

**Tomoaki Amagi**

**Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu**

A detailed illustration of a young woman with long, flowing light blue hair and golden eyes. She is wearing a light blue, strapless dress with a black choker and a chain. She is smiling and gently touching the face of a dragon head that has a human-like face. The dragon head has green horns, a yellow eye, and a red mark on its forehead. The background is dark and moody, with a large, blue, winged dragon-like creature in the upper part. The ground is covered in fallen autumn leaves in shades of orange, red, and yellow.

# **Zilbagias** the **Demon Prince**

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



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"You underestimate me, brat!"

A leathery snap filled the air.  
Light once again welled up deep in  
Faravgi's throat. He had shaken off  
the curse with brute force.  
With another roar, burning white light  
flashed toward me.

I could feel my spear shifting in my hands.  
My left hand was wrapped in a thick layer of  
dark magic...and carried a bone shield.







“Okay, then...”

★ Layla timidly released her transformation behind me.

“I’ll...try to fly now.”

• But the timidity in her voice was soon blown away. With a light kick off the ground, she stretched her wings and flapped hard. Unlike her previous uncoordinated attempts, her movements were now smooth and graceful.



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# Prologue

The Demon Prince woke up early. While the sky was still crimson and the sun was still not yet under the horizon, the prince was already getting out of bed.

“Good evening, Lord Zilbagias.”

“Good evening, Master Zilbagias!”

“Yeah, good evening.”

As always, his attendant butler, the devil Sophia, and his personal maid, the white tiger beastfolk Garunya, had been the ones to wake him. Demons pretended to be more refined than they actually were, but they were still savages. This meant it was not customary for maids to dress those they served, unlike in human culture. After dressing himself, he would then partake in his “waking meal,” what humans would refer to as “breakfast.”

“All right, time for some exercise. Come on, Liliana.” After breakfast, he would then take his beloved pet for a walk. “You’re quite energetic today, aren’t you?” The prince laughed as his pet dog scurried about on all fours, barking away happily.

All it took was a few days for the rumor of the “seventh prince’s new pet” to spread within the castle’s walls. There was an equal balance of curiosity and fear in the eyes of those they passed in the halls of the castle. It was not part of demon culture to keep pets. That in itself would have made Zilbagias’s circumstances rare. But the fact he had managed to turn a high elf into his pet dog was truly exceptional. It was completely unheard of. Despising the high elves above all else, the admiration the night elves held of the prince’s abilities to subdue the saint bordered on worship.

“Okay, Lord Zilbagias. Today we’ll start with reviewing the geography of the center of the continent.”

Once they returned from their walk, it was time to study. As usual, it would be



the knowledge devil, Sophia, guiding the lessons. As they were savages, there were many demons who could do little more than basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, but given his role as a prince, education was much more essential to him.

“The center of the continent? I guess that would be the elven forest, the kingdom of Deftelos, and the Duchy of Tritos?”

“Correct. All nations you may come to conquer one day.”

“I see.”

In particular, knowledge about military matters was highly prized. Starting with nations’ relative positions to each other, then populations and production capabilities, followed by simple histories and military strength and overall capability for waging war. A variety of information was pounded into his head.

“You know an awful lot about the Panhuman Alliance for someone with barely any contacts.”

“The night elf information network is pretty good.”

“Ah. That explains it.”

After geography and history came math. Calculations for the amount of supplies needed by a given number of troops and the number of days it would take to acquire them were common questions, all things that were practical and concrete.

And then, after his night meal and a short break, it was the beginning of his hellish physical training.

“Come, Zilbagias. Today I will not be holding back.”

“I’d ask for nothing less, mother!”

On the parade ground he faced his mother, the Archduchess Pratifya, standing ready with her spear. There was a duality to her presence. She was naturally gifted in spearmanship, but also possessed a level of refinement and intelligence quite rare for a savage race like the demons. Quite fitting for a wife of the Demon King. She possessed a frigid beauty, a bold, ferocious smile—with



just a tiny bit of affection mixed in—as she stared down her son. There was no doubting the love she had for Zilbagias, but it was still very different from the kind of love of a human parent.

“You’re getting quite good at this!”

“Thanks!”

Spear clashed against spear, sparks flying as their metal tips struck. Indeed, their training utilized actual weaponry, akin to a real battle. But...

“Guh!”

The prince let out a pained cry as Pratifya’s spear bit into his flank. There wasn’t the slightest semblance of mercy in her attacks. All wounds were permissible here, as long as a swift death was avoided. As the fight progressed, the prince grew more and more bloody.

“Gah...*Me Ta Fesui!*”

Dark magic poured from the prince as he activated the Rage family’s unique ability, **Transposition**, a curse to shift one’s wounds and maladies onto another.

“Still too soft.”

Despite his efforts, the gap in their magical strength was still quite large, making him unable to penetrate his mother’s magic resistance. Easily brushing off the curse, she used the opening left by his attempt to slam the haft of her spear into him, pulverizing his shoulder and collarbone.

Zilbagias cried out, the intense pain driving him to his knees, eyes wide and mouth frothing. His spear slipped from the grip of his now impotent arm and clattered to the ground.

“You’re focusing too much on your magic. Neglect your movements and your magic will not profit you at all. You must execute the spell much faster in order to avoid giving your opponent a clear opening.”

“Yes...mother...” the prince responded to her advice between groans, his crimson eyes still burning with fighting spirit.

Breaking free from Garunya’s control, Liliana dashed to the prince’s side with panicked barking, tears in her eyes. As she licked at his face, his whole body was



wrapped in a bright glow, his wounds mending of their own accord.

“What a convenient power...” Pratifya murmured, her voice impressed yet her expression conflicted.

Compared to the Rage family curse, which required a target to force one’s injuries upon, Liliana’s healing miracle was incomparably convenient. As a member of the Rage family, which had secured their position in the demonic kingdom as the foremost healers, it was no wonder she’d have a few thoughts about it.

“No matter. Thanks to her, our training can continue for much longer. Now, let us resume.”

Pratifya recovered, readying her spear yet again. If they were using **Transposition** to heal, their training would be forced to an end as the prepared human slaves would all succumb to their injuries.

With Liliana’s effectively infinite healing power, they could keep fighting as long as they possessed the energy to keep moving.

“Gladly...!”

Fully recovered, the prince took up his spear once again.

*“You have grown to enjoy this training an awful lot now that the use of human sacrifices has been avoided, haven’t you?”* a certain devil god murmured. *“I must say, it’s unfortunate that you also avoided partaking in that taboo...”*

*Shut up.*

Anyway, hello. It’s me, Alexander, now known as Zilbagias. Once again, I’m playing the part of this shitty demon prince.



# Chapter 1: Those Hidden in the Dark

A train of carriages raced down the night road, cutting through the demonic kingdom with no heed to the surrounding terrain. Inside one of those carriages, I was sinking into a rather comfortable seat while looking out the window at the countryside whizzing past us.

It had been quite a while since I freed Liliana from the night elf prison.

Just as Prati had planned, I was heading out to exterminate a band of goblin deserters. Our destination was a ruined fortress two days out from the castle by carriage.

*“The purpose of this exercise is to experience traveling over land and acquiring some tactical achievements.”*

Or so she said. In short, I was playing soldier for a bit.

It probably would’ve taken mere hours to reach the fort on dragonback, but in order to get experience working in an ordinary unit (or at least as ordinary a unit as a prince would ever join), we were going by carriage. Along with me were a number of servants, including Sophia and Garunya, as well as a few night elf hunters.

The accompanying night elves were those I had healed due to my deal with the former prison warden, Sidar. They had made a contract that for anywhere between a few months to a few years, they would serve me personally. So far, the unit consisted of a young hunter who had her stomach ripped open, a hunter who had lost consciousness after a sword was rammed into his chest, and a spy who had one of his legs all but torn off. Among them, the spy in particular possessed a magical energy almost on par with that of a demon. His skill was apparent even at a glance. Once he returned to active duty, I could only imagine the havoc he would wreak.

The standard Rage family healing quota would typically be used on someone of his caliber, but due to recent movements on the front lines, there were an



overwhelming number of demands for treatment. When put on a scale, a spy that would lose a leg and thus lose his usefulness as an agent was weighed against someone so gravely wounded they would lose their life if not treated. It was difficult for the night elf leadership to make a judgment on which way the scale should tip. So none other than the seventh demon prince Zilbagias had arrived to lend a helping hand.

*“From the bottom of our hearts, we give you our utmost thanks and swear our loyalty, Your Highness.”*

After being treated and restored to full health, the now quite sprightly night elves had immediately bowed down before me.

They had witnessed me take their injuries with **Transposition**, and so had seen me vomit blood, lose my leg, and thrash about in agony. Apparently having a demon prince offer his own body to save them had pulled at their heartstrings, inspiring a sincere loyalty in them that was very much unlike their people.

*“The night elves are vindictive and crafty, so you cannot let your guard down around them, but they are also quite dutiful.”*

Prati’s words resurfaced in the back of my mind. I was a bit torn on the matter. No matter how dutiful they might have been, it was a night elf that had killed my mother in my past life...

Regardless, that was the unit I was taking with me on this little excursion.

*“I will be assigning observers and guards to protect you as well, but pay them no mind. Proceed as you would normally.”*

Though I’d still be under observation, it was my first time venturing out without Prati. It was also the first time I was leaving the castle since my trip to the Dark Portal...but with so many night elves and devils tagging along, I certainly couldn’t ease up.

“This carriage thing is pretty comfortable,” I said, looking over the spacious interior of our vehicle. All while trying to pretend it was my first time riding one for Sophia’s sake, who was sitting opposite of me. As frustrating as it was to



admit, this was much more comfortable than the carriages I had ridden in my human life. “From the human literature I read, I thought it would be a much bumpier ride.”

