personal attendant can be nipped in the bud by keeping up with one’s training, so that is no problem. But no amount of training can prevent a high-altitude fall from being fatal. I’m worried because it’s so much more dangerous.”

Despite what Prati said, I could hardly think you could write off betrayal from anyone as “no problem.” But her concern was understandable. Even if she trusted and relied on me, she couldn’t fully rely on Layla. And with Layla having a way to harm me that she had no way of preventing, that left Prati troubled.

“And falling from such a height is not the only threat she poses. If she wished, she could easily carry him off into Alliance territory.”

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. As much as I hated to show any reactions around Gorilacia.

“Why would she do that?” Gorilacia asked.

“Of course I have no proof she would. But Zilbagias is a prince. Perhaps, as an act of revenge, she could conclude that taking him there to become a hostage would serve to do greater damage to the demonic kingdom.”

“That would be quite the move.” Gorilacia smiled. “But that girl really does love Zilba, you know? At least right now.”

“If I could guarantee that love would last forever, then there would be no need for my worries.” Prati sighed. “It really makes me wish I had inherited *Effusura* instead of something like *Repida Skias*.”

What do you mean “something like Repida Skias”? You do realize Gorilacia is part of the Dosrotos family, right? You’re gonna hurt her feelings if you talk about her family like that.

“Though, it’s quite fortunate she didn’t inherit such a useful Bloodline Magic. If she had the ability to see through your emotions, your cover would have been blown long ago,” Ante said, sending a shiver down my spine.

That was a good point. Imagine recognizing that kind of bloodlust in a baby right after it had been born. There would be no explaining that away. A newborn with that much open hostility would be too out of the ordinary. If she had seen that, then...

Thank goodness she couldn’t. On that note, thank goodness I had been kept isolated from the rest of my relatives since that would have been just as bad! It seems I had lived the early parts of my life on a thin sheet of ice. No...that was still the case now, wasn’t it?

“Anyway, no point complaining about what magic you inherited now.” Gorilacia snorted. The fact she wasn’t that upset about what Prati had said must have meant she also valued *Effusura* more than the Dosrotos family’s magic. “If you are worried about that girl changing her mind...then I have an idea.” But I had a bad feeling about the grin that appeared on her face.

“Really? I would love to hear it, mother.”

“It’s simple. If she has a change of heart, she won’t be able to keep her true behavior hidden. Maybe some dumb man might fall for her ruse, but she won’t

be able to deceive another woman so easily, right?” Gorilacia turned to me, as if looking into my soul. “So, if you want to confirm whether her feelings have changed or not, just have them put their affection on display occasionally.”

“What?!”

“Excuse me?!”

Prati and I shouted at the same time.

What’s this granny thinking?! She wants us to get all lovey-dovey in front of my own mother?! This has to be some sick joke!

“Any woman should be able to tell whether she is really in love or just acting to get the better of a man, don’t you think? It doesn’t take magic to see that.” Her smile grew more mischievous. “Surely you’re used to dealing with those types of women in the castle by now. I hardly expect that this girl could deceive you.”

“Hmm...” Prati sank into thought. *Come on, there’s nothing to even think about here!* “That might work...”

Seriously...?

“Anyway, I might pay you a visit at the castle every once in a while. I can use that as an opportunity to interview Layla. That should give you a few decades of peace of mind, at least.”

“While I don’t like it, I have no alternatives.”

I was totally at a loss for words.

And so, in exchange for being able to fly with Layla, I ended up being forced to prove my “love” for her in front of Prati at regular intervals...

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“Lucky” might not be the best way to describe it, but it felt like Gorilacia never left our side while in the Rage territory. Since she could keep an eye on Layla, there was no reason to act all lovey-dovey quite yet. Once we returned to the castle, that would be a different story...

“What?! In front of your mother?!” Naturally, Layla had been quite disturbed

when I had mournfully relayed Prati's decision. *"I... I guess...I'll do my b-best..."* Layla clenched her fists, steeling herself as her face took on a deep red.

She's gonna dive headfirst into this, huh?

"You must do the same, no? Perhaps we should work on those hip movements of yours."

If there's no way of getting out of this, I'll just have to make our passion so intense that Prati will get sick of it quickly!

Anyway, as tumultuous as the day was, it eventually passed. As scheduled, the next day we made our way to some ruins for urban warfare training. It was about two hours away from the capital by skeleton carriage. An old abandoned village sat quietly within a misty valley.

The trade city of Tarfos. Long ago it had been a prosperous waypoint for merchants trekking to neighboring nations. Unwilling to submit to the demonic kingdom after their capital fell, the residents continued to resist...so all of them had been exterminated, women and children included.

Despite being a story hundreds of years old, the cityscape had been preserved for the most part, and Tarfos was now repurposed as a training ground for learning urban combat. The city itself was abandoned, but there was a small lodging set up just outside it for demons using the area. It looked kind of similar to the city situated near the Dark Portal, Cosmologie. Also, according to Gorilacia, the lodgings outside of Tarfos were pretty high-class.

"The food here does wonders for an exhausted body. Plus, all the blood and dirt that builds up over the day can be washed off at the hot spring there. So no matter how rough today will be, you can look forward to that!"

"Yes ma'am..."

And so our training regimen had been decided. Even the Dosrotos warriors, who were usually so bright and energetic after our usual routine, would be left completely spent. It was going to be a bloody, dirty day. The thought of good food and a hot bath was merely small consolation as we equipped ourselves and trudged our way into the city, feeling very much like a column of prisoners

marching to the gallows.

To be quite honest with you, what followed was hell. It was so brutal that it dredged up old memories of defending cities in my previous life.

“Remember! Humans are weak, so they’ll fight dirty to get the upper hand on you!” Gorilacia lectured us as we marched back and forth in a line. “First rule of urban warfare: spare no one! Not even civilians begging for mercy!” She then used the sword in her hand to cut down a nearby effigy of a human on their knees as if in prayer.

“Humans love this technique! Using weaklings as bait before trying to get the jump on you from your blind spot. The best countermeasure is to avoid playing their games. Along the marching route you will find a number of effigies like this one. Destroy them the moment you see them! Real battle requires less thinking and more acting!”

“Yes ma’am!” the three idiots straightened up, answering as one. I started to scowl.

She wasn’t far off about the tactic; even I’d used it before. We’d have heroes or soldiers take off their armor and act as bait, and once they’d caught the enemies’ attention, we’d ambush them. We never used civilians, though! Stop making up crap, you hag!

“Second rule of urban warfare: always watch your feet!” She then stomped a foot on a nearby stone tile. With a loud crack, the tile snapped in two, letting her foot sink deep beneath it. It was a pitfall trap. “Take a look inside.”

“Wow...”

“That’s brutal...”

“That looks terrible...”

The three idiots peered inside and began to shudder. At the bottom of the pit were a number of metal spikes aimed diagonally downward. Once your foot slipped into one, they would tear into your leg, making it exceptionally difficult for you to free yourself.

“Humans have no problem using traps like this to slow you down. You guys...” Gorilacia glanced over our footwear. “Hmm. Those are pretty good boots. I expected as much from Zilba and Kuvital, but even you three idiots are pretty well equipped.”

“Heh, they have an extra layer of protection thanks to my family’s Bloodline Magic,” Alba declared proudly.

“Is that so? That’s interesting. Is that something you can add to an already finished piece of equipment?”

“Yes, as long as it doesn’t have particularly strong magical properties.”

“That’s great. Please, if it isn’t asking for much, I’ll pay you to make a set for everyone.”

“Wait, seriously?! Gladly! My mother and sister will definitely do it for us!” Surprisingly, Alba seemed over the moon about this job suddenly falling into his lap. “That said, it’s not that powerful of a protection.”

“Even the smallest difference can mean life or death,” Gorilacia snorted. “Anyway, these traps are all throughout your marching route. The night elves have studied what kind of traps the humans typically use and replicated them. I’ll show you some examples.”

Gorilacia then began to demonstrate a number of “cowardly” human traps.

“Flip boards. When you step on them, they flip up and launch blades at you.”

“Whoa...”

“Wire traps. They’re camouflaged so if you break one of the wires, blades shoot out of the walls, or rocks fall on you.”

“Ugh...”

“Spike wheels. It’s a variant of the spike traps from before. Sharp spikes are put on a spinning pole, which will rip you apart if you fall into it.”

“Gah...!”

Each trap had the three idiots growing paler and paler.

Yeah, I was very familiar with all of the traps. Every once in a blue moon you’d

catch a demon in one...but now I see it was probably only effective at catching destitute demons who lacked the means to get proper training.

“By the way, though we obviously haven’t replicated it here, the blades and spikes are often smeared with excrement. Not even **Transposition** can heal you from poison! If you happen to get caught in one of these traps, make sure you dig out all the flesh around the wound!”

“Ugh! That’s terrible!”

“Those cowards! Unforgivable!”

“We better watch ourselves to avoid those!”

The three idiots were trembling.

“Did you really go to such lengths?” Ante asked, a little taken aback herself.

Of course. Sometimes we used poisonous mushrooms or snake venom, but there was nothing more convenient than your own shit.

“If you get caught in one of these traps, you’ll be treated exactly the same as if you were caught on the battlefield!”

Dammit. So the responsibility falls onto me!

At my voiceless scream, Gorilacia turned a slightly pitying look in my direction.

You three idiots better not get caught! I won’t allow it!

“All of these traps were set up by Zilba’s subordinates,” Gorilacia explained, motioning to a group of night elf hunters led by Virossa. They all had smug, satisfied looks on their faces. They probably went all out in making sure the traps were as diabolical as possible to help with my training. I was almost moved to tears. Really. Avoiding traps set by humans wasn’t a big deal, but that confidence was starting to falter knowing these were the work of night elves.

“Now, let’s get this training started! Are you ready?!”

“...Yeah...”

“Speak up!”

“Yeah!”

“Good! Finally, the third rule of urban warfare! Never let your guard down! Not even for a moment! That’s all!”

And so at Gorilacia’s declaration, our trip through hell began.

“Come on! Pick up the pace! Show any weakness and you’ll get targeted!”

With Gorilacia shouting at us, we ran full tilt down an alley, being pelted by rocks and arrows. We needed to get to the house at the end of the alleyway and clear it out.

“A human civilian! What do we do?!” Gorilacia shouted.