“Some special work was done to this one that humans can’t manage.” Sophia nodded with a proud smile. “Did you notice the metal box seated between the cabin and the wheels?”

“Is there some mechanism in there?”

“Yes. There are some specially altered skeletons inside. Apparently they absorb and control the shock experienced by the carriage.”

Suddenly I didn’t feel all that comfortable anymore. As gentle as the ride was, all it took was that little tidbit to make me uneasy.

“By the way, that was an invention of the lich Enma.”

*Him again?* In case you were wondering, the carriage was being drawn not by living horses, but by horse skeletons. They were covered in thick black leather and cloth so that they wouldn’t disintegrate in the sunlight. Though they would slow down in the daytime, as long as they had magic to fuel them, these undead horses could go on forever. They had become a critical piece of the demonic kingdom’s supply network.

“On top of that, this road was fashioned by the Corvut family. Unlike most stone roads, this one has almost no seams or variations in level, so much of the shaking is eliminated.”

The roads in this area had been fashioned through brute force by the Corvut family, who specialized in earth property magic. The stone roads their magic built were frighteningly smooth and incredibly resilient. The fact these undying horses could run at full speed down these perfect roads and still take two days to reach our destination must have meant it was actually pretty far away.

A whine preceded a light thump on my knees. Liliana, wearing a cute little dress, was rubbing her face against me. She had been brought along for her healing powers.

“Good girl,” I said, a quick scratch behind the ears drawing a happy growl from her. Her arms and legs were still short. With metal caps welded to the



ends of her limbs, it would take some surgical work to remove them and allow her limbs to regenerate. Which of course would involve cutting. As she was now, Liliana was still deathly afraid of blades.

Beyond that, the night elves also warned that if she were allowed to regenerate her hands and feet, she would be a tremendous danger to everyone in the castle in the event she ever regained her sense of self. Forest elves were quite adept with magic. As such, as much as it pained me to leave her like this, her arms and legs remained truncated.

*“Listen everyone. Treat her kindly and with respect. If someone messes up and our relationship sours, her healing power could stop working on me.”*

Thanks to those orders, the servants treated Liliana pretty well. The night elves clearly didn't appreciate it, bitter expressions occasionally appearing on their faces, but they kept their composure and didn't make a fuss. And thanks to her, I was able to continue my training without killing any more humans.

That didn't mean the slaves had been saved. All it meant was they would be used for healing elsewhere. The best I had accomplished was prolonging their inevitable fate by a few days.

*“And now that they are not killed for your sake, the power you might have gained from them is lost.”*

Ante had mentioned. But saving ten or so slaves every day, putting off their deaths for a few days each time, might result in a small handful of lives being saved once the demonic kingdom fell. The potential power from committing that taboo might be a considerable loss, but that was a trade-off I was willing to take. Besides, I was sure I'd have a frustratingly large number of opportunities to make up for it later.

As I stroked Liliana's hair, I felt someone staring at us. Looking up, I saw Garunya at Sophia's side, staring intently at Liliana. Very, very intently. Her face was quite serious, her tail swaying back and forth, her hands clenched tight on her skirt.

“...Oh!” Noticing my attention, she quickly looked away.

“Come here, Garunya.”

At my invitation, the maid hesitantly made her way over. I reached out and started scratching at her neck, immediately earning a satisfied purr.

*“You’ve gotten quite good at this,” Ante teased. “A high elf dog on your left, a fluffy white cat on your right. A flower for each hand, no?”*

Beyond that, I was also now getting a rather cold look from Sophia.

“Having women waiting on me like this makes me look like a real prince, don’t you think?”

Sophia snorted dismissively at my joke, pulling a stupidly thick book out from her chest pocket. I had expected to be practicing magic since we had so much downtime while traveling, but spending it like this wasn’t all that bad either. Putting aside my previous sense of unease for now, I surrendered myself to the backrest as I enjoyed the sensations beneath both my hands.

+++

As much as this was practice for working as part of a military unit, there was no need for us to entirely exhaust ourselves. Before the sun rose, we settled down and started setting up camp. Naturally, as a prince, I didn’t lift a finger. I could sit back and relax while everyone else did the work. It was great. We had multiple carriages with us, so our camp actually took on a bit of the feel of a military encampment.

“Hey, do you have a minute?” I called out to the spy I mentioned earlier as the servants went about preparing dinner.

“How may I be of service, Your Highness?” he responded immediately with a smart bow. He had been leaning up against one of the carriages, arms crossed as he kept watch over the camp.

His name was Virossa. He was middle-aged for a night elf at about 130 years old, and was quite infamous for his work even among his own house. The other night elves all looked to him with respect. Like all other elves, he was blessed with particularly good looks. He wore matte black armor that remained silent even as he moved, and was equipped with a bow and a thin-bladed sword. Not a dagger or a knife. A sword. That was quite rare for a night elf. Every motion he made seemed to be effortless, and if you relaxed your attention for even a



moment, your eyes could glide right over him without noticing his presence.

“How are you doing that? It doesn’t look like concealing magic.”

When I was healing him I’d noticed he had incredible magical power, but now his presence felt weak, almost transparent. If there was concealing magic at work, there would’ve been something akin to an unnatural blankness.

“I’m dispersing my magic into the area around me.” With a faint smile, Virossa seemed to collect himself, his presence becoming stronger and more defined. Before it was like I had been looking at him through a foggy glass window, and just like that—never mind the fog—the glass itself had been swept away.

“That’s impressive,” I murmured, rubbing my horns. It was pretty incredible that he could hide himself so well even from the senses of a demon.

“Simply the result of years of training, Your Highness.”

“I wonder if I could do the same, then.”

Virossa’s eyes went wide. “Are you interested? This is a technique designed for executing surprise attacks, or concealing oneself from pursuers...it is not something the demons typically find favorable.” Apparently it wasn’t a very popular technique.

“That has been on my mind lately. In the end, your objective is to kill the enemy, right? How you carry that out doesn’t really matter. Killing them simply means you’re victorious.” I’d jump at the chance to kill the Demon King with poison. The only reason I hadn’t yet was because he had a magic ring for detecting poisons.

“You seem quite...progressive, Your Highness.” Virossa gave another faint smile. It seemed he very much agreed with me.

“Whether I can actually use them or not...and whether I’d actually be allowed to, I’m interested in your techniques,” I said. “I doubt they’re the kind of thing I could pick up in a day, but when you’ve got time, would you mind giving me some tips? I imagine they could prove useful in the future.”

“Absolutely, Your Highness. I would be honored.”

And so, by playing the part of the inquisitive young prince, I broke the ice with

a night elf spy and made my first forays toward learning their methods and accessing their information network. In particular, the latter was incredibly important. Learning how the demonic kingdom got information on the Alliance and seeing how that information disseminated was crucial.

“For the most part, I worked behind enemy lines rather than on the battlefield itself.”

“How did you break through the borders?”

“Simply walking through the forests or mountains would likely get me caught by those filthy plant-munchers. Instead, I’ve navigated underground tunnels dug by goblins, or approached by a rather circuitous sea route.”

“How did you get locals to help you?”

“Money, mostly. Are you familiar with the term ‘economics’? Ah, good. That simplifies things. The Alliance is extremely well-developed economically, creating a strong dependence on currency in its citizens. We have a number of puppet organizations operating within the Alliance, but for the most part we work through bribes.”

“What kind of work do you do, in a concrete sense?”

“Using companies that deal in provisions, we send bribes to the Holy Church, giving us access to information about military plans of the Alliance before they ever take place. So we’ll often raze storehouses made in preparation for large military operations, or sabotage bridges critical for mobilization.”

I could feel my blood running cold as he spoke. Demons were savages. For the most part, the mere concept of currency and economy were beyond their understanding. But their subordinates, the night elves, seemed to possess a great understanding of human society. I never expected that they’d have informants as deep as the Holy Church itself. And there were companies supporting the Demon King from within the Alliance?! I desperately put my new young and intelligent brain to work memorizing the names of the companies and cities Virossa mentioned. I wanted to get that information to the Alliance as soon as possible, but right now that seemed like it would be exceedingly difficult.



“Speaking of which, I heard that before I was born, a group of heroes launched an attack on the castle. Did you have any information about that beforehand?”

Virossa grimaced at the question. “Unfortunately we were unable to predict that attack. We knew the white dragons had rebelled, that the Alliance was beginning to use them for flight, that a number of units of heroes had gathered in the Holy Land, and that activity between the Holy Land and various other nations of the Alliance had started to increase...”

*Whoa, hold on there pal. It sounds like you understood everything perfectly fine.*

“...but we never anticipated a suicide attack on the castle itself.”

So they already had all the puzzle pieces, but couldn’t quite fit them together. Of course, the plan had been top secret, only revealed to those who were in positions of national leadership. Apparently all members of the attack squad had been just like me, without a family to leave behind. Alternatively, it was possible that at such a high level, counterintelligence operations for the Alliance were doing their job...though considering how much was leaking from below that, it was a small consolation.

“But I’m surprised you can operate inside the Alliance without being noticed,” I said with an awed tone. “How do you disguise yourselves so well?”

“Of course we start with makeup to change the color of our skin, but the real difficulty lies in our eyes,” Virossa answered, pointing to his own dark crimson orbs. “It is possible to change their color with magic, but being night elves, not all of us are so capable. As such, we take soft, transparent shells from a species of crab that live in a certain underground lake and dye them with extract from a particular species of corn. We can then apply those lenses to our eyes directly. From the names of the materials used, we named these lenses ‘colorcorns.’”

“Interesting...”

“However, as our eyes are naturally red, we cannot use these lenses to make them blue. Most people aim for brown or black instead. Finally, we have an ointment to apply to the skin to protect us from the sunlight.”

I knew about that one. The herbs used to make it had quite a distinctive smell, so dog beastfolk were quite capable of rooting out night elf encampments.