A human effigy popped out of the alley, in a begging posture. Without missing a beat, I cut the effigy down with my swordspike and kept running. **Constraint** helped weaken the projectiles aimed at us, but that didn’t mean they’d be harmless if they got us in our eyes or faces. And if those projectiles distracted us, we might lose track of our footing—

“Gaaaaaah!” With a thud, one of Alba’s legs slipped into a pitfall.

“Leave him! Your enemy wants you to slow down! You can save him later! Prioritize eliminating your enemies! Let the fool who falls for the trap get himself out of it!”

“Aghhh! My ankle...my ankle!” Alba cried as he failed to extract his leg from the trap. It seemed to be a combination of a pitfall and a bear trap. No matter how solid your boots were, a bear trap always aimed for a certain weak point—the ankle joint.

Leaving Alba to be bombarded by stones, we burst into the house.

“Gaaaaaah!”

And as we did, Okkenite failed to notice the tripwire inside, triggering a huge log to swing down like a pendulum and slam into him from the side. He crashed into the wall, blood spurting from his mouth. The log had been fixed with a number of spikes, many of which had punched their way into Okke’s chest.

“Damn you all!”

With a scream, yet with incredibly careful steps, Seiranite headed up to take

the top of the building. Kicking in the door, he waited a breath to check for traps before rushing up the stairs—

“Guh...”

—and he immediately fell into a pit as the very first step on the staircase opened up beneath him. Spiked rollers came in from his sides to pierce through his unarmored legs and under his arms. Without the breath to even scream, he just looked up and accepted his fate.

“Dammit, why am I stuck healing these guys?!”

Leaving Seira, I vented my frustration as I climbed up the stairs and was greeted by yet another annoying wire trap. *Connected to the ceiling, right? Yep! And beyond that a pitfall. Man, they were really thorough! If we had all the time in the world to set up traps like these in people’s houses, defending our cities would’ve been easy!*

Evading and disabling countless traps as I went, I made my way up to take down the beastfolk acting as human soldiers. And then my *favorite* part...healing everyone.

“Guys...please...start learning already...”

We took a short break from training as Liliana licked at my wounds, giving me a moment to complain. Brutal training was one thing. It was to be expected people would get hurt. But it was like these three idiots couldn’t help but fall for the traps!

“Sorry...”

Naturally, they didn’t have any excuse for themselves.

“How are you able to avoid all the traps, Your Highness...?”

“Intuition,” I answered bluntly. It wasn’t like I could tell them about all the experience I had from my past life. The three idiots shared a troubled look.

But I couldn’t really act all high and mighty here. With the night elves disguising the traps, I ended up just poking around blindly, guessing at where they might be.

“By the way, if this had been a real battle, those spikes and blades would have

been covered in shit. If that happened, you could bandage those wounds all you want. But you'd probably be suffering for a long while after returning home. It wouldn't be a surprise if it killed you," Gorilacia explained, adding another shade of despair to the three's faces.

Transposition could deal with almost any wound or injury, but that wasn't the case for poison or curses. If there was still poison in the body, it could bring you back to health temporarily, but you'd eventually collapse again. It would be a huge burden to keep using **Transposition** to heal you until the poison passed. I never expected that poop-smearing our weapons out of frustration would cause so many issues for the enemy...

But, on the other hand, they had plenty of human slaves to use as fodder for **Transposition**. Waiting out the poison in their system was well within their means. In the end, all our efforts accomplished was the death of more humans. *Dammit...!*

"Sorry for being useless. But isn't it a bit unfair that we always have to take the lead?!" While my temper was starting to smolder, Alba turned his own frustrations on Kuvital.

"Don't get the wrong idea." Kuvital and his men responded coldly. "Your job is to be our vanguard. Discovering and clearing traps is your job. Ours is to protect the life of the prince. That is much more important."

Kuvital then snorted as he looked over the traps. "We'd never get caught in traps like this. Your inexperience is exactly why we're letting you guys get some practice. Or what? Do you plan on whining after getting caught in some trap on an actual battlefield? Don't make me laugh..."

Kuvital's men began to sneer. Since he and his men were usually so polite around me, seeing them so arrogant like any other demon was pretty refreshing. The three idiots could only grind their teeth at his rebuttal.

"That said, I doubt words will be enough to satisfy you. Let me show you the difference our experience makes, kid." And so Kuvital took the lead.

The moment our training began again, Kuvital gave a grunt and stomped on the ground, sending a wave of magic through the street. Immediately stone spears punched up from a number of the street tiles, destroying all the traps

laid in the street instantly.

“Uh...is this training really necessary?” Seiranite asked tentatively. Alba and Okke both seemed to agree there wasn’t much point if Kuvital could handle them all himself.

“Of course it is. If something happens to me, it’ll be up to you guys to break through,” Kuvital responded with an unshakable rebuttal.

He had a point. Since these traps didn’t have any magical properties, you couldn’t use magic to sniff them out. Kuvital had only been able to destroy the traps because he had spotted all of them himself.

“You guys are too focused on single things because you’re afraid of the traps. You need to keep a wider field of view...” And the lecture began. He was honestly great at looking after those under him.

So, with the weight of exhaustion on our shoulders, we pressed on. Let me be frank. A real battlefield didn’t have anywhere near as many traps as this! We didn’t have the time to set up this many!

“In other words, the intent is to make this training so intense that a real battlefield appears much easier in comparison,” Ante commented.

Unfortunately she was quite right. Besides, the daytime fighters like the beastfolk and goblins would usually run through and clear out most of the traps anyway.

“Good running, but we’re not done yet!” With a much too energetic Gorilacia driving us forward, we continued making our way through the city. Disabling traps, taking down enemy soldiers, destroying human effigies...

Basically, we had our hands full. It was quite brutal. I could feel my senses starting to dull, color leaching out of my vision. I hadn’t experienced this for a long while. The feeling of being pushed to your wit’s end by a protracted battle.

When was the last time I felt this? The fight against the Demon King’s royal guard before reaching the throne room? With a part of my brain stuck in reminiscence, I pushed through the alley and brought my swordspike to bear against another effigy—

—when our eyes met.

“P-Please, don’t! Don’t kill me!” It was a woman. Wrapped in flimsy, dirty clothes was a perfectly ordinary young human. “Please! I haven’t done anything wrong!”

Falling on her hands and knees, the woman desperately begged for mercy, grinding my brain to a halt...

“Look out! To your side!”

...so I couldn’t even respond to Ante’s warning.

With a thunderous roar, the wall beside me collapsed, a warhammer taking me in the side. The tremendous impact left me in unsettling agony as I felt my bones breaking beneath it. With the air driven out of my lungs, I collapsed helpless to the ground. I couldn’t breathe.

“Ha ha ha, another idiot demon fell for it!” Regorius swung around his warhammer with a guffaw.

“Come on, I warned you about this.” Gorilacia sighed.

“Gori...what...”

“We talked about the human civilians, right? They use them as bait all the time.” Grabbing my hair, she pulled my head back.

Ow...!

“And what did I tell you to do? What are you supposed to do the moment you see one?”

Stop it...

“This!”

Stop it!!!

Without a hint of hesitation, she swung her sword. With a choked gurgle, the woman collapsed, blood spraying from the diagonal cut across her abdomen. Her now-lifeless body fell, facing me—her vacant eyes staring directly at me.

“Ah, what a waste!” Seiranite cried out without thinking, watching from the sidelines.

“Oh, right. We could have used her for healing...” Gorilacia stuck out her tongue, making a goofy expression. “Zilba’s healing has been so convenient it just slipped my mind. Man, what a luxury.”

“What was this woman doing here, instructor? She seems awfully young to be disposed of,” Okkenite asked, confused.

“She was barren, apparently. Those that can’t have children are instead just used for healing.”

“Ah, that makes sense...” Okkenite nodded.

I could only stare helplessly at the woman’s corpse. *How...how could someone be killed so...senselessly?* Everyone else was perfectly fine, but I felt like I was being left behind.

No...there was one other person trapped here with me. I could tell there was another who was also taken aback—Albaoryl.

“Okay, get healing. We’ve got plenty of more training ahead.” Gorilacia thumped me on the head.

Deep within my chest, it was as though a flame had been ignited. But I suppressed it. I *had* to. The only thing that could somewhat take my mind off it was the pain from my destroyed rib cage. I couldn’t let my bloodlust get the better of me, not in front of Gorilacia!

“Bark bark!”

Liliana came bounding over, licking away my wounds. In no time at all, the pain faded. My breathing returned to normal. But...

Liliana gave a sad whine as she moved to lick at the dead woman’s cheek, but her ears just drooped. No amount of healing would help her. There was no saving someone who was already dead.



After that, I ended up killing three more people.

That hellish training in Tarfos continued. Similarly to the first woman, slaves had been placed as traps throughout the city. I proactively cut them down myself. Killing them was part of our training. In that case, rather than let others do it...this was a taboo best left for me to carry out.

Dammit!

Also, when we had first started training, the three idiots would scream and cry out every time they fell for a trap, but apparently they had been so worn out that even with fatal wounds they just quietly waited to be freed. Though I'd prefer if they didn't fall for the traps at all. That said, compared to when we first started, they had become incredibly careful and crafty.

The food and hot spring set up outside the city were phenomenal, but it was kind of necessary for the new recruits to make it through that kind of training without breaking. *What a luxury...*

So we ran ourselves ragged in mind and body for three days. On the final day, we gathered together in the central square of the city.

"Today, we've prepared a special final trial, just for you guys."

Me and the three idiots couldn't help but be perturbed by the announcement. After all, this was Gorilacia we were talking about. Who would celebrate after hearing that from her?

"All right, bring them out!"

And my mood, already in the gutter from her initial proclamation, would only continue to plummet as her signal was received.

About fifty human slaves piled out in front of us. There were barely any young among them, mostly middle-aged or elderly. Aside from their usual blue attire that denoted their status as slaves, they were equipped with swords and shields. Although they formed up like a unit, their stiff and awkward movements were like that of amateurs. It was like they were a militia, sent to the front with only the bare minimum of training.

There was a strain to their faces—a kind of tension, an uneasiness born of being pushed to the edge, the realization this was the end. It wasn't just desperation. These were the faces of men who had picked up their swords with a determination to protect what was important to them.

Why were they here? I hardly needed Gorilacia's explanation to figure that out.

"So...you want us to kill them?"

"Ha. If you can." Gorilacia replied mockingly.

The hell are you laughing for? You think this is some joke?!

"Contain yourself! Your bloodlust is seeping through!" Ante spoke sharply.