“However, recently the smell of the ointment has been easily picked up by dogs, making it a liability. As such, we have started using another kind of ointment. For the most part, the original ointment is now used mostly as a diversion. We have a number of similar ointments that do the same thing, all with quite different smells, so whenever one is recognized we simply switch to another.”

*What...?!*

Despite my shock, I forced myself to ask about the plants used for these other ointments. Virossa seemed quite pleased to inform me about them, but if I pressed for too much detail, he would likely start to get suspicious. He was a spy, after all. I was a demon prince, and had personally healed him of a grievous injury, so he wasn't particularly on guard against me. But things would get dangerous fast if I did something to earn his suspicion.

“That is how most operatives disguise themselves. Those of us more skilled in magic use **Anthromorph** magic to appear fully human.”

Within his explanation, he suddenly dropped a bombshell I couldn't ignore.

“**Anthromorph** magic?”

“Yes. It is originally a magic of the dragons that allows them to take on a human form.”

Though I had never seen it in action, I had heard about this dragon magic. Apparently, white dragons had used their human forms to negotiate. *Are other races capable of doing that?*

“Can other races use that magic?” Dragons and humans had been enemies since the dawn of time, so we knew vanishingly little about their biology or their magic.

“Yes. However, acquiring the magic requires the consumption of dragon blood, and it requires a considerable amount of magical power to execute. Getting the dragons to spare some of their blood for us comes at a steep cost, so it is not something everyone can do.”



I hummed thoughtfully. “So, of course you can use it, right?” I asked, earning a grin from the spy.

Suddenly his form twisted and distorted, and in mere moments, a middle-aged human man sat where the night elf once did. Unlike an elf who maintained a youthful appearance for ages, he looked quite properly aged as a human. If you looked really closely you could see traces of Virossa’s features, but from his deep tan to his rough stubble, it was impossible to see him as anything other than human. His ears were round, and his hair and eyes had turned brown.

“Th-That’s incredible...” The sight had me quite shaken. There was no way to tell him apart from the real thing! “How does it stand up to sunlight or holy magic?”

“Sunlight isn’t much of an issue. At worst, we sunburn a little easier than normal humans. However, returning to our ordinary forms while sunburned brings a rather exquisite agony, so we still avoid working during the day as much as possible. Unfortunately, the disguise is worthless against holy magic.”

*Thank goodness. So it should be possible to sniff out the imposters with holy magic.*

“Also, as I am sure you have already noticed, our senses and magical power reduce to that of an ordinary human while transformed.”

Sure enough, unlike earlier when his presence had been scattered and diluted, now it was...

“Extremely weak, right?” The man smirked, seeing right through me.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“By the way, even people in this form, you cannot underestimate them. Allow me to show you something interesting.” Standing up, Virossa drew the sword at his hip. It was quite the piece, gleaming in the faint morning light. Without much effort, he casually swung the sword at a nearby tree. The blade sliced through the thick trunk without so much as a sound. The tree then collapsed, revealing a terrifyingly clean cut.

I felt goose bumps. His sword looked like it was practically ignoring the laws of nature. *Impossible. This guy’s a night elf!*

“Even though you’re an elf...” I said, voice shaking, “...you’re a Swordmaster?”

A Swordmaster, one who had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, able to perform supernatural techniques with a blade without even a hint of magic. Just like holy magic, they were one of humanity’s trump cards, our ultimate weapons against the demons. That was how it was *supposed* to be.

“It took me fifty years of training in this human form to reach this level,” Virossa said with a small yet smug laugh as he returned the sword to its sheath.

*That’s right. It takes even a genius swordsman close to thirty years to awaken as a Swordmaster. I can’t begin to imagine how long it would take for an ordinary person. They could spend their whole lives training and never quite reach it. Virossa’s training must’ve been exceptionally brutal.*

Still, I couldn’t help but feel like this was unfair. When a human reached this level of skill they were already past their prime, beginning to descend into old age, but this guy got to the same level with another hundred years left in him.

“That’s...amazing. I never thought the first Swordmaster I’d ever encounter would be a night elf.” First for this life, at least. It took me a moment to muster those words.

“I’m the only one within my clan,” Virossa said, returning to his night elf form with a shrug. “It would have been better if I possessed skills with a bow like most other night elves...but unfortunately I lack the talent for archery,” he said with a grimace, scratching embarrassedly at his face.

“So you trained with a sword instead?”

“Yes, seemed suitable since I would frequently use a sword while undercover. Appears to be a rather poorly thought-out weapon, doesn’t it? Not as convenient or mobile as a knife, but not as much range as a spear.”

*Hold up. You’re not about to talk trash about my swords, are you?*

“Yet as I continued to practice, I became quite attached. As pathetic as that is.” He gave a self-deprecating laugh, patting the scabbard.

*Hm. My mouth twisted into something of a grimace. I guess no one who hated the sword could become a Swordmaster.*



“But I’ve never heard of someone who could use magic being loved by the laws of nature.”

Even setting aside the issue of his race, becoming a Swordmaster while being able to use magic on the level of a demon was no small feat. It was basically accepted that mages couldn’t become Swordmasters. The laws of nature didn’t like them.

These laws were extremely strict. If you threw a rock, it would fall. If you put water in a high place, it would flow to a lower place. That’s how this world was built. Those laws made up the fundamental structure of reality. But those with strong magic, in other words mages, could warp reality around them through their will and their words. As such, when a mage wielded a sword, their body would grow stronger and their blade would become sharper, all without any conscious effort on their part.

This infuriated the laws of nature. From nature’s perspective, mages were outlaws, ignoring the rules it had established. It went without saying the laws of nature would hate a person like that. In contrast, those who dedicated themselves to sincere training without trying to circumvent those natural laws would very, very rarely earn nature’s favor.

This was where ultimate techniques came from. These people would be able to slice apart a stone boulder with a wooden sword, close a gap dozens of paces wide in an instant, or pass through enemy attacks like they weren’t there—miracles that were on the same level as magic. That was all possible for those who were loved by nature—the ones we had come to know as Swordmasters.

By the way, there were also equivalents for other weapons. A night elf with no talent for magic could become a Bowmaster, and a beastfolk that refined their martial arts to the limit could become a Fistmaster. They were capable of performing miracles without magic, just like Swordmasters. They were often collectively known under the label of Weaponmasters. If memory serves me right, I think one had to be a Fistmaster to be recognized as a king of the beastfolk.

At any rate, a mage couldn’t help but twist reality to achieve their goals, so it was more or less impossible for nature to favor them. So no matter how much

they trained, with their inherent talent for magic, there had never been a case of a Spearmaster emerging among the demons.

“When I am in my human form, my magic becomes incredibly weak. I am incapable of using any spell save for the one to return to my original form. Honestly, it is more convenient for slipping into human society as an ordinary person,” Virossa explained, a distant look in his eyes. “When I am in the field, I can rely on nothing but martial arts. That was why I dedicated myself so thoroughly to swordsmanship, studying under a human master and stealing all of his secrets. But I never imagined I would become a Swordmaster like that.”

The turning point had been twenty years ago. While in the field, he coincidentally happened to come into contact with holy magic, which burned him and thus blew his cover. He ended up having to fight a hero in broad daylight.

“Since it was the middle of the day, I couldn’t undo my transformation and simply run. I thought that day would be my last. The defensive wards I possessed were insufficient to stop his holy flames, so I was all but defenseless. He had warded off all of my throwing arrows and poison needles, so all that remained for me was my sword.”

The hero had been especially cautious. Enhancing himself with holy magic, he focused on defense above all else, slowly pushing Virossa into a corner.

“I lost each of our exchanges. Whenever I tried to close in, he would distance himself and retaliate with magic. I even threw my scabbard at him, attempting to create an opening to attack, but I was always one step behind him.”

Even so, he still swung his sword in spite of himself.

“And at that moment, something strange happened. Time seemed to slow. It felt like someone was pushing on my back.”

And the next moment, though he was still hopelessly out of range, his blade found the hero’s throat.

“Sometimes, I relive that moment in my dreams. I still remember the look of shock on his face as he died. Wouldn’t be surprised if I was wearing a similar expression.”



I uttered a silent prayer for the fallen hero, one of my predecessors.

“Ever since that moment, I suppose you could say I have been a Swordmaster. Though I can only use those abilities while in human form.”

“What happens when you try in your night elf form?”

“I have no idea. I have been too scared to try,” Virossa replied, his face deadly serious. Hearing that from a veteran spy felt extremely uncharacteristic. “I had practiced using a sword in my night elf form before, but once I awakened as a Swordmaster, I never again drew my blade without transforming first. I feel if I were to draw my sword and accidentally distort the laws of nature, I would lose nature’s favor forever.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s possible.”

The laws of nature were pretty obstinate. It was a mystery why they had taken a liking to Virossa in his human form in the first place. I would have thought that was distorting their rules enough already. *Was it because while on the verge of death, he relied on his swordsmanship rather than his magic? Actually, now that I think about it, I guess all the Swordmasters I knew in my previous life also awakened in a fight to the death...*

“At any rate, Your Highness, even as weak as an individual human may appear, there are some among them who can use techniques like this. The same goes for the Fistmasters of the beastfolk. Never underestimate your enemy on the battlefield.”

“True enough. I’ve heard of plenty of demons dying to Swordmasters.”

*Not quite as many as the number of Swordmasters I heard died to demons, though.* I had studied the reports Sophia wrote for me diligently, so I knew quite a bit.

Those born with incredible talent, who then spent their entire lives honing their crafts, could someday reach that vaunted pinnacle. Even so, their prime would be short-lived—only about a decade or so—and their lives could be cut short at any moment on the battlefield, just like anyone else’s. In times of peace, they would have become legendary figures with huge followings, but in times of war, they were swallowed up and forgotten by the darkness of history.

“Maybe I should get your signature while I have the chance,” I blurted out, my head spinning with all this information.