Yeah? So what?

Gorilacia's glittering *Effusura* would only see exactly what was expected from a demon prince.

"It seems you've underestimated me quite a bit. You boasted about this 'final trial,' but this is it?" I said with no attempt to hide my disdain, pointing at the band of humans with my chin. "No matter their numbers, small fry like this are nothing more than fodder. This is a waste of time and resources. If this is just for your amusement, at least pick something a bit more tasteful." *What exactly did she think any of us would get from a fight like this?*

"Zilbagias, no one is underestimating your strength," a soothing familiar voice called out to me from behind. It was Prati. "We have seen how strong you are in your training here. No one doubts that if you were dispatched to the front lines right now, you could handle any challenge with ease. But you are not a soldier of the Rage family. You are a demon prince. The risk is not worth taking, no matter how low the chances are. So before you are sent off to a real battlefield, we want to teach you something."

The sound of chain mail clinking—the footsteps of someone armed—filled the air.

"We want to show you just how annoying humans can be when bound together with holy magic." Prati pointed.

Even at a glance, it was easy to tell what that guy was—a hero.

It was like I was looking at my past self.

“What a luxury,” Gorilacia said. “Experiencing holy magic before reaching the battlefield is practically unheard of. This might be the first time in history.”

“We prepared this specifically for you, Zilbagias. It is exceptionally rare for us to capture a hero alive,” Prati explained, all smiles. “Your opponent will be this militia, led by a hero.”

I could hear my teeth grinding as I clenched them.

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Going back a few weeks...

When Leonardo came to, he found himself tied to a chair. His vision was wavering. He had a faint understanding that this was the side effect of some drug.

Where...am...I...?

He had been captured alive in Emergias’s camp, tortured by the night elves, and finally drugged. Everything after that was a blur.

What had happened? Even his sense of time was vague. Only one thing was clear, an overbearing feeling of something between nausea and hunger pounding him in waves. Not only could he not move his arms or legs, he couldn’t feel his right arm at all. His legs and left arm throbbed with a dull ache. The likely explanation was he lost his right arm. He assumed his remaining three limbs were likely useless too. Though he didn’t remember much, he did recall being tortured.

So what would happen to him next?

Char...everyone...

He didn’t want to think. Thinking would just bring a hollow sorrow.

Then he heard approaching footsteps from outside, finally bringing him to realize he was tied up in a dark, cramped room. The door in front of him swung

violently open.

“So this is the guy, huh?”

“He looks terrible. Are you sure he’s alive?”

Though his face was so swollen he could barely see, the room’s new occupants seemed to be two demon women. He felt an ominous magical pressure from both of them.

“Obey.”

That pressure suddenly took an iron grip on his soul.

“Looks like it.”

“Great. Would be a waste if he didn’t make it after we had him shipped all the way here.”

The burlier of the two women picked him up, chair and all, shaking him as she carried him outside. Outside? Fresh air. A starry sky. An unfamiliar landscape.

“Car...ri...age...”

And he realized he had not, in fact, been in a small room, but in one of the demon’s skeleton-drawn carriages.

“Hmm...it says his torture resulted in him developing heavy dependence on the drugs. Is this guy going to be of any use? Lots of extra drugs with him. That was awfully kind of them.”

He heard the sound of someone flipping through papers.

“Right arm missing. Remaining arms and legs broken. Ah, some of his fingers are missing too. Right eye gone. Standard night elf treatment, I suppose.”

“A single healthy body should be enough.” The two women chatted as they carried him away. Where were they taking him?

The next time he came to, he found himself tied down to a bed.

“Me Ta Fesui.”

He felt a strange sensation as all the pain and injuries were expelled from his

body.

And with it, clarity was restored to his mind. At the same time, a scream of pain filled the air, the agonized cries of someone whose world was coming to an end snapped Leonardo right out of his stupor. He tried to jump out of bed and help as quickly as he could...before finding himself unable to move.

“Oh, glad to see you’re so full of energy!” a woman said happily. A demon! He then noticed the obsidian-like blade she held to his neck. “Don’t do anything silly, now. Or do, but you’ll just get yourself killed. I figure you’d probably be better off figuring out what’s going on first,” she said, almost disinterested.

Leonardo’s gaze looked over the room, trying to absorb as much as possible. The room was small. He was lying on a bed. With him was this burly demon woman and another with a similar face but younger.

And on the ground...was a man in terrible shape. His right arm had rotted off, his whole body was covered in blood. He was twitching helplessly. What on earth had happened?!

“Huh?! My arm...?!” He then realized that his right arm had returned.

What?! How?!

High-level healing miracles could restore lost limbs, but the only ones around were denizens of the dark!

“Sorry to dump this on you when you’re still out of it, but you’re going to have to deal with it.” Ignoring Leonardo’s confusion, the burly woman started explaining.

They were in the capital of the Rage territory, deep in the demonic kingdom. He had been taken as a captive on the front lines and sold to them as a slave. The Rage family Bloodline Magic had transferred his injuries to another slave, thus healing him. And the reason they had bought him...

“You want me to train your slaves?!”

“Exactly. We want you to make them into passable soldiers so they can fight my grandson.”

“Go to hell!” Leonardo raged, attempting to bring his fire magic to bear—

“Kneel.”

Leonardo choked. Apparently, while he was drugged, they had planted a curse in his mind. On top of that, the woman’s magic was far superior to his. Suppressing him was mere child’s play to her.

“No need to be so grumpy. The deal isn’t half bad on your end, you know? My grandson is the seventh demon prince. If you do well in training the slaves, you might just be able to kill a demon prince. And if you win, we’ll even send you back to the Alliance alive.”

“Like hell...I’d...believe that...!”

“Doesn’t matter. I see no reason to try convincing you I’m telling the truth. All I wanted was to give you some hope, a reason to fight.” The woman gave a sinister smile. “And besides, you want to go home, don’t you? All this time, you’ve been muttering about wanting to see ‘Char.’” A muddy red light glowed in the demon’s eyes.

After careful consideration, Leonardo finally decided to cooperate. Helping demons get what they wanted infuriated him to no end, but it seemed better than dying for no reason. In the end, the woman—whose name he learned was Gorilacia—was right. If he did exactly as they said, he might get the chance to kill a demon prince. That was the only thing he had to cling to.

He wasn’t naive or optimistic enough to actually believe he’d make it home alive. But even so, the “hope” Gorilacia had given him ate away at his heart, corroding his already exhausted spirit.

He was then taken to a place farther into the mountains where he was charged with training fifty skilled slaves that used to serve in the demonic kingdom.

“I am the hero Leonardo. Nice to meet you.”

Three weeks was all he had to teach them the basics of combat...but he knew how hard that would be from the moment he laid eyes on them.

Each and every one of them looked back at him with dead eyes. Not a single one of them looked like a fighter. They listened to everything he said, but they never answered. Their fear of their night elf, beastfolk, and demon overseers

was so great that they were unable to hold a conversation.

Leonardo spent the first few days teaching them the basics of moving as a group and trying to break the ice with them. At the very least, they were used to following instructions, so marching in formation and lining up was pretty easy for them. It was a bit surprising for people that had never acted as a group before in their lives.

“I see...so that’s what life was like for you guys.”

“Yes...” the slave named Vigo responded.

Though under supervision, Leonardo was able to eat and sleep together with the slaves, deepening his bond with them. A small number of them finally started to speak up—Leonardo had just been too much of an unknown, so they had been afraid of him—and once he got in with those few, the rest of the slaves began opening up to him. And slowly but surely, he was able to build a rapport with the entire group.

Fighting together meant they needed to grow closer as people. Above all, Leonardo was especially curious about the lives of those deep within demonic territory. But the stories he heard were far beyond anything he could have imagined.

“Those who are born with any kind of frailty are immediately culled.”

“The moment they show any signs of understanding, they begin taking lessons from their parents and instructors.”

“If they don’t show any talent, they are immediately shipped out.”

“There can’t be too many people living in the quarters. They have to keep the population low...”

“Aside from children, the worst performers are shipped out.”

“If we don’t do our best and fight, our families will be shipped out next.”

The conversations he had with the slaves didn’t go as smoothly as he hoped. Their vocabularies were strictly limited. Any cultural element not related to their performances or professions were ruthlessly pruned. As if to say livestock didn’t need any superfluous knowledge.

So with considerable effort, he learned that the fifty slaves he was in charge of were those “shipped out” after the demolishing and downsizing of one human settlement.

“All right, I’m here. What do you want?”

Through his overseers, Leonardo managed to get a meeting with Gorilacia.

“You said if I defeated the demon prince you’d let me go free, right? I want something similar for the other slaves.”

“Oh? I guess I’ll hear you out. What for?” she asked.

“What for? The fighting hasn’t even started and their hearts died a while ago. They only cooperate because the well-being of their families have been threatened, but they need more than that. No amount of training will make them soldiers. They won’t be able to put up a real fight,” Leonardo said, fighting the overwhelming sense of loathing and disgust welling up from the bottom of his heart. “So, to answer your question, it’s like what you said before. They need hope to fight.”

Why did that inspire disgust in him? Because giving them hope was the same as giving them despair. Overwhelmed by despair as they were now, there was no room for any more suffering. But once they had hope, death could snatch that away from them. It was quite the cruel thought and that tormented Leonardo.

Gorilacia chuckled. “I suppose so. Then how about this? For each wound on the demon prince, one of them gets to live. But I can’t send them back to their old quarters. We can’t have slaves who’ve learned to fight mixing back in.”

“Swear to the gods.”

“Hah. Fine. I swear to the gods of darkness. And let me add, I swear on the ancestors of the Dosrotos family. For each wound the demon prince suffers, one of your militia will be permitted to live.”

Leonardo gave her a hard look as she appeared to be enjoying this far too much.

“What’s wrong? I did exactly what you asked. Don’t I deserve a thank you?”

Leonardo took a moment before responding with, “Thanks.”

Gorilacia roared with laughter at Leonardo’s stoic, emotionless bow.

Getting up to leave, he said one last thing, not turning around. “I figured you would have just laughed and ignored me.”

“I have two reasons for accepting your request. First of all, as you know, wounding the prince is going to be no small feat. Second, if sparing the lives of a few slaves gets us better results in training, that’s more than a fair price.”

Without another word, Leonardo returned to the slaves.

The slaves received the news of the deal with a moderate level of suspicion, but the seed of hope had nevertheless been planted.

“Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!”

May your holy light shine in my hands!

The other slaves exclaimed their surprise at what they saw. Once they had achieved a level of cohesion when it came to basic movement, under even stricter supervision, they began to practice using magic.

“This is holy magic.” A silver flame danced above Leonardo’s palm. “For us humans, this is our trump card.”

The slaves...no, the militia found themselves lost in that silver glow, their eyes nailed to it as if their fear of the guards had never been present. It was the first time they had ever seen anything like it, this blessing for humanity. Leonardo’s face fell a little. It was too sad.

“Do you want to try touching it?”

“What... Can we?”

“Of course. It won’t hurt you at all, I guarantee it.”

Nervously, one of the old musician slaves—a middle-aged man named Vigo—

reached out a hand and was wrapped up in a silver light.

“Wha... Whoa!”

The feeling was both pleasant and surprising, this newfound sensation of strength welling up from inside. As he saw his own hand glow, tears poured from his eyes.

“It’s shining...!”

“I-I want to try to!”

“Me too! Please let me touch it!”

The silver light spread throughout the crowd. All fifty members of the militia shone with a blinding, holy brilliance. The night elf hunters and beastfolk guards watched with strained expressions. Even the demons were wearing dark expressions. In particular, Gorilacia was stone-faced.

“Shields up!”

“Yes sir!”

“Close formation!”

“Yes sir!”

“Everyone, charge!”

The militia roared.

It was as though the holy light had ignited their morale and transformed them. Sure, in Leonardo’s eyes they were very much still clumsy and amateurish. But, without a doubt, a transformation had taken place.

“Basic stamina is really proving to be a problem here. Let’s all run together.”

“Yes sir!”

“But just running is boring. Let’s sing while we do it. Heroes of humanity, assemble! No foe can match our might! Brave warriors, sing your spirit to the heavens!”

Leonardo began to sing as they ran, but as much as the militia followed him, they stared at him in confusion.

“Do you guys not know that song? Not even the musicians?”

“No, we don’t...”

“Wow, seriously? It’s called the Silverlight Anthem.”

He soon learned that the musical slaves were permitted to play a very limited number of songs, much of their culture of music having been erased.

“Song of heroes resound. Make our hearts unwavering and bound.

Warriors who drive out darkness, advance. Scatter your foes as your blades dance.

Oh flames of hope, burn bright. Let our fight illuminate through the night.

Souls of the warriors, shine. Allow your purifying silver light to guide.

May our deeds echo eternally, the story of our triumph forever fervently.

Oh gods of light, oh laws of nature, smile upon us.

No matter how dark the veil of night, there’s no need to fear.

Our souls, our light, will cast all evil out of here.

Together we will greet a new dawn,

with victory and glory in our palms!”

In no time at all, the militia had learned the words of the song and joined in. The sight of them running in sync and singing was quiet proof that the demons had been right in how they restricted their slaves.

And then the fateful day arrived.

“Today we’ll finally be taking on the demon prince.”

Facing his militia, equipped with swords and shields provided by Gorilacia—probably sourced from Leonardo’s fallen predecessors—Leonardo began his final speech.

“As a hero, I just want to say this. Never before have I seen such a fine group of soldiers come together in such a short amount of time.”

The former slaves puffed up with pride as they listened. When they had

initially encountered Leonardo, he was nothing more than an outsider, a human from an unknown world. His presence only filled them with fear. Now, they stood so boldly in front of him it was hard to believe it was the same group. And Leonardo wasn't lying either. This group of slaves that had been kept as livestock had transformed into real soldiers.

"Our fight today will win the lives of your friends and families. And on top of that, if we can manage to deliver any injuries to the prince, even more people will be saved. They will be able to live on, not as slaves, but as soldiers. As humans."

Leonardo drew his sword. Though not his own, it was nevertheless a holy sword, one that had been given to him just that day by the demons. But that was fine. As long as he and everyone else had a sword and shield, they could fight.

"Vigo! The right wing is yours. Take care of it for me!"

"Yes sir! Leave it to me!" The former musician raised his shield.

"Dirilo, I'm leaving the left wing to you!"

"Got it! I'll do my best!" The former carpenter drew his sword in excitement.

"Old Man Greis, I'm leaving the rear to you. Hold on for me!"

"I will...give it my all...!" The elderly former stonemason nodded.

"Let's win this! Those demons are underestimating us. Let's show them what we're made of!"

The militia gave an impassioned roar.

Good. Now we just have to see how long we can keep this up.

The calm, cool, and collected side of Leonardo's brain was still trying to calculate their chances for victory. He gave the militia as much confidence in themselves as he could. But once the fighting against the demon prince and his retainers commenced, once their attacks failed to land, once their comrades started to fall...it wouldn't take much for that confidence that had been built up to be shaken.

We need to deal with this as quickly as possible.

Pressing down on his hands to keep them from trembling, Leonardo bit his lip. For the past few weeks, he had been harrowing from the side effects and withdrawal symptoms from the drugs used during his torture. He had barely been able to sleep, and his body had been run ragged. It felt like even if he survived this battle, his days were numbered.

So...!

He was going to make the most out of the time he had left. When he had launched the attack on Emergias's camp, he had been as good as dead.

Sorry, Char. I won't be able to make it home.

Had she made it out safely?

But I'll be doing my job as a hero, until the very end. So please, even if just a little, give me some courage.

Though Char's bracelet was long gone, he nevertheless held tight to his right wrist, his expression darkening as he approached the battlefield.

+++

Fog hung over the ruins at night. Together with the three idiots, I stepped into the urban combat section of Tarfos—where the hero's forces were lying in wait.

"I will take the lead. Seira, Okke, guard His Highness."

Realizing the high likelihood of traps being set, Alba volunteered for the most dangerous role. The two Nite brothers responded with a "yes sir!" and a "leave it to us, bro!" as they readied their spears at my side. Overcoming this trial would signal the end to our hellish training. That thought was enough to reignite their morale.

I recalled what Gorilacia had said just before the start of the mock battle.

"Let's do a rundown on the win conditions. If the hero's forces make the prince unable to fight, they win. If the prince's forces take the stronghold, or wipe out the hero's forces, he wins."

"Stronghold? They've got one?" I had confusedly asked, to which Gorilacia responded with a mischievous smile.

“Yeah. The old city hall in the heart of these ruins will act as their point of defense. We’re basically running a scenario as if the enemy general and royalty are inside. Taking them out is an alternative way to win instead of wiping out the hero’s forces.”

That revelation had given me a bad premonition.

“So even in this enemy general scenario, we still have to kill someone?”

“Yep. In this case...the families of the hero’s army. We let them know from the start that if they half-ass the fight, their families will pay the price. Didn’t we?”

Gorilacia had spat out her last few words at the human slaves, who were starting to grow restless.

Their families being held hostage really explained the look of determination in their eyes. Even though their chances of victory were slim to none, they were still going to fight desperately. *Those demon assholes!*

“By the way, though we’ve already assigned these slaves to be culled, I made a deal with them that each wound they inflict on you saves one of them. I swore to the dark gods and my ancestors in the Dosrotos family, so I’ll keep my word.”

So even their own lives were on the line. *Really going all out to manipulate their slaves into fighting, huh?*

“And if by some miracle you are defeated, we also promised to let the hero go free. I know it’s a bit late to get your approval now, but you don’t mind, do you, Zilba?”

The hero’s face had grown darker at that. Even from a fair distance away, the tightening of his grip on his holy sword was evident. I could only imagine what he felt in this situation.

“Of course not. I don’t mind in the least.”

Had he thought I wouldn’t agree to those terms? I remembered back when I’d learned **Naming**, when I’d fought those human soldiers, I had promised them they’d be free to go back to the Alliance if they defeated me.

“There’s no telling how low they’ll be willing to go, Zilbagias. Approach this like real combat,” Prati had warned me, her expression unusually stiff.

“Although we will be observing your fight, under no circumstances will we be interfering. With your skill, I cannot imagine anything going wrong...but if any concerns arise about your fighting, we will have you sit out of the attack on the capital. So fight with everything you have.”

“...Yes, mother.”

And now I had no excuse for holding back. Dammit! If I couldn't wiggle out of the fight, I had figured the least I could was try to minimize the number of human casualties! And now giving a poor display here would mean being taken off the attack on Evaloti. That would be awful for me.

I sure as hell didn't want to personally participate in the massacring of Alliance soldiers. But...losing out on a chance to fuel my **Taboo** would mean the Demon King's army would just cause more death and destruction. It had already been five years since I was reborn. I couldn't waste any more time!

“Go ahead, Zilba. And you three idiots. Put the results of your training on display!”

At Gorilacia's instruction, the hero's forces had headed into the city first, with us following shortly after. By the way, Kuvital and his men weren't accompanying us this time. After all, this fight would barely be a challenge with such experienced soldiers on our side. Though I was sure they were trailing us in secret somewhere.

“You have garnered no small amount of power in your few days here. It has truly been a great windfall for you,” Ante said with a sarcastic laugh. She had a point. Adamas had been drenched in so much human blood, it barely had time to dry. *Damn all of this...!*

“I wonder how they'll attack,” Seira said to himself, keeping a close eye on all the surrounding windows. We were heading down a narrow alley. It seemed like the perfect choke point for the defenders, but there were no signs of them.

“When it comes to complex battlefields like this one, a surprise attack is basically guaranteed.”

Though really, I couldn't imagine they had much of a chance without such

tactics. All they had to work with was some thrown together training and a single hero that could use magic. That meant their alternative tactical options were basically zero.

“But splitting their forces would work against them. Without the protection of the hero, they’d be highly susceptible to magic. Granted, they may lure us into situations that could guarantee their victory by sacrificing a few. For example, the street right in front of their stronghold.”

“I see...”

That said, if the hero could use any concealing magic, that would be a different story. They had an abundance of materials here to make traps and more rocks than they could ever throw at us. We needed to keep our guard up.

“But it is still only a single hero, no? Victory should be an easy feat for you.”

If I used **Constraint**, I could hardly imagine myself losing. But Gorilacia had said this was no-holds-barred. There was a chance they’d use poisons and the like. If I was in the hero’s position, I would take advantage of anything in my power to increase the chances of killing my enemy. *And you saw his face, didn’t you Ante? I could sense we were quite similar.*

“True. If we were up against you, we could not afford to relax for even a moment.”

Right? He’s really impressive despite being so young. He really is...so young...

“...assemble...warriors...heavens...”