“My signature?”

“Yeah. You’re a mage, yet mastered the weapon of another race so much as to become loved by the laws of nature. I’d be surprised if your name *didn’t* go down in history. A scrap of paper with your signature on it could become a family heirloom.”

Virossa began to chuckle. “Your Highness, I’m a spy, one who lurks in the shadows of history. Becoming famous would bring shame to my clan.”

*I suppose that is true,* I admitted with a wry smile. *But Virossa, you really are a cut above. My peak as a hero in my past life wouldn’t even come close to you.*

I was convinced there was a lot I could learn from him. The fact I had healed someone who was such a potent threat to the Alliance might have been a cause for grief...but I didn’t feel that in the slightest. All I had to do was profit from his help enough to make up for that!

“Master Zilbagias! Dinner is ready!” Garunya’s energetic voice called out from the center of the camp.

“I guess we should get something to eat. I’d love to continue this conversation after dinner.”

“It would be my honor, Your Highness.”

I needed to absorb every last bit of information I could from him while he was still my subordinate.

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Reading a book while stroking Liliana’s hair, I noticed the carriage start to slow down.

“Looks like we’re here,” Sophia said, clapping her own book shut.

Sticking my head out the window, I noticed the Corvut-built road had come to an end, turning into a dirt road leading into a poor-looking village. Apparently, we were closing in on the fortress where the goblin deserters had been last spotted.

The journey had been quite relaxing. I had spent most of my time either reading or learning magic from Sophia. The carriage shook so little I had no issues following the words on the page, and didn't have to worry about motion sickness. Plus, thanks to Sophia's help, I had learned how to make a soundproof barrier.

*"Now you can work in secret and indulge in all sorts of indecencies to your heart's content,"* Ante commented.

*Don't put it like that.* But it would without a doubt be an invaluable tool going forward.

While camping, in order to avoid getting rusty, I had continued practicing combat with Garunya and had been able to join Virossa in his training. On a particularly hot day, we had the opportunity to go swimming. The hunters had even taught me a few tricks while navigating through a forest, and I had had a chance to practice with a sword for a bit. It had been quite a fulfilling time.

*"You seem quite talented, Your Highness. It is hard to believe this is your first time wielding a sword."* When I'd picked one up to mess around, Virossa had started praising me with an endlessly frustrated look on his face. *"Were it not for your standing, I would very much like to have you train in earnest."*

I had tried to put up the charade of being mediocre, but a master like Virossa had been able to see completely through it. Of course, he had no way of coming to the conclusion I had learned swordsmanship on my own without formal training, so he assumed I was naturally gifted.

But given my status within the castle, devoting myself to swordsmanship was out of the question. So instead, while we trained, I used a spear and he used a sword. Our sparring was not far off from practical combat.

His strength was impressive. I needed magic to help close the gap; without it, he would have easily wiped the floor with me. I'd have loved to be able to match him with spearmanship alone, but who knew how many years of practice that would take.

*"My sincere thanks for coming here in person, my prince."*

As our group approached the village an old beastfolk, who seemed to be the



village chief, came out to greet us. He was a cat beastfolk, with a spotted design to his fur. It really gave me a new appreciation for the proud and proper history of Garunya's tribe. *It's hard to put into words, but the villagers here seem like...mongrels?*

They were all dressed in plain and simple clothes, which made them seem like they were hundreds of years behind the rural villages of the Alliance. Despite that, they seemed to be in good enough health, and their fur was in good shape. The entire village was surrounded by forest, and they had some sort of fields for crops. Apparently their primary source of food was hunting and not farming. And they seemingly had no issues feeding themselves by those means.

After spotting goblins at a nearby abandoned fortress though, they'd noticed that the amount of prey in the woods had dropped drastically since the area had been frequently ravaged.

"We figured it was almost certainly the work of the goblins. So, we sent some men to scout the fortress, but..." The chief's face fell. Ten strong men from the village had been sent to evict the goblins, but not a single one had returned. Those whose patience ran out and went to check on them similarly disappeared.

The chief had then decided to utilize unified strength, taking a large group to confront the goblins...but I guess you'd call it his battle instinct? Having survived countless battles in his own right, he had been struck by a sense of uneasiness upon arriving at the fortress. Swiftly he had stopped the party in its tracks and ordered everyone to retreat back to the village.

"Perhaps this old body was just struck by the wind of cowardice. No excuse can possibly suffice. But I also take full responsibility. I beg of you, please deal mercifully with the people of this village!" he said, all but planting his face in the ground.

*So that's why everyone here looks so gloomy, huh? Hold up, I was sent here to deal with a few goblin deserters, but this seems a lot more complex. Does Prati realize what she signed me up for?*

"The situation seems quite different from what I read in the reports..." Sophia said, eyes twitching. *Hey, hey, no need to be so intimidating. Given how much*

*this guy is shaking, his nerves are already shot.*

“So basically, something weird is going on in the forest, and anyone who went to check out the fortress never returned?”

“I am ashamed to admit it, but that is the case.”

*Huh. A group of ten well-built beastfolk men being wiped out is certainly odd. If there are enough goblins to handle them to ensure none escaped, kinda strange why there isn't more damage to the village.*

“Something seems off. Or do you think this is all part of the plan?” I asked Sophia. Battle is unorthodox by nature. I couldn't rule out the possibility Prati had prepared this little surprise to test me as a part of my training.

“Well...I can't say it would be uncharacteristic for my lady.” It seemed Sophia was a bit uneasy with the situation and it was hard not to feel the same way.

“Maybe she's trying to see how I would respond to an unexpected situation?”

“I do not think it would be possible for my lady to arrange something this elaborate so easily.”

*That's the thing. The possibility this isn't part of the exercise is still on the table.* The chief was still watching us uneasily.

“Maybe there was a mix-up in the paperwork? Like we got sent to the wrong place?”

“That would certainly be in the realm of possibility if the paperwork was handled by those useless hobgoblins,” Sophia all but growled, pulling the paperwork out and rapidly scanning it. The gesture seemed pointless since I knew she would have memorized the whole thing. “Chief, what's the name of this village?”

“Kakou Village.”

“Hmm. There shouldn't be any other villages with the same name in the kingdom... Just in case, when was this village founded? What was the population last year?”

“U-Um...please hold on a minute...”

As the village chief started to falter under Sophia's interrogation, Virossa came up and whispered beside me.

"The three of us are ready; just say the word." Virossa, plus the two other night elf hunters. Even if we were just after some goblin deserters, their discipline remained stout, and they were fully armed and ready to act at any moment.

"Go scout the surrounding forest. Just getting a peek at the fortress should be good enough for now." I grinned. "If there's someone there, they're my prey."

"As you wish." With an elegant bow, he and the other hunters melted into the darkness of the night. No sound of breathing, no sound of footsteps, not even the sound of clothes rustling. *As much as it pains me to admit, this is exactly the kind of situation in which night elves excel.*

"Now then..." I shifted my attention to the road we had arrived on. Prati said she had sent observers and an escort with me. Would they be Rage family warriors? If things went south, I could get one of the servants—I think Veene could use fire magic—to send a ball of fire into the sky. That was a potential way to communicate with them.

But considering the possibility remained that this was all part of the training, it would feel pathetic to call for help this early on. Our escort, the Rage family warriors, could begin to doubt my mettle. That would be a problem in and of itself.

"Oh, are you finally thinking of trying to actually become the Demon King?" Ante teased.

*Not at all. If my mother's family starts to question me, it could become a pain in the ass down the line.* I didn't mind making use of my connection to the Rage family, but if they started making light of me or even tried to make use of *me*, I'd get pretty frustrated.

On a small hill some distance from the village, the ruins of an old stone fortress stood against the night sky. We had no idea what was inside, but whatever it was, it was capable of taking down ten strong beastfolk men without letting a single one escape. *Is it a fiend? Maybe an undead that just wandered here?*

*“Whatever it is, I imagine that Virossa can handle it himself,”* Ante mused.

Honestly, I agreed.

After about thirty minutes, Virossa’s group returned.

“We neutralized a number of goblins lurking around the outskirts of the fortress. All of them seemed to be under the effects of some kind of charm or brainwashing.” After his unsettling statement, he paused for a moment. “As for the fortress itself...I can’t say for sure, but...” Virossa’s hesitation was very much unlike him. “I felt the presence of humans inside.”

*What? We’re smack-dab in the center of the demonic kingdom. What the heck are humans doing here?*

“What made you think that?” I asked.

“The weak magical presence was the initial indication, but primarily it was the footprints,” he answered honestly. “There were footprints around the fortress much different from the goblins’. They were barefoot, making no effort to hide their tracks. From the size, the width of the feet, and the shape of the toes, it’s most likely they are human.”

Elves had relatively narrow feet. Dwarves’ were considerably wider. Beastfolk rarely left full footprints. Humans and demons, aside from the presence or lack of horns, were built mostly the same, their feet being fairly average in size.

That meant these footprints had fallen into the average range. The fact they were walking around without footwear, and that their magical presence felt especially weak from outside, meant it was unlikely they were demons.

“So by process of elimination, humans are the most likely candidates, huh?”

For the time being, I took our small force, servants included, and the village chief to an area closer to the fortress. It was much bigger than it looked from afar. It could probably hold a garrison of close to five hundred. Some of the walls were in rough shape—scarred, cracked; one had even collapsed. They told the story of the harsh battles the fortress had weathered.

“From the smell and body heat, there’s probably a large number of goblins



inside. But it's quite quiet. They must be on guard," Virossa whispered from behind me. "Even on military duty, it is hard to believe goblins can stay this quiet. While that's bizarre, the goblins outside the fortress were acting just as strangely. That was why we came to the conclusion something must be influencing their behavior."

"So you think there's a mage inside the fortress?" I asked.

"Most likely. Though it is much weaker than a demon, it would be a mage of considerable power by human standards. I suppose they would be something close to this," he said, dispersing just enough of his magical energy to imitate the strength of the person inside.

"You're pretty good at that..."

Gauging someone's magical energy was all about feeling, so it was really hard to put into words. This kind of demonstration easily got the point across. I was honestly really impressed. *So the mage's magical strength is above the average night elf's and around the level of a weak devil. For a human, that's pretty strong.*

"Maybe an escaped slave?" I muttered, wracking my brain. If there really were humans with the guts to operate so deep in the demonic kingdom, I wanted to support them with all my heart. But I had too many "reliable" companions by my side, so I was restrained from acting recklessly.

*"True enough. I am having difficulty thinking of an excuse to spare them,"* Ante commented.

*Right? As a demon prince, backing down here isn't an option.*

"Even for a runaway slave this seems like a stretch. Any slaves with magic potential are closely monitored. If one managed to slip away even with all those safeguards, it seems unlikely they would be so careless as to not hide their tracks," Sophia pointed out. "Besides, if they were a fugitive, I would think they would've fled after the initial encounter with the beastfolk. It would be puzzling if they chose to stay in the fortress."

"True enough. Garunya, have you noticed anything?" I turned to her, mostly on a whim.

“Huh? Um...my apologies, but not really...” *Why are you asking me?! You have so many capable people here!* was the clear meaning behind the expression on her face. By the way, she was currently carrying Liliana. Liliana was here to help in case anyone was injured, but she was pretty slow without hands and feet, therefore we had tasked Garunya with carrying her around. Garunya was pretty strong, so carrying the high elf was no problem for her. And regardless of how the maid herself felt about it, Liliana had clearly taken a liking to her.

“What do you think, Liliana?”

Liliana responded with a quiet whine, no doubt inspired by the fact we were all whispering. Unfortunately, she gave me nothing but a look of simple confusion. Meanwhile, the beastfolk village chief was watching her with utter bewilderment.

*Guess there is no other option.* “We have no idea who they are or what they’re up to, so we’re left with only one option: we must find out for ourselves.”

Everyone nodded. They were all calm, no sign of nerves among them. It seemed everyone had no reason to think a human mage and a band of goblins was much of a threat. The village chief who had once come here only to retreat seemed to be feeling a little ashamed of himself. Though considering beastfolk’s capability with magic was quite low, he had probably made the right choice.

“Everyone ready?” Attaching my obsidian knife to the end of one of my human bones, I reformed them into a spear. Everyone else, Garunya aside, began preparing their weapons. All the servants that accompanied me were trained combatants, more skilled than your average soldier.

“I will engage in this form,” Virossa said, transforming into a human and drawing his sword. *So he is going Swordmaster mode, huh?* Even though I felt like we’d be able to defeat whoever came out of the fortress, I still was saddened by the fact there would be no way to save whoever was inside. “So, how shall we attack, Your Highness?”

“Split into two groups,” I said, looking at the front gate. “Me and the others who specialize in close combat will break in through the front gate. Our target is

the mage. Those with ranged weapons and the hunters should take up position at the collapsed wall. Once the charm spell is broken, the goblins will probably rush to escape. Don't let them."

If I was really using the utmost caution, I would have our mages capable of fire magic smoke them out, forcing them to fight on our terms. But that seemed a bit too cowardly for a single mage and a bunch of goblins.

There were no objections to my plan; the hunters shouldered their bows and immediately moved into position.

"Let's go." The rest of us rushed for the heavy metal door that was the front gate. It likely once had powerful protective magic cast on it, but it had since rusted and weathered away. At this point it was merely a sturdy lump of metal—in other words, no obstacle for a Swordmaster.

"Virossa."

"As you command." Stepping forward, Virossa's blade flashed with an unnatural quickness. A short, sharp sound filled the air. An observant onlooker might have recognized the sound as a blade cutting through metal many times at once.

The gate crumbled into frighteningly clean-cut pieces. I wouldn't be surprised if I could've used the shards as mirrors if in a pinch. A disgusting smell wafted out of the now defenseless fortress. The sour, dirty smell of wild animals. This was a smell I had much familiarity with from my experiences on countless battlefields. It was the stench of goblins.

Many pairs of golden eyes lurking in the darkness turned their attention to us. Small humanoid figures quickly lined up inside. Short and stout. Green, veiny skin. Short yellowed fangs protruding from their mouths. Despite my many encounters with them in the past, seeing them in a neat formation was a first. Their silence might have given the initial impression that they didn't notice us, but they rushed toward us without making a sound.

"I see. This is definitely strange," I murmured, bringing the closest goblin down with one quick jab. Goblins were known for being loud and obnoxious. But these goblins were silent with vacant looks on their faces, as if they were lost in a daydream.

“It looks like bringing a spear was the right call,” Sophia said, no hint of urgency in her voice as she flourished a portable magical spear, much like Prati’s. Weapons with more reach were handy in situations like this, such as for keeping blood splatter off your clothes. The night elf and beastfolk servants were having a much more unpleasant time since they were using knives and knuckles. I couldn’t help but smile at Garunya’s face in the back. She was clearly both relieved that she didn’t have to take part because she was responsible for carrying Liliana and sympathetic that her colleagues were stuck doing the dirty work.

One person stood out who was clearly on a completely different level—Virossa. He fought with a perfect fusion of human swordsmanship and night elf footwork. There was a silent elegance to his execution as he wove through the goblins, leaving the pathetic creatures to fall to pieces. In the time Sophia and I dispatched a small handful, he had already left over a dozen in pools of their own blood. After clearing out the majority of the goblins himself, he took a guarded stance, carefully analyzing our surroundings. I noticed that not only was there not a speck of blood on him but there also wasn’t any on his sword.

“This is certainly odd,” Sophia said, looking at the dead goblins. “They’re too thin. It’s like they were on the verge of starvation.”

Looking closely at the goblins Virossa had dismantled, I noticed their innards weren’t quite right. Goblin bodies were simple compared to other races—the position of the organs was different, which was why they couldn’t be used for **Transposition**—but even taking that into account, they looked too...dry? It was like they had been drained of their nutrients...

“I thought it was awfully noisy out here,” a metallic, rasping voice filled the air. “Looks like we have some energetic guests.”

Someone was casually walking down the spiral staircase in the depths of the fortress. Our troops immediately assembled around me. Virossa stood at the lead, and Sophia and Veene took up defensive positions in front of me, with Garunya carrying Liliana just behind me.

Finally, the speaker came into view. They looked human. They had pale,



almost translucent skin, with only a few scraps of cloth to cover themselves. Their eyes glowed gold. But there was one clear indication they weren't human.

They had horns.

They weren't like the sinister, spiraling horns of the demons, or the straight horns that protruded from the foreheads of devils. They emerged from the temples, sweeping back behind the head. *That angle, that shape...no way...*

"This is bad," Virossa murmured.

"You have come at the perfect time. You seem to be ripe with magic. Right when I was starting to get an appetite." The figure licked their lips. "Come, it's time to feed."

And they opened their mouth wide. Their form wavered, rapidly growing as their magical energy exploded. Casting off their human disguise, the figure retook its true form. An enormous monster, covered in glittering silver-white scales now stared down at us.

A dragon. And no ordinary one. By the color of those scales, it was one with light magic.

"A white dragon?!"

*You've got to be joking. Why is there... And disguised as a human?! And why here?! In the middle of the demonic kingdom?!*

The dragon roared, the sound and brilliant white light washing away all my questions in an instant. The trump card of the dragons. Their breath.

A torrent of light washed over us.

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*"This operation is top secret."*

Cardinal Miralda, my direct superior and once teacher, told me. We were in a room in the basement of the Great Cathedral in the heart of the Holy Land. In the wavering lamplight, Miralda's wrinkles seemed to grow deeper.

*"The white dragons have rebelled against the Demon King. With their help, we will be sending the elites of all the races in an aerial assault on the Demon King's*

*castle. We are going to try and assassinate him."*

"Are you insane?" I blurted out unthinkingly. I honestly thought it was some sick joke. But she didn't so much as smile, the wrinkles on her forehead only growing deeper.

*"The Alliance is losing ground. Our large-scale counterattack has ended fruitlessly. We only managed to marginally push the front line back, ground we are already starting to lose. Voices of dissent are starting to grow within the Alliance. If we don't do something about the Demon King, humanity has no future."*

I knew that. I knew that painfully well. But still...

*"Even if they somehow succeeded, there's no way the assault team would make it back alive,"* I pointed out.

Miralda responded with silence.

*"So it's a suicide mission?"*

Her hands clenched on the desk in front of her. *"If I were twenty years younger...even fifteen years younger, I would join the operation myself. But as old as I am now, I would not survive the high altitude journey. I would only slow you down."*

Back in her days as an instructor, it had been said she could kill a devil with just a glare, but all that remained was bitterness on her aged face.

*"So you want me to go."*

*"We cannot afford even the slightest chance of word getting out about this. Those participating cannot even be allowed to say goodbye to their families."*

*"So that's it. You're leaving it to people with no one to say goodbye to."*

Miralda bit her lip, silently nodding.

*"All right. I'm in,"* I said casually, as if I had been invited on a morning stroll. At the rate I was fighting, my demise would come eventually on the front lines somewhere. I'd rather risk everything if it meant making a real difference. This suicide mission seemed like a meaningful death. *"Oh, unless you're expecting me to go alone."*

*"We already have a number of others on board."*

*"Glad to hear it. I bet there are a bunch of people who would gladly line up to give the Demon King a good smack, even if it costs us our lives."*

*"I'm sorry."*

*"Come on, don't give me that look!" I said. "Just look forward to hearing about how we socked him right in the face!"*

*"I'm sorry, Alex..."*

*"Your reputation as a vicious old lady is crumbling here. It's too early for my funeral!"* I patted Miralda on the back as her shoulders started to shake. She had really grown quite small, huh?