Huh? We stopped at the sound of distant voices. *They’re...*

“...Singing?” Okke muttered, finishing my thought. My initial assumption that it was some sort of diversion was slowly whisked away as the closer we got, the louder the voices grew. It wasn’t just one or two people. It was a chorus of dozens.

“Oh flames of hope, burn bright! Let our fight illuminate through the night!

Souls of the warriors, shine! Allow your purifying silver light to guide!”

The moment that anthem reached my ears, faded memories burst back to vivid color.

“You know this song?”

I sure did. In fact, anyone in the Alliance was more than familiar with it—the Silverlight Anthem. Even though I could no longer remember the names or faces of my old comrades, I did remember singing it alongside them.

At the end of the alley, the moonlight illuminated a city square. There they were. The human soldiers were standing in tight formation.

“May our deeds echo eternally! The story of our triumph forever fervently!

Oh gods of light, oh laws of nature, smile upon us!”

They were all singing at the top of their lungs. Was it a trap? A diversion? But...wasn't that all of them? And more importantly...

“Looks like the hero is with them.”

Not even trying to hide himself, in front of the human army was a single armored warrior, waving his arms around like a conductor. The magic I could feel coming from him meant he was no body double with the hero's clothes—it was really him. *Ah. So that was his game.*

“Your Highness, they haven't noticed us yet,” Seira whispered. “Let's attack them now.”

“Are you stupid?” My reply came out ice cold, purely by reflex. Seira's expression seemed a little hurt, but this was a response any high-level demon would give. “Are you really suggesting we surprise attack them? *Humans* at that? All while my mother, Kuvital, and everyone else are watching?”

At my fierce expression, Seira gave a small gasp, realizing the error of his suggestion and offered an apology. *There's no way we could do that, right?* As a demon prince, I couldn't resort to underhanded tactics.

“I understand the logic behind your judgment, Seira. Simply put, it's not a choice I can make,” I added, nodding to Alba. Taking the lead, I stepped out into the illuminated square.

Sensing our approach, the hero turned to face us, still singing. The intensity

on his face, the burning light in his eyes; all filled with a defiant determination.

Dozens of human soldiers, all following a lone hero. Against them, three demons led by a demon prince.

“No matter how dark the veil of night, there’s no need to fear!

Our souls, our light, will cast all evil out of here!

Together we will greet a new dawn,

with victory and glory in our palms!”

The roar of their song faded into the cold night air.

“Everyone, shields up!” the hero shouted.

In one smooth motion, the whole army lifted their shields to the ready.

Here they come. Any traps? Reinforcements?

“I sense nothing of the sort in the area. Nor any sign of concealment magic.”

They really plan on facing us head-on?!

“Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!” A silver light ignited, like fire taking to a field of dry grass, engulfing the soldiers in an instant. “Chaaaaaaarge!”

The soldiers roared. As a single unit, the group rushed forward, assembling around their hero. They were running at us at full speed! They really wanted this to be a straight up fight with no tricks?! Were they insane?!

The hero flashed a ferocious smile, as if he could read my bewildered thoughts. He then gathered his magic, like a brilliant spark around him.

“Aigia A Lumaturasu!”

Silver light wrapped around the soldiers like a suit of armor. In a moment, the strength of the entire group’s presence exploded outward. *Hold up, he can use a really high-level spell like that at his age?!*

“Be crippled!”

“Burn down!”

Alba threw a curse while the Nite brothers unleashed a wave of viscous black flames. However, the thin veil of the **Divine Armor of Champions** deflected the curse.

“Agria Floga!”

And a wave of silver fire devoured the darkness. Then...

“Megari Pu Rostacia!”

Deploying another protective ward, they burst through the wave of scattered flame, and in no time at all, they were on top of us.

“Gush forth, my power!!!” Seiranite roared, leaping forward with a prayer without the slightest bit of cleverness to it, bringing his authority of **Strength** to bear as he swung his spear. That roar, that dwarven-made blade, swept away the right wing of the hero’s army with ease—equally both a tackle and a slash. A shrill sound split the air as swords were sent flying, shields crumpled, and men were sliced to pieces without a chance to even scream. Despite bending to an incredible degree, the spear remained stout as it scattered any soldiers before it. This feat was thanks to the spear Prati had given him. If this had been his old spear, it likely would have smashed into pieces.

Despite that, his tremendous strength and dwarven-made spear weren’t enough to impede the humans’ advance. No, it was impossible. The soldiers weren’t in control of themselves at this point! Their lack of experience with the blessings the hero had granted them meant they were being dragged around by their own excess strength.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Raaaaaagh!”

“Take thiiiiis!”

It was like an avalanche of glowing, silver snow. In an instant, the wave swallowed Seira. They were poorly trained, and could do little more than charge blindly forward, but they still had one thing going for them—their pure strength of numbers. That gave them a fighting chance...and because of their charging momentum, even as their front ranks got obliterated, they couldn’t stop and flee even if they wanted to.

And that went the same for me! Though there was still some distance between us, they were flying forward like an arrow. They were so close, I didn't have time to use **Naming**!

"Swordsmanship is forbidden!"

The curse took hold.

Using nothing more than sheer force, I overpowered the hero's defensive wards...but it wouldn't last. Though the hero's movements slightly slowed as he glanced down at his right hand in shock, it would take mere moments before he shook off the curse. *And there was basically no effect on the other soldiers!*
What gives?!

"Because their training is too poor!"

Gah! They don't know any swordsmanship! They're just charging with their shields!

"Your Highness!" Alba and Okke rushed forward to shield me from the charge, but Okke was swallowed up just like his little brother, and obviously the charge was too much for Alba to handle on his own.

"Death"—shaking off my curse, the hero gritted his teeth—"to the dark!"

And he roared. A holy sword, blazing with silver flame, reached for me.

"Agria Floga!"

It was like a jet of concentrated rage and hatred, shooting straight for me. An eruption of silver light overtook my vision.

Yep, without a doubt, he was exactly like the old me. A hero with the fire attribute. An avatar of humanity's fury. Though it was clear his talent far surpassed what I had achieved back then. In that sense, it was pretty pretentious of me to say we were the same. His charge contained not just his strength, but the strength of all the human soldiers behind him. To get this far, he had done so very well. I had been told these soldiers were all skilled slaves that had been marked for culling and they only had a few weeks of training. There was no doubt they had never even touched a sword before. Their clumsy movements and lack of anything resembling tactics didn't disguise that fact.

They just grouped up and charged forward.

And yet...it was so beautiful. These once-slaves were now remarkable soldiers. Even without skill, they had the will to fight, to resist. It was surely thanks to the hero's efforts that they had found that inspiration. He wasn't like me, a hero whose only talent was surviving. He was a real, natural-born leader.

Dammit... Why? Why did we have to meet here like this?!

"Impressive!" I gritted my teeth, deflecting the hero's sword with my swordspike. As if delivered using a Swordmaster's technique, despite being deflected, the vicious slash left a small scratch on my cheek.

Silver sparks and dark magic spiraled outward, annihilating each other. But the unwavering charge continued, pushing me back as their holy magic began charring my body. The maddening pain made even my human soul scream in agony.

"My name is..."

Amid the flame, I began to chant.

"...Zilbagias Rage..."

Staring into the eyes of the hero right in front of me.

"...the next Demon King..."

The hero's eyes opened wide.

"...and humanity's harbinger of the end!"

I was a harbinger of the end, all right. Informing humanity that the *demons* would be ended!

Death to the dark.

For that purpose...

I'll honor you for what you've accomplished here.

"Fuel my rise!"

A torrent of dark magic roared out of me, flowing through my spear as I thrust with my sword. Their whole army's combined power was no match for mine.

All the hero could do was watch in shock and disbelief as my old, battered blade pierced through his chest armor with ease. With a roar, I drew my spear back and swept the blade through the air. The hero fell to his knees, my blade only grazing the top of his head, while the soldiers all around him were cut down.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Raaaaaagh!”

“Honor to humanity!!!”

But the glowing army didn’t break. Pressing forward in desperation, their movements were mournfully amateurish. With their charge now halted, they were hardly a threat anymore.

Stab. Pierce. Taking multiple at a time. They grabbed at the haft of my spearspear, so I shortened the bones and swung Adamas like an ordinary sword, using the bones remaining in my left hand like a cudgel. Gouge. Stab. Strike. Smash. My vision was drenched in fresh blood, the brilliant red of humans.

The sound of pained breathing from behind me caught my attention, breathing that was nevertheless focused and guarded. Sure, it was ordinary breathing. But I was all too familiar with the sound someone made as they drew their final breath, just before their life was snuffed out.

I turned around. Though he could only barely lift himself off the ground, he was glaring at me. Those eyes...yeah. I had seen that look before. Over and over and over again. During the assault on the Demon King’s castle, we all had that very same look.

“Good...bye...” the hero managed, but I knew those words weren’t for me.

With a sword in his right hand, for some reason he moved his open left hand to clench tight to his right wrist. And in the next instant, his face became that of a furious war god.



“Floga!”

This time my vision was blanketed in white.

It was hot. Closing my mouth, I covered my face with my left hand, so my eyes, nose, and lungs wouldn't be scorched. Not even Syndikyos would be enough to completely protect me from the intense flame. The mad flame lashed out, consuming all the surrounding fallen humans in its attempts to also consume me.

“Intense heat is Taboo.”

But with a quiet whisper from Ante, the air grew cold.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Everything was scorched. All I saw was ash. And in front of me sat another pile of charred, vaguely human shaped remains. Its right arm held tight to a sword, supported by its left hand...both reduced to little more than charcoal. Unable to bear the weight of the sword and the armor, the remains collapsed with a dry, hollow sound. As it struck the ground, they scattered to pieces.

“Gah, dammit! It hurts!”

“Damn you all! Die!”

Completely surrounded, Seira and Okke whipped their spears around in a frenzy, throwing off the human soldiers. The holy magic that had protected them was no more. Before I could move to stop them, they cut down the remaining human troops.

“Your Highness! Are you okay?!” Though covered in burns from holy magic, Alba dashed to my side.

Looking at the charred remains of the hero, then looking around at the scattered human corpses, Alba was at a loss for words. Then suddenly, as if remembering where he was, he blurted out an apology. *“I'm so sorry! I... I couldn't do anything...!”*

“Me neither,” I replied shortly. *“Not a thing.”*

Really. I was helpless. I couldn't save a single one of them. I had to kill the

hero.