*"So, why did the white dragons decide to rebel anyway?"* In an attempt to change the topic, I asked the first question that came to mind.

*"According to their leader, Faravgi of the Dawn,"* Miralda answered with a sniffle, *"they're looking for revenge."*

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Although I blacked out for a moment, the burning sensation all over my body quickly brought me back to reality.

I didn't scream and I didn't groan, but it sure did hurt like hell. The enemy hadn't finished me off so it wasn't the time to start acting reckless. If I gave them any reason to take notice of me, they could change their mind.

While on the ground, I tried cracking my eyes open to assess the situation. The three who had been trying to shield me, Veene, Sophia, and Virossa, were sprawled on the ground, burnt to a smoky crisp while clinging to their lives. Sophia hadn't exploded yet, so that was easy enough to figure out. Plus Veene's faint wheezing indicated she had some life left in her. White dragons were the natural enemy of night elves. It wasn't enough that their breath was effectively unavoidable, but it was twice as damaging being a beam of light magic. Sophia might be able to endure it, but Veene had a few minutes at most. As for Virossa...he was entirely silent, unnervingly motionless, still in his human form.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Quite a fitting look for you denizens of the dark! You burn so well!” Opposite us, the silver-white dragon gloated. I could very much sympathize with its desire to sneer at seeing us denizens of the dark so thoroughly obliterated.

*Ante, what’s the situation like to my rear?*

*“Not as bad as the three before you. Just burns, some minor, some more severe. However...”*

I could hear the sound of something like hooves tip-tapping toward me, accompanied by a series of barks and whines. I was soon beset with licking, the pain quickly fleeing from my body.

*“This one is still fine.”*

Glancing up at her, I saw Liliana’s teary-eyed face staring down at me. She was completely unscathed. It made sense considering she was a high elf, blessed by the gods of light. To her, the breath attack had probably felt like nothing more than a hot shower.

“My! A high elf?!” The white dragon took quick notice of her. “My name is Faravgi! Leader of the white dragons! Or, at least, I used to be.” Heavy footsteps resounded as the dragon approached. “What a resplendent light! You must be a high elf of great power! Surely you can wield purifying miracles?! Could you restore my wings?!”

Through half-closed eyes, I took a closer look at the dragon calling himself Faravgi. Sure enough, his wings were withered and broken.

“Those cursed dark dragons placed a withering curse on them! After so long, I have managed to restore them, albeit just slightly...but I never have enough magic! But for a high elf, maybe...!”

Liliana whined, scurrying back in fear. Noticing something was wrong, Faravgi came to a stop.

“You...you are under some form of control?” A low rumbling filled the air, akin to a rolling millstone, but it was no millstone. It was Faravgi’s laughter.

“How...convenient. Allow me to take the reins of that control! Come, look deep into my eyes!” Sounding like a parent soothing their child, Faravgi sidled closer.



“I offer you the comfort of an eternal dream. Come, be mine!”

*Charm magic.* Suspicious, rainbow-colored light washed over Liliana—

*“Bark!”*

—and was immediately deflected away from her. It didn’t matter if she thought she was a dog, at the end of the day she was still a high elf. Her magic resistance was off the charts. It was nearly impossible to influence her unless she opened her heart to it already, like she had done with me.

“Impertinent fool! You dare defy me, even after losing your sense of self?! Succumb, high elf! Submit to me!” Faravgi’s voice roared like thunder as he approached, attempting to overpower her.

But at that moment, Virossa leaped up from the ground with his trusty sword in hand.

*“Me Ta Fesui!”*

I swiftly used my magic while extending my hand, taking his wounds.

*Gah! Right after I got rid of this pain, here it comes again!* Virossa had a shocked look on his face as he glanced at me, but he wasted no time wielding his now healthy body to strike at the dragon’s neck.

The dragon howled as the sword slashed through his scales, drawing a red line across his neck. Faravgi retreated with unbelievable speed. *Damn, one attack isn’t going to cut it!*



Liliana once again hopped toward me, licking at my face. *Believe me, I'd love to heal up and get outta here, but...*

*"You plan on fighting this lizard?"* Ante asked.

*Getting him to join me is nearly impossible, right? Even if I abandon all my subordinates here, the hunters and Prati's guards sent to escort me are lurking outside. Very likely I could die before managing to silence all of them. There's just not enough time to even attempt to try talking down this dragon, and that's not accounting for if that would even be possible. And besides, even if I could convince him to join my side...*

I looked around me, to Garunya and the others sprawled across the ground.

It was too great a risk. A white dragon would be too hard to use. Unfortunately, meeting here, like this, was bad luck for the both of us.

*Dammit! I need to get moving! How the heck did Virossa manage to move with those injuries?! The front of my body was mostly ash and it took Liliana's magic a minute to kick in!*

Meanwhile, Virossa was artfully dodging Faravgi's claws, countering with biting slashes at the dragon's arms. But...

*"You insult me, worm!"* Faravgi roared, his eyes flashing with unnatural light. *"Halt!"*

The blinding light froze Virossa in his tracks.

*Ah, crap.*

Without even taking a moment to catch his breath, Faravgi cracked his tail forward like a whip, sending Virossa flying with a wet smack. He struck the stone wall behind him, splattering it with red blood.

*"M-My...apolo..."* Leaving a bloody streak behind as he fell, Virossa collapsed to the ground, his form shimmering back to that of a night elf.

*"What?! **Anthromorphy**?! And an elf, using a sword?!"*

For a moment, shock overpowered Faravgi's anger. Which was an appropriate reaction.

*All right, I can finally move my legs. Time to get going—*

“You shall regret interfering, boy!” Faravgi’s golden eyes flashed again with rage as his attention turned to me. *Okay, I probably should’ve expected that too.*

“Your Highness! Are you okay?!”

“What the hell is that?! A dragon?!”

“Guard the prince!”

Voices called out from behind me. The hunters that had been on guard rushed into the fortress. A volley of poisoned knives and arrows whistled through the air, accompanied by dark curses and fire magic, but they danced harmlessly off Faravgi’s glittering scales.

In response, he spat a beam of light that swept over the hunters. Briefly, there was some screaming, soon replaced by the sounds of burning and faint groans.

“Your Highness, is it?” Faravgi shifted his gaze back to me, his eyes filled with disgust.

“Nice to meet you, I suppose,” I replied, returning his gaze as I rose to my feet. “Faravgi, was it? Boss of the white dragons? I’m kinda busy, so if you have any business with me, keep it brief.”

“They called you ‘Highness.’ Who are you?” Faravgi asked again, slowly, carefully.

*“My name is Zilbagias. Son of the Demon King, Seventh Demon Prince Zilbagias!”* I declared, **Naming** myself as I readied my spear.

The dragon roared with laughter. “Perfect! Exceptional! To think the son of that wretched Demon King would appear before me!” A dangerous light emanated from the dragon’s golden eyes.

“Faravgi, why are you so angry? What did the Demon King ever do to you?”

“Like you don’t know!” the dragon roared again, a little less amused this time. “He joined hands with the dark dragons! Kidnapped my daughter, murdered my wife!” Blood spurted from his open wounds as he raged. “He oppressed my



people! Going so far as to torture our young! Do you expect me to just swallow that grudge?!" His anger was almost enough to burn me, no breath needed.

*So the source of his anger was having his family taken away, huh? "I understand how you feel. Painfully so."*

"Like hell you do! A prince, raised in the lap of luxury?! Pity from a worm like you is no more than an insult!" Faravgi crept closer, every muscle in his body rippling. "You! Son of the Demon King! I'll tear you apart, piece by piece! I will make that high elf mine, heal these wings, and scatter your remains across his castle!"

"Oh, you're heading to the castle?"

"Of course! My rage will know no rest until that castle burns, until I've torn the dark dragons' heads from their bodies!"

"Ah. Apologies in advance, then." I lifted my spear. "My life isn't so cheap that I can throw it away to sate such a petty revenge."

*You want to burn down the castle? What a waste of time. It will take more than that to take down the Demon King. Even though I understand how you feel, I can't help you. That's not enough. Not enough to make me your ally!*

"Arrogant until the end, are you? Suffer and die!" Faravgi's claws flashed forward like gigantic knives reaching toward me. Using his breath would have been more efficient, but it seemed he was serious about tearing me apart. Though if I tried to flee and gave him a hard time, I didn't doubt he would use his breath on me.

Leader of the white dragons, Faravgi of the Dawn. In a way, he was responsible for everything that had happened to me. If he hadn't come to us with the plan to attack the Demon King's castle, I wouldn't be here today. And with both of us fueled by our desire for revenge, it seemed fate had brought us here to collide.

*This really sucks. This whole mess is the fault of the Demon King's army, isn't it?*

"But if you're going to get in my way..."

*...then I won't hold back. Ante, all that power you've been storing for me, I'm going to need every last drop.*

*"Very well."*

Something snapped inside me. From the depths of my body—not physically, but somewhere deep in my soul—a geyser of power exploded. The power born and fueled by the taboo of a hero killing dozens of innocent humans.

I infused all that power into my spear, driving it into Faravgi's arm as he swung at me. The dragon's scales, cloaked with silver-white light magic, shot out sparks as my obsidian knife, overflowing with dark magic, made contact. The two attacks struggled against each other...and in the end, the dragon's scales broke.

*"What?!"*

A small demon boy had gone toe to toe with a dragon dozens of times larger than him and matched the dragon in pure strength, enough to break through his scales. Faravgi leaped backward, taken aback by the unexpected development. Rather than a lizard's, his movements were akin to a large cat's, quick and agile. Even without the ability of flight, dragons still possessed incredible strength.

But I was no slouch either. Man...I felt like I had the power to do anything. It was intoxicating. It was like I could rewrite the world around me just by sheer force of will. But at the same time, I could sense the beginnings of dismay.

*There is no going back now. Since Ante has given me this power, she can't retake it. The laws of nature are now merely suggestions to me. Regardless of my intention, they would bend and break to my desires. I will forever be scorned by the laws of nature. Becoming a Swordmaster is now an unreachable dream. Meeting Virossa had rekindled my admiration for Swordmasters, a feeling I hadn't felt in many years. But that's in the past now, nothing I can do about it. I'm never going to be a Swordmaster. I'm a hero.*

"You...what is that power?!" Faravgi rasped, slowly pacing around me. To him, it must have looked like I had suddenly transformed into a giant.

"I'm a demon," I replied with a laugh. It sounded almost sarcastic to my ears.

“A devil’s heresy...?!” A new light came to Faravgi’s eyes. Envy? That would be understandable. Everyone desires strength, right? If the dragons were allowed to pass through the Dark Portal and make contracts with devils...I couldn’t begin to imagine such a terrifying thought.

“If you want to run away, now’s your last chance. No need for us to waste our energy,” I said, though I knew my warning would have the exact opposite effect I hoped for.

“Shut it, you demon brat!” Faravgi raged, light welling up in the depths of his throat. *Hey, what happened to tearing me to pieces? You look like a kettle that’s about to explode.*

The dragon roared, his searing breath on the cusp of bursting forth.

But.

“*My name is Zilbagias.*” I felt the power inside me surging, growing even greater. “*In the name of Demon Prince Zilbagias...*” Even though it was going to catch everyone in the vicinity, they needed to endure it for just a minute. “*Breathing is Taboo.*”

Success.

Faravgi sputtered, his eyes going wide. The burning white light in his throat turned to smoke. I couldn’t breathe now either, but I had taken a deep breath beforehand. As Faravgi’s eyes flashed in panic, I drove my spear into the wound Virossa’s sword had opened earlier. My target was his heart. *I need to get this over with so I can heal my subordinates, those damned denizens of the dark!*

Faravgi roared in pain, swinging his arm toward me, his claws whistling through the air. They got frighteningly close to me, but I managed to throw myself out of the way in time. Despite this, the attack had stripped me of my defensive magic. And my attack had been too shallow! It wasn’t deep enough to be fatal.

“You underestimate me”—a leathery snap filled the air—“brat!”

Light once again welled up deep in Faravgi’s throat. He had shaken off the curse with brute force. With another roar, burning white light flashed toward me.

I could feel my spear shifting in my hands. *Ah, this brings back some memories. When I was a kid, I heard a fairytale about a hero fighting an evil dragon. I think the village chief had a picture book of it in his house. When the dragon breathed at the hero, he...*

The torrent of white light shook the fortress.

The sheer heat from the beam caused the stone tiles to split and crack, the wall taking on a red-hot glow.

“Aha ha ha ha ha!” Faravgi laughed, noticing the curse binding him had entirely vanished. Before him was nothing but smoke and cinders. “I fully intended to rip you apart, but I suppose I will just have to...?!”

“Settle for your ashes,” I’m sure he intended to say, before a whirlwind of magic cleared the smoke from the air.

“Quite an awful rendition of the story. A light dragon and a demon of the dark? The roles are completely backwards.” I slowly stood from my huddled stance, standing on top of a blackened stone tile. My left hand was wrapped in a thick layer of dark magic...and carried a bone shield.

*“Being red-hot is forbidden.”*

In moments, the air around us cooled. Even the heat in Faravgi’s mouth vanished, apparently along with Faravgi’s fighting spirit.

“This is awful, don’t you think?” I gave a daring smile, shield in my left hand and obsidian dagger in my right, having just survived his breath attack head-on.

A dragon’s breath is their trump card. To have it handily dealt with had taken Faravgi completely by surprise. His original rage had cooled, the dragon now watching me with a careful, guarded expression.

“Infuriating,” the dragon spat. “I was saving this power for the dark dragons...!”

His eyes took on an ominous, rainbow glow. *Hey now, I don’t have a clue what you have in store, but I’m not just going to sit here and watch!* Raising my shield, I prepared to rush forward and drive my knife deeper into his open

wound, but the glow in Faravgi's eyes had already spread to envelop his entire body.

*"Paradeisos Cosmos! Egokenturi Imperifas!"*

I am the incarnation of light! Burn this sight into your eyes!

His silver scales shone, as bright as the sun in the middle of summer. Faravgi's roar filled the air together with the blinding light. So bright in fact that I was worried it would burn my eyes. *Wait, actually, my skin is feeling pretty hot too. Is his entire body giving off heat rays?! It isn't as strong, but it feels like a breath attack that was shot out in all directions at once! All of this is just absurd!*

Rebuilding my defensive wards, I wrapped myself in dark magic. The pain subsided a little, but if I allowed the battle to drag on, Sophia, the beastfolk, and especially the night elves would be burned to a crisp. *Ah, dammit! Why do I have to worry about denizens of the dark?!*

With another roar, Faravgi surged forward while lashing his tail at me. I jumped backward, avoiding the scaled tail as it whipped past me. While it missed me I tried to slash it with my knife, but it deflected my blade with ease. The shining scales were much tougher than they had been. And actually, upon a closer look, the wound Virossa had inflicted had stopped bleeding and was even starting to close. *Self-reinforcement magic?! This guy was already tough as hell, are you kidding me?!*

*"Shining is Taboo!"*

The curse landed, but quickly snapped and was thrown off. Faravgi continued to rage, spittle flying as he charged. I narrowly dodged his snapping jaws, but was unable to avoid his claws which followed up his initial attack.

I grunted as they made harsh impact against my shield, sending me flying. I quickly rolled back to my feet. *That one attack stripped me of all my defensive magic again! Besides that, my **Taboo** magic isn't doing much of anything!*

*"He has likely **Charmed** himself," Ante explained. "His mind is clearly unstable. As a result, it appears his power has grown substantially, along with his magic*



*resistance.”*

*Well I’m glad you’re still able to keep your cool and be analytical, given the situation!*

The rapid assault of claws, teeth, and tail continued, which I did everything I could to dodge and block even though they repeatedly sent me flying. All I was doing was surviving, but unless I turned things into my favor, I wouldn’t last much longer. I tried using multiple **Taboos**, from forbidding close-range combat to forbidding biting, but none of it worked. *If I don’t do something quick, he may trample over my subordinates, even if unintentionally. Dammit!*

As his claws swooped toward me again, I drove my knife into his hand, but the enhanced dragon scales held fast, my blade giving an ominous ping.

“Uh-oh.”

That was not a good sound. Though it was enchanted with powerful magic and was stronger than any steel, the blade had finally reached its limit. My obsidian knife cracked and broke apart.

Faravgi roared again, attempting to sweep me away with his arm. Blocking it with my shield would’ve been pointless since the impact would mess up my arm, so instead I jumped back. But then came the follow-up. There was just no way I could react in time.

“Don’t...touch...” At that moment, a flash of white jumped in front of me. “...my master!!!” Garunya gave a distinctly feline yowl.

*Wait, Garunya?! She was conscious?!*

Heedless of her own safety, the maid leaped for the dragon’s head, her own claws flashing. The dragon shrieked as Garunya’s claws raked across one of his eyes. His ominously shining eye filled with blood distracted the dragon enough to stop its leg midstrike. Instead, he turned to sweep with his tail.

“Garunya!” The maid gave a sickening gasp as she was thrown back. I barely managed to catch her out of the air. Her fluffy white fur had been burned to a crisp. No, that wasn’t all. Hit head-on by the dragon’s tail, her arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and her rib cage felt wrong. *Her ribs are broken...*

“Master...Zilbagias...please, run. I’ll...hold him...” Even so, she desperately tried to stand, struggling to her knees before passing out. And why? To save someone like me?

With another roar, Faravgi charged again. It seemed like he planned on pulverizing the two of us to dust along with the wall behind us. His bleeding eye was already glowing again. *Damn, he already healed?!*

*He’s just charging blindly, I could maybe barely dodge with Garunya in my arms, but if he knocks down the wall behind us it may bring the whole fortress down.* A glance around the area showed that everyone else was still down, completely motionless. *If the fortress were to fall on them with those injuries, no way they’d survive.*

*“Who cares? Leave them,”* I heard a voice echo inside me. *“What does it matter if some denizens of the dark die?”*

There was some truth in that. But these guys were my subordinates. They were *my* pawns. It wasn’t pity or anything of the sort, but I wasn’t going to abandon them because of one rampaging lizard. They were too valuable to give up now. This wasn’t pity. This was logic!

*Damn. The first time I use this name in this life, why does it have to be to protect denizens of the dark?!*

*“My name is...Alexander!”*

They were all unconscious, and Faravgi had gone insane.

*“Contractor of the Devil God Antendeixis!”*

The only ones who could hear my declaration were Ante, Liliana, and I.

So here was my second layer of **Naming**, a technique unique to me with my two true names—one from this life, and one from my past. Drawing out all the power Ante had stored up for me, I felt myself growing stronger, my body forced to an even greater extreme.

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

*“Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!”*

May your holy light shine in my hands!

The shield in my left hand started to glow, the dark magic surrounding me burning silver-white. I stepped forward to protect Garunya.

As much as the silver glow empowered me, it also scorched my body. No matter what anyone said, I was a hero. But that didn't change the fact that this body belonged to a demon. The pain was like every nerve that ran through my body had caught on fire...and then suddenly began to subside.

*“Bark!”*

At some point Liliana had scurried up to my side, and was now supporting me from behind. Her healing power was dulling the effects the holy magic had on me. I couldn't be more grateful! I glared at Faravgi.

*“Bring it on, you lizard bastard!”*

*I'll take your charge head-on! With Liliana and Garunya behind me, I won't back down, not even an inch!* Belief turns into conviction; conviction turns into resolve!