I couldn't do a single thing for any of them.

Epilogue

A month had passed since I arrived in the Rage territory. We decided to head back to the castle before the snow got too deep.

Shortly after sunset, as a light snow started falling on the training ground, servants packed our carriages. Staying in the Rage territory until the spring thaw was a possibility, but who knows what developments might come about at the castle while being gone for such an extended period of time. And, to be honest, I had more than my fill of training here. Honestly, I was sick of it.

Standing at the entrance of the Rage family chief's residence, I stared out at the now familiar Rage capital cityscape. Just when I became acquainted with the place, I would have to leave it behind. Such was life.

There was a farewell party for me the day before, but it didn't appear like anyone was enjoying themselves all that much. After the incident at my welcome banquet, it seemed like everyone was walking on eggshells. I doubted I was the only one who questioned if a party was needed in the first place. Of course, not a single face from House Dios was present. Apparently Mr. Broken Horn Germadios managed to beg a dying relative to heal his damaged horn. But after being egged on by a thirteen-year-old to try and bully a five-year-old, and getting his horn broken in the process, he was as good as dead in the view of demon society. He had remained unmarried for so long in hopes of winning Lumiafya, but it looked like he would have to kiss his hopes of marrying anyone goodbye. Poor guy.

"What a milquetoast commentary. Try putting some heart into it."

Some days are just like this. Besides, you're being just as monotone as I am.

Speaking of Lumiafya, she had been made to sit beside me at the banquet yesterday. It was likely their attempt at publicly stating there was no bad blood between us. At the very least, Lumiafya didn't have a rebellious bone left in her, so everyone in the banquet hall certainly saw her being plenty meek and subservient toward me.

One somewhat interesting thing of note was how she only used a fork throughout her whole meal. Despite continued agonizing training, she still couldn't bring herself to hold a knife. Zizivalt had lamented that it would be impossible to find a husband for her now. *Hey, Ante, quit laughing.*

"Just put those two dropouts together. Wouldn't that resolve everything?"

It would be fitting, in a sense. But I'd feel bad for their kids. Though I guess...sooner or later, any demon born now would meet considerable misfortune, thanks to me.

"I'm gonna feel real lonely, you know," a familiar voice called from behind me as a hand so heavy it was hard to believe it belonged to a woman clapped me on the shoulder. Gorilacia stood at my side, looking over the skeleton horse carriages with a wistful gaze. "I've taught you just about everything I know."

After seeing me off, this muscle-brained yet logic-bound warrior of a granny would be heading back to the Dosrotos family lands.

"I feel like we barely got to teach him anything!" Her younger brother Regorius popped his head out with a hearty laugh.

"True. It was like most of our time was spent worrying about those kids." The two looked over to where a group of people were giving a passionate farewell to the three idiots.

"Go make a name for yourselves!"

"Man, I'm so jealous!"

Okke and Seira were being jostled about by a group of demons that seemed to be about their age. The rough farewell was a clear sign of their jealousy.

"Owowowow! If you're so jealous, why don't you tag along?!"

"Well, I mean...you know."

Don't give me that "you know." And quit looking at me as you say it.

"Big bro! We picked up these in the forest for you!" Beside the Nite brothers was Alba, talking with a group of children in ratty clothes. "If you get desperate, you can eat these!"

“Wow, look at all this... Is it really okay for me to have them?”

The kids were eagerly offering him a number of stuffed leather bags. It looked like they were full of fruit and nuts.

“You’ve always had our backs and treated us so many times before. This is our way of saying thanks!” one boy said, rubbing his nose in embarrassment, much like Alba always does.

“Thank you!” Alba said, wrapping the boy in a big hug. As he was now working for a prince, the gift was more or less pointless. Even if he was viewed as garbage, he’d still be living in luxury. But despite being so poor, they had poured their heart into this gift for him.

“Alba...” Next, a middle-aged demon woman and another younger one with a blindfold called out to him. “I made this together with mother. We’ve put tons of protective magic into it.” Grabbing Alba’s hand, the younger one handed him something akin to a handkerchief. Even at a distance, I could see powerful magic in its embroidery.

That must have been from his mother’s Bloodline Magic, the ability to put magic into thread. At Gorilacia’s request, all of our boots now had laces with similar blessings. *So that’s his mother and sister. He mentioned that his sister was born blind, didn’t he?*

“I’m sure it’ll keep you safe.”

“Alba, make sure you work hard.”

“Mari, mom...thank you!” Alba wrapped them both in a big hug. His sister seemed to whisper something to him, but of course I couldn’t make it out from here.

Watching them felt kinda awkward, so I looked away. It was like I could feel the protective magics in my boots teasing and pointing at me.

Finally, I turned my eyes to another carriage that hadn’t accompanied us on our journey here. Unlike the other carriages, it was rather plain and unadorned. It was a carriage to transport livestock, fairly rare in the demonic kingdom. What on earth were they loading on it? Of course, the answer was obvious. It was the surviving slaves.

In the end, only three slaves had survived the final trial. After the hero fell, them fleeing wouldn't have been a surprise, but instead they stayed and fought to the bitter end. To be more precise...there had been six or seven still breathing when Gorilacia and Prati stepped in at the end. But they determined I had only been wounded three times—one being a scratch on my face and two areas where I had been burned. So the three with the least injuries had their wounds transposed onto the others. Because, of course, there was no way a demon prince could take wounds for a human slave...

After some discussion, it was decided that the three of them would be given to me. Having learned how to fight, they were now only a nuisance to the Rage family. Gorilacia had guaranteed their lives, but without someone to keep an eye on them to make sure that promise was upheld, it would only be a matter of time before they died from "illness." To ensure their survival, the best bet was to place them in my care.

The survivors were a musician, a carpenter, and an instrument maker. The music the humans had performed was quite pleasant, so the surface-level reasoning I gave was so they could play for me back at the castle.

Prati had been opposed, saying something along the lines that looking after them would be a pain. Garunya had also clearly been uncomfortable with the idea due to her disdain for humans. But, in the end, I had managed to force my will through. I told them that in the worst-case scenario, if they became a problem, I would use them to practice necromancy.

"I doubt knowing such a fate possibly awaits them would allow them to rest easy."

Yeah...probably not. Best not to tell them, then.

Speaking of not knowing, I had asked the performer, a man named Vigo, afterward about the hero. That's how I learned his name had been Leonardo. Right after the battle I had tried to call on his soul...but there had been no response. His final gasp had been so great that the intense flames had consumed his own life. It wouldn't surprise me if those flames had also taken his soul in the process.

Though it was only to make myself feel better, I had wanted to apologize to

him. I wanted to tell him the truth. But really...in the end, that was all just for my own satisfaction.

“Looks like we are ready to depart,” Layla came and informed me. In front of our carriage, Chief Zizivalt was saying his goodbyes to Prati.

“You do your best too. Take care of my cute grandson for me, Layla,” Gorilacia said, clapping Layla on the shoulder with surprising gentleness. Now that I thought about it, I believe that was the first time she had ever said Layla’s name.

“Yes ma’am.” Without any sign of nerves or embarrassment, Layla responded, looking directly into Gorilacia’s eyes before giving a crisp bow.

And so we climbed into the carriage. Unlike on our trip here, it was nice traveling with Garunya, Liliana, and Layla. Without my mother around, there was no reason to worry about the opinions of others in a carriage full of girls!

“But Veene’s coming with us too, huh?”

“Yes...my apologies...”

“There’s no need to apologize.” I gave a wry smile as the maid seemed to shrink. There was no reason for her to stress over it. After all, it wasn’t like we were going to be up to anything raunchy here.

By the way, apparently Prati and Sophia would be spending the trip working on some issues that had come to light from correspondence with the castle. They probably had their hands full. The three idiots would be traveling divided between the carriages with Kuviltal and the night elves.

“So much has happened, huh?” I murmured, looking out the crystal glass window and waving to Gorilacia and the other Dosrotos warriors.

“*Bark!*” Liliana piped up in reply, content lying in her spot right at my side.

The carriage slid into motion. Once we made it back to the castle...there’d be a lot to do. I’d have to go say hello to the night elves and the undead, and give a report to the king. And since I could now fly with Layla, I’d need to start making plans—

“And you’ll have to start making out in front of your mother.”

That...was true...oh, which also reminded me, riding on Layla’s back was pretty dangerous. I’d have to remember to get a saddle for her. Hopefully it could be something portable and convenient. I wondered if the dwarves would make something good for me...

Looking out the window, all sorts of thoughts raced through my head.

“See you later, everyone! I’m going to go make it big!”

Behind me, Albaoryl’s voice rang out.

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“See you later, everyone!” Alba shouted, leaning out the window of the night elf carriage.

The many familiar townsfolk waved back at him. Some of them even ran after the carriage as it pulled away. Shouting, “Come back soon,” they and their antics brought a smile to his face. Even his sister heard his shout, turning and waving goodbye. Normally she avoided going out in public, but today was different—she had to see her brother off.

“I don’t care if you do well or not.” Her last whisper came back to him. *“Just please, come back safely.”*

The charm she had made for him felt warm in his chest pocket. All the emotion that had gone into making it was palpable.

Don’t worry, Mari. I’ll definitely be fine. So he thought. *Lord Zilbagias has recognized me as one of his retainers and will be taking me to the assault on the capital.*

But for some reason, surprising even to himself, that prospect didn’t exactly fill Albaoryl with excitement. Conflicting feelings warred in his head, spawned by Zilbagias’s casual question.

“There’s no shortage of unlucky people among them. Those longing to be saved. What do you think about them?”

What did he think of the humans? He had thought long and hard about it but had yet to find an answer. Seeing the intense desperation the hero and the

slaves had fought with just made matters worse.

But still...

He had his dream, something he wanted to accomplish. Though they ran with all their strength, eventually the carriage's speed would leave those kids behind.

I'll save them. All of them.

That couldn't be a bad thing. Though it might not be an answer that would satisfy everyone, it was "correct" in a certain sense. So, he would treasure that—those he could reach with his own hands. Once that was done, he could worry about other issues.

"See you later, everyone! I'm going to go make it big!" Alba shouted as his hometown, the Rage capital, shrank into the distance. He stared hard, burning the sight into his eyes, determination filling his heart.

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Vigo sat holding his knees, seated on the floor of the livestock carriage. They had plenty of grass cushions, so it wasn't all that uncomfortable.

"I guess...this is the first time I've ridden in a carriage."