Faravgi's head struck my shield. The holy magic surrounding me sparked, scorching the white dragon's scales. My feet dug into the stone tiles below me. It felt like the impact would tear me apart, but the dark magic wrapped in its new silver glow fought back just as hard to hold me together.

The ground shook below us...and the dragon stopped. We were now close enough to feel each other's breath, Faravgi's glowing rainbow eyes almost within arm's reach.

“Well done.” At that moment, Ante popped out from inside me. “The kitty proved that the source of this magic is in his eyes.” In one smooth motion, she hopped onto Faravgi's head. “I'm lacking when it comes to physical feats, but even I am capable at this range.”

She reached out her hands...

“And...goodbye!”

And with a singsong voice, she casually gouged out the dragon’s eyes.

The dragon thrashed with a silent scream, his pain enough to strangle the shriek in his throat. Ante was thrown off, slamming hard against the ceiling before dropping to the floor, giving an almost comical grunt each time.

But things worked out perfectly. With his eyes gone, the glow surrounding Faravgi started to weaken.

“N-No...not yet. I can’t...stop...here...!” The dragon keened, blood pouring from his face like tears as he regained his sanity. Once again he was gathering his power, the flames of rage starting to reignite.

*This guy is something else. Indomitable spirit and an unquenchable thirst for revenge. If we were allies, I can only imagine what we could’ve accomplished.*

But I had to end things here.

I needed something, a weapon. Looking around, I found a silver gleam beside Virossa’s fallen body. A sword. I couldn’t have hoped for a deadlier weapon.

Faravgi let loose another roar. *Damn, what are you up to now?!*

Time was of the essence. Even the few seconds needed to pick up the sword wouldn’t be enough...or so I thought, as the shield in my hand transformed, extending itself. As if to make my will into reality, the bone shield transformed into something like a whip. It reached out and wrapped itself around the hilt of the sword before retracting back. It then turned straight and solid, like the haft of a spear. I had a new weapon. Not quite a sword and not quite a spear, but something in-between.

I felt something pushing me forward, as if telling me I could somehow make this weapon work. The combination of that blade and the bones of the soldiers felt so natural in my hand. The swordsmanship I had practiced in my past life and the spearmanship that had been drilled into me in this one came together as one.

*“Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!”*

May your holy light shine in my hands!

The blade flashed silver. The force of my charge and the force of my swing worked in concert to drive the edge into Faravgi's neck. Surprisingly, there was little resistance. The silver light drew a large arc in the dimly lit fortress.

The dragon froze. And then, slowly, his head fell from his neck, striking the ground with a thud. Golden eyes, virtually fully healed, stared up at me with a vicious hatred, but even the faint light of consciousness still in them rapidly faded.

The now headless dragon's body collapsed to the ground, shaking the floor beneath me.

The dragon of light, fueled by hatred and a thirst for revenge, was slain by the demon hero.

+++

"Gaaaaaah!"

The pain was killing me, literally. Virossa was lying in front of me and his body was a complete mess. He had broken bones protruding from his skin in many places, but thanks to **Transposition**, he was slowly returning to normal.

You know what that means, right? All those brutal, life-threatening injuries were now mine to bear. The pain was so overwhelming I could barely even scream anymore; the best I could muster was spitting up some blood. My whole upper body was in agony, like it was being ground away by a giant file, but my lower body was unnervingly insensate. *Dammit Virossa, your spine was broken too?!*

Liliana moaned pitifully as she licked my face, providing me with her healing power. I could practically hear her saying, "I just healed you a second ago! Why are you so hurt again?!" *Forgive me, Liliana. It's not like I want to worry you...but we still need to heal like ten more people after this. So please, keep it up.*

Little by little, I healed all of my subordinates. Veene, charred from head to



toe, already had a foot through death's door. If I had been even just a second slower, she almost certainly would have died. Instead, now I was at death's door! Even though her maid uniform was in tatters, she was back to normal, all things considered. So she was quietly sleeping on the ground nearby. Apparently she hadn't regained consciousness yet. She might have been a disgusting night elf, but that didn't change the fact she had used her own body as a shield to protect me from the dragon's light breath attack. If she died protecting me, it would haunt me for a while.

*"I was expecting your attitude to be a bit more like 'what a fool for wasting her life to save mine! Enjoy watching my betrayal from hell! Bwa ha ha ha!'"*

*Ante, if you have time to keep yapping to me, how about you lend a hand? Get the wounded organized, or help explain what's going on to everyone who's woken up.*

*"I believe my previous actions are sufficient. Instead, I shall rest inside your soul and keep an eye on your pitiful enterprise here. Ah, perhaps I can cheer you on?"*

Ante then popped out beside me, at least as an illusion, knelt down on the ground and started chanting, "You can do it!" Honestly, I wished she would cool it when it came to her quirks.

But speaking of devils, Sophia was still charred and motionless. Devils weren't really living things in the same way we were, so I couldn't use **Transposition** on her. *What are we supposed to do?*

*"Ah, her wounds have likely driven her into dormancy. In the material realm, our souls and our bodies are effectively the same thing."*

According to Ante, physical injuries like losing a limb were extremely easy for devils to heal, but wounds caused by magic required entering a dormant state to focus on recovery.

*"Surely you have fought many a devil in your time as a hero. Were you not aware of this?"*

*Well, whenever we beat a demon, we killed it on the spot.*

*"Ah. I suppose you lacked the luxury of leaving them unconscious."*

As we were talking...

“Your Highness! Lord Zilbagias!”

“Is the boy okay?!”

“What the hell?! Is that a dragon?!”

...panicked footsteps rushed into the fortress. I looked up to see a group of demon soldiers standing awestruck in the all-but-collapsed entranceway. The five of them were adorned in plain leather armor, carrying portable magic spears, and their faces were covered in black warpaint. Their faces drenched in sweat and ragged breathing were indicators that they had sprinted the whole way here.

“That is Lord Zilbagias...right?”

“What is this magic...?”

“He feels like a completely different person...”

They began to whisper among themselves. *I guess these are the people Prati sent to kinda act as both observers and bodyguards to protect me.*

“You guys are late. The fight ended a while ago.” Thanks to Liliana’s healing licks, I was able to sit up and motion to the dragon corpse. “Just so we’re on the same page, you guys are the ones Prati sent to observe me, right?” I specifically avoided saying “to protect me.” For their sakes.

“Y-Yes, that is correct.” The man who looked to be the oldest among them, about forty in appearance by human standards, scowled as he straightened up. As they looked over Faravgi’s body, they began to sweat for an entirely different reason.

They had been too slow to protect the person they had been ordered to oversee, and while they were dallying, he had been attacked by a dragon. By the time they arrived, the dragon was already dead. The amount of stress and anxiety they were dealing with was unimaginable.

“My subordinates are heavily wounded and require treatment. Help me line them up.”

“Yes sir.” The Rage family warriors immediately jumped into action at my

command, as if desperate to avoid any further disgrace.

“Gaaaaaaah!”

“Wait, you are taking their wounds yourself, Your Highness?!” As I received the wounds of one of the roasted night elf hunters, one of the younger Rage family soldiers began to protest.

“That’s right. By enduring them myself and with the saint’s healing miracle, there’s no need to use any slaves. Convenient, no?”

“But...why go to such lengths for the lesser races?” As if to ask: why would a prince put his own body on the line for people so far beneath him?

“It’s up to me how I treat my subordinates. And besides, everyone here risked their lives to protect me.”

“Ah...ah! My apologies. I spoke out of turn.” The soldier’s face paled as he shut his mouth, but not in time to avoid the fists of the other bodyguards, evidenced by his cries of pain as they descended on him from outside my field of view.

“So...what exactly have you guys been doing?” I asked.

“Well...um...” The oldest soldier made a bitter expression once again as he explained. According to him, the instructions Prati had given them were as follows:

First, keep enough distance to avoid putting pressure on the prince.

Second, keep a careful eye out to ensure none of the other heirs’ factions intervene.

Lastly, do not show yourself except in the direst of emergencies.

It seemed Prati had wanted to ensure I had as much freedom as possible during the mission.

The problem was that when it came to stealth, the capabilities of demons were far below that of night elves. That meant they needed to stay a considerable distance away. It did seem she had picked soldiers specifically with

keen eyes and strong talents for detection magic. So in order to avoid being seen by me, they had spread out around the fortress, keeping guard so that no one interfered with our excursion. But when they saw beams of scorching light erupting from the supposedly goblin-filled fortress, they immediately panicked and rushed to us.

If they had at least made it in time to participate in the fight they could have saved some face, but unfortunately I killed Faravgi before their arrival. Though, if I had been a normal demon, I probably would've died long before they arrived.

The Rage soldiers wore their shame silently. In demonic culture, after screwing up, spouting excuses was much more disgraceful than keeping quiet. It was difficult to gauge how much leniency Prati would be willing to show them. But given I knew how scary she could get when angry, I could really sympathize with their plight.

Around the time I finished treating everyone, Virossa came to.

"Your Highness?!" He immediately bolted into action and started searching the ground around him, seemingly for a weapon.

"If you're looking for this, sorry, I had to borrow it for a bit."

Virossa looked back at me in shock as I returned his incredible sword to him, back safe and sound in its sheath. His eyes then darted around the room as the reality of the situation set in. The intensity of the shame that clouded his face was about five times than that of the Rage soldiers.

"My sincerest apologies. I have no excuse for my utter failure in this incident..."

*Yeah, pretty much what I expected him to say.*

"Virossa, what do you think went wrong here?"

"We failed to properly evaluate the threat, Your Highness. With our observations we concluded it was due to the presence of a human mage, and in our conceit we failed to consider the other possibilities. The blame rests solely

on me.” Virossa ground his teeth. “For others, perhaps it would be an understandable mistake. But for me, who is proficient with **Anthromorphy**...”

*I guess he isn't entirely wrong