"Yeah. I never imagined I'd get the chance."

The other two with him in the carriage were talking away. The former carpenter seemed pretty moved by the experience. His past duties had likely involved making parts for carriages just like this. The carriage was bare and simple, lacking even windows. The only thing it had was air holes.

What fate would become of them now?

I...doubt they'll kill us. After all, why would they give us our tools?

They were being shipped somewhere with all the tools of their respective trades. In Vigo's case, he had his favorite violin.

After the events that had transpired, it was a shock that he was still alive. That just filled him with greater sorrow. For all the others that had died. For the hero Leonardo that had led them. He had given them the light of hope, the strength

to keep living. They would never forget that strength and light.

So even without him, they could somehow press on. For the debt they could never repay...

Instinctively, Vigo reached for his violin case. Pulling out the instrument, he spent a few moments tuning it and positioned himself to play.

It was the first time. The first time he had ever *wanted* to play. Until now, this instrument had only been a means to see another day. This was the first time he had ever felt the need to *express* something.

He began to play the melody in his head.

“Ah...”

“That’s...”

The faces of his two companions twisted, as if holding back tears.

It wasn’t one of the few songs permitted for the music slaves. In fact, it was a song he definitely would have been prohibited from playing. The melody of the Silverlight Anthem.

Heroes of humanity, assemble. No foe can match our might.

Brave warriors, sing your spirit to the heavens. Let them witness our fight.

Song of heroes resound. Make our hearts unwavering and bound.

Warriors who drive out darkness, advance. Scatter your foes as your blades dance.

Oh flames of hope, burn bright. Let our fight illuminate through the night.

Souls of the warriors, shine. Allow your purifying silver light to guide.

May our deeds echo eternally, the story of our triumph forever fervently.

Oh gods of light, oh laws of nature, smile upon us.

No matter how dark the veil of night, there’s no need to fear.

Our souls, our light, will cast all evil out of here.

Together we will greet a new dawn, with victory and glory in our palms.

Despite being shaken by the movement of the carriage, Vigo played the song. The anthem of hope the hero had taught them. The powerful melody that had changed him from the weak man he had been.

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“Hmm...?” As I was petting Liliana, I felt a strange sensation. It felt like...just a little...my power had increased?

“It has. Barely.”

I’m not breaking any taboos at the moment, right? So why?

“Hmm. I cannot imagine petting Miss Lili is much of a taboo anymore. And you are no longer particularly plagued by the guilt of your decisions. In that case, only one possibility comes to mind.”

There’s another way?

“Someone related to you has, with considerable resolve, broken a taboo.”

*The authority of **Taboo** works like that?*

“Indeed. Of course, the power acquired from it pales in comparison to carrying out the deed yourself.”

Whatever. I won’t complain about getting some power. But who could have caused this?

“Not even I can know that.”

What? But it’s your authority...

“Even now, taboos committed across the world are pouring power into me. There is no way for me to distinguish between each and every one.”

I see...

But, I did wonder. It didn’t feel...bad.

With a soft sigh, I relaxed into the cushions under me.

I don’t know who you are, or where you are. But...I won’t let this power go to waste.

Closing my eyes, I thought over everything that had happened here in the Rage territory, and everything that would soon come. And I felt like...from somewhere, I could hear a soft yet powerful, nostalgic melody.



Bonus Short Stories

The Three Idiots' Great Welcome Plan

In the old city of the Rage capital...

"This is it! Our chance to finally make it big!" Albaoryl shouted, unable to contain his excitement.

"What's going on, bro?"

"This isn't about us maybe heading into the next battle, right?" His two honorary little brothers, Okkenite and Seiranite, leaned forward with a glimmer of anticipation in their eyes.

"At the very least, this might be a close second! Just wait until you hear this... His Highness Zilbagias is coming here! To the capital! And guess what else? He's looking for retainers!"

"Whoa!" the two brothers exclaimed as one.

"He's looking for three qualities: motivation, loyalty, and, above all, potential! On top of that, he's also looking for a possible confidant, so he's going to be picking from the younger demons!"

"Wait, you mean...younger demons like us?!"

"Exactly! We could become his retainers!" Alba clenched his fist. "So...how are we going to get into his good graces? It's time to draw up a plan!"

"Yeah!" the two brothers shouted in unison.

So the three put their heads together and started thinking.

"Bro, I got an idea!"

"All right, Seira. Let's hear it!" Alba looked to Seiranite expectantly as the younger demon immediately lifted his hand.

"First impressions are super important, right? If we want him to remember

us, we gotta go big and leave a lasting impression!”

“Good point! He’ll definitely be swamped with hopefuls, so we have to stand out from the pack. But, how exactly are we going to do that?”

“Hmm...” Seira crossed his arms with a scowl. “Maybe...how about eating with him?! Sharing a meal is the best way to deepen a friendship, right?!”

“A meal?!” With a prince? On their first meeting?

“What meal could possibly impress a prince?”

“He definitely eats fantastic food on the regular!”

“How about a barbecue?” Seira suggested.

“That would require even *better* food!”

Just in case, the three crunched the numbers on what savings they had and ultimately concluded that the kind of food that could satisfy a prince was well outside their price range.

“And besides, he wouldn’t come anyway! Sharing a meal to deepen a friendship only works if they’re interested in the first place!” Okkenite interjected a bit late.

“Oh... I guess that’s true...” Seira sank back into thought. But then, as if by divine revelation... “What if we welcome him...with an original song?!”

“An original song?!” Alba and Okke exclaimed. That would certainly leave an impression!

“Yeah! We can sing about how much we respect him and want to be his retainers! If we deliver it right after he gets off the carriage...!”

“That would definitely have a huge impact!” Alba gave an impressed nod. “The question then becomes, who’s going to write it?!”

“Well, writing a song from scratch would be tough. We could probably just add onto the words from another song.”

“But a song might be a bit too weak, don’t you think?” Okke said, putting a hand to his chin. “When others see us trying to make a scene, they might try and get in our way. As soon as one of them puts up a soundproof barrier, we’re

finished.”

“Ack, true...”

“It’ll also be really easy for them to get rid of us. We’d need him to listen to us for a good few minutes for it to really sink in.” No matter what performance they tried, they’d probably only have a ten-second window at best.

“Then a song is no good. We need something that gets right to the point.”

“Ah! What about a flag?! We can make a flag and write a welcome message on it!” Seira suggested, waving his spear around like a flagpole.

“Oh, that’s good! Not only does it stand out and easily get the message across, but it’ll be hard for others to get in the way!”

“Won’t it be kind of hard for him to read it if we’re waving the flag around?” Okke said. “Why don’t we just hold it up for him to see?”

“But if we don’t wave it around, how’s it going to unfold for him to read it?”

“True... Too bad we can’t use any wind magic.”

The three shared a troubled look.

“Oh, hold on. Why don’t we just make a big long one? We can attach it to two flagpoles, then two of us can hold it up together!” Seira suggested.

“That’s genius!” Alba and Okke were blown away by Seira’s idea. The trio had never heard of a horizontal banner up to that point, but they had now reinvented it.

“If it’s that big, we’ll have plenty of space to write! What should we write on it?”

“Probably something simple like ‘Welcome Lord Zilbagias,’ right?”

“Then I’ll grab some fans and write ‘please take us to the front lines’ on them!”

“That sounds perfect!”

“Awesome! Let’s get to work then! First, let’s find a flag!”

“Yeah!”

And so the three idiots were bursting with energy as they hit the town to do some shopping.

Prati's Negative Example

Zilbagias approached with a ferocious roar. Knocking aside the incoming blade with her spear, Prati delivered a kick toward her son using the full force of her body. She lacked the composure to hold anything back. Dodging around the kick with the flexibility of a young sapling in the wind, Zilbagias pressed with another slash.

This boy is truly incredible!

Astonished by movements she would never expect from a child of only five years, she unleashed her secret weapon with a broad smile. Emerging from her back, the devil's arm equipped itself with one of her spare spears. Working in concert with Prati's own spears, they delivered an unending torrent of blows.

"Ahhhh dammit!"

Even the most minor of scratches made way for the Devil of Sadism's curse to deliver vicious pain into him, causing his movements to slow for the briefest of moments. And in that tiny window of opportunity, Prati overwhelmed him with a flurry of strikes, fatally wounding him. Blood spurted from his mouth as he fell. His struggling attempts to remain upright were in vain, still determined to fight.

"Bark bark!" Liliana was on him in seconds, licking away his wounds.

"You let your guard down, Zilbagias. You can't let curses slip by you like that."

"I guess...so... All my focus was on your spears since your curse's activation requires delivering a wound with them...but that was clearly the wrong approach. Working on the premise that 'I won't fail' seems to be a mistake. I'll rethink my strategy." Pounding the ground in frustration, Zilbagias jumped back to his feet. "Okay, one more round!"

Splendid, Zilbagias. My curriculum for you wasn't a mistake after all. You are truly a child of the Rage family, not the Dosrotos!

Enjoying the pleasant, intellectual back-and-forth with her son, Prati's mind was drawn to memories long past.

"Get up!"

"Aaaaah!"

"Quit your whining! You think I'm gonna go easy on you?!"

Her mother had been born into the Dosrotos family, renowned as the foremost warriors in demon society. Without warning, she would ambush a sleeping Prati. If Prati was unable to properly defend herself, she'd be beaten mercilessly with training spears.

"Run, run! No dinner until you finish three more laps!"

"What... What is the point...of this?!"

"Save your complaints until after you finish! Now move!"

Sometimes Prati had been chased around the forest while being forced to carry a boulder her own size...

"This is...bad for...my body! What if my bones start to warp?!"

"What did I say about complaining?! That's two more laps for you!"

"Noooo!"

Talking back just resulted in even more merciless punishment.

"Mother! You promised not to get in the way of my reading time!"

"Never let your guard down! No excuses! Until you have a familiar or a trustworthy guard that can keep watch, you must always keep an eye open!"

Despite promising a moment of reprieve while Prati was reading, her mother would still barge in and attack her.

"Then let me go to the Abyss already!"

"You're still too young! If you go while you're still so weak, there's no telling

what devil you may make a pact with!"

The young Prati could only grind her teeth in frustration.

"If you don't like it, then get stronger! Ha ha ha!"

I will definitely make this old hag cry someday! Prati swore, quietly letting her fury build. As a result, when she finally made it to the Abyss, her first pact had been with a Devil of Sadism. There was probably no need to explain whose suffering she wished to see.

But now with the advantage of hindsight, Prati could see that her mother's methods hadn't entirely been wrong.

Practice defending myself while sleeping actually came up once during a deployment...

When the Alliance forces sent an elite squad to launch a surprise attack in the middle of the day, when the demons were all asleep, Prati had been the first on her feet ready to fight back.

And carrying those boulders around taught me how to carry the wounded on my back.

Even with **Transposition** at her disposal, curses as a result of holy or light magic were difficult to heal. In those cases, she had to carry her wounded comrades to safety herself.

But interrupting my reading is unforgivable...!

The day after the incident, Prati had learned that the attack during her reading time had been revenge after an argument her mother had with her father about Prati's education. That revelation spawned a real bloodlust in her.

Regardless, explain yourself thoroughly. Don't just throw some tantrum like a child because you are in a bad mood. Even if the promise was made with a child, keep it and trust them! My choices were all correct!

She had decided she would avoid putting her own son through all the treatment she had hated growing up.

“Um, mother?” Zilbagias asked, the concern in his voice snapping her back to the present. “Are you okay? Should we call it there for today?”

“No, I just had something on my mind.” Laughing off his concerns, she readied her spear again.

To be perfectly clear, though she raised her son strictly while attempting to offer a gentle hand, the times she spent sparring with him as just another warrior brought her great joy.

“Bring it on, Zilbagias! Don’t hold anything back!” Prati urged him on with a wide smile.

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t plan on it!” As he said, he attacked with a palpable bloodlust. Prati’s smile only deepened.

She could only pray that her son enjoyed their time training together as much as she did.

The Hero’s Letter

If only my friends could have seen me now. Sitting at a desk, pen in hand, staring intently at a piece of paper. They’d probably laugh their butts off and say “It just doesn’t look right!” Yeah, it felt pretty out of character for me. But today I could make an exception.

“When was the last time I wrote a letter?” I muttered to myself. But actually, now that I thought about it, this might have been the first time.

“How do you start these things? Some greeting for the season?” I scratched at my head for a while, but ultimately if I didn’t know, I didn’t know. “Eh, whatever. *Yo, it’s the hero Alexander. Do you remember me? I’m sure this sudden letter from me will come as a bit of a shock.*”

I began writing in my own style. I couldn’t write elaborate prose or anything. Honestly it had been so long since I held a pen, I was starting to forget how to write some of the characters. No way could I write something fancy—I wasn’t a forest elf after all. If I tried, they’d see me as even more of a laughingstock.

“The white dragons have rebelled against the Demon King. With their help, we’re going to attack the Demon King’s castle.”

I had to stop myself from outright calling it a suicide attack. Instead, knowing due to operational security that the letter will take a while to be delivered, I wrote about how it would probably all be done by the time they read it.

“We’re leaving soon, so off I go. See you around. Stay well.”

Huh. There was still quite a bit of blank space on the page. Writing some more might make it a bit better.

“I’m gonna go slug the Demon King right in the face, so this war will be over by the time I get back.”

There, that should be good. Copying the same letter onto various pages, I changed only the addressee. I normally didn’t like doing stuff like this, but as this would be the last time, my hand moved quickly and smoothly.

“Barbara...” As I finished the letter to a certain woman Swordmaster, I got another idea. Searching through my bag beside me, I found a bit of money.

“It’s not like I’ll be able to use it anyway, so here’s some money.”

It was money I had earned from my military service, but I would hardly have any need for it anymore. Putting the money into the envelope, I sealed it and stood up.

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“Instructor Miralda.”

At my call, the old priestess slowly turned to face me. In her heyday she had been quite the vicious teacher, feared by all of us learning under her, but now she was serving as a cardinal in the Church...and the years had really taken their toll on her. There was no sign of the ambition that had once fueled her. It was like she had been reduced to a withered tree, ready to fall over once the next gust of wind comes calling. And today, her wrinkled face looked even more grim than usual.

“Alex.” Miralda gave an awkward smile, trying to force the dark look from her face.

“Here. I wrote some letters. Please deliver them for me.”

“Very well. I will do so.” She pursed her lips, taking my letters carefully as if receiving some great treasure. “Hm? What’s this?” But the feeling of money in one of the envelopes seemed to trigger some confusion.

“I decided to send an early wedding gift to one of my Swordmaster friends.”

“Oh, she’s getting married?”

“No idea. I imagine someday, though.” My bluntness left the old instructor a bit perplexed, as if unsure if she should laugh. “It might be tough to deliver a letter with money in it, but it’s all my savings. In any case, I’ll leave it in your hands.”

“Of course. Are these...all the letters?” she asked hesitantly, counting the number of envelopes. She probably thought there were too few. Too few to be my last goodbyes.

“Not many still alive who know me.” That was one of the reasons I had volunteered for the plan in the first place. There were few people left who would grieve my passing. To be honest, I didn’t have a clue if everyone I had written letters for were even still alive.

“I see. But don’t worry. I will definitely make sure they are delivered.”

“Thank you. That’s encouraging to hear.” With a smile, I turned away. I couldn’t bear to see Miralda trying so hard to fake her smile any longer. “I’ve got an early morning tomorrow, so I’m off to bed. Dinner was great! Say thanks to the cook for me!”

“Of course. I will...let him know.”

“Good night.”

With her hoarse “good night” following me, I made my way back to my room.

With Adamas in my arms, I lay down on my bed.

The magical steel felt both cold and hot. It was almost like touching my own heart, a sensation I always found quite calming.

Tomorrow's the big day. The white dragons would take us straight to the Demon King's castle.

"Hold on just a bit, everyone," I murmured.

I thought about all the friends who my letters could no longer reach.

"I'm going to kill that damn Demon King and then come see you guys."

I would end this damn war with my own hands.

Grandma's Heart-Throbbing Interview

Layla Edition

My name is Gorilacia Dosrotos, grandmother to the seventh demon prince Zilbagias. "Granny" makes me sound old, so call me Gori!

Today I would be having a talk with the young dragon girl who was rumored to be trying to seduce my adorable grandson.

"Come in!"

"E-Excuse me..." Hesitantly stepping into the room was a pale-skinned girl with horns. Unlike ours, her horns swept diagonally backward. It was a unique characteristic of dragons using **Anthromorphy**. As timid and shy as she looked, I couldn't let my guard down around her.

I had the Bloodline Magic of *Effusura*. With it, the emotions of living beings appeared like colors floating around them. Its original purpose was for detecting prey or enemies hiding in foliage, and the ability to distinguish between their emotions was just a side effect. But that little side effect just made it a peerless bit of magic when it came to judging someone's character.

Anyway, I was getting off track. Back to the dragon girl. Though she acted terribly timid, I could tell there was an extreme calmness in her heart. She showed the deep blue of one keeping her emotions tightly in check. That wasn't bad. I liked it when people had some backbone, but it would be a different story if she ended up being an enemy.

“Let’s get the formalities out of the way first. Tell me your name and parentage.”

“My name is Layla. I am...the daughter of Faravgi, the leader of the white dragons, and Freya.” As expected, bringing up the name of her departed parents caused her emotions to flicker somewhat.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“I imagine you are trying to learn about my feelings for Lord Zilbagias.” The blue of her tight control mixed with a red of caution, making a new purple. That wasn’t to say it was messy. In fact, it was bright and pretty.

“Exactly. So let me be frank. What do you think about Zilbagias?”

“What do I think...?”

Wow. That was quite the reaction. A vibrant green of relaxation mixed with an excited red and pink, making her all but glow. I had seen something similar on the northern front before. I felt like it was going to burn my eyes. Despite its beauty, it was still somewhat unsettling.

“Zilbagias was the one who killed your father. Do you not hate him for that?” Keeping a careful eye on her, I tried to rattle her a bit. And as expected, my pushing caused her colors to darken slightly. A faint black mixed into the previous colors. But it was really, really faint.

“I do not believe there is much hope of hiding it from you. So, to be honest, I cannot say I have no hatred of him at all.” Layla said, eyes downcast. Her sheer honesty. Even though her answer might mean relinquishing any chance of ever carrying Zilbagias on her back. Well, it made sense that Zilbagias would want to ride her, but any desire of hers to carry him would only come across as suspicious at this point.

“Don’t you want revenge?” I pressed her again. But surprisingly...

“Not at all,” Layla raised her head, giving a crisp reply. The darkness of her hatred vanished entirely. “I have come to understand that the...incident between Lord Zilbagias and my father was an unfortunate accident. In the end, Lord Zilbagias is the one who saved me from the dark dragons. He has...he has been so good to me. He taught me that it was okay for someone like me to live.

So I...I really..."

Guh! My eyes were really starting to burn! I had barely ever seen such a bright love before!

The fact she wouldn't deny her hatred meant we might still need to be cautious of her. Prati would likely be thrilled about that. But after all these years looking at people through *Effusura*...I could tell. This love was real.

No matter how good she was at lying, no matter how well she could use words and expressions to disguise her true feelings, the colors I saw were never wrong. With the night elves' skills in deceit, they could even trick themselves into showing false emotions. However, in those cases, the colors of those lies revealed themselves as muddy and impure. Those who tried to fool themselves into liking someone they hated, flattering them as they eyed their money or authority, came across as filthy. I had seen enough of that for a lifetime.

In comparison, this girl's feelings were bright and clear, blindingly pure. A color like this couldn't exist unless it came from the heart. In all my years, I had only seen colors like this a few times.

I supposed I had seen a similar vibrancy from the high elf pet Zilba brought around with him. The fact he had two such incredible exceptions following him around was an ominous sign, to say the least. Especially since he was only five.

"It seems like you're serious about him."

"Of course." Layla nodded, not hesitating for a moment. She was so straightforward it was almost funny.

As far as I could tell, she didn't have a shred of hostility toward him. However...no matter what I said, those who didn't possess *Effusura* wouldn't understand. Prati would surely keep worrying and suspecting the girl.

It made me wonder...how would she react if I told her that Layla's feelings for Zilbagias were even brighter and more beautiful than her own son's feelings for her? Well, I didn't need *Effusura* to imagine that black fury, so I would restrain myself this time.

“What do you think about Zilbagias?”

“Woof? Bark bark! Whine, whine!”

“...I see.”



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Zilbagias the Demon Prince: How the Seventh Prince Brought Down the Kingdom Volume 3

by Tomoaki Amagi

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Elijah Baldwin

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2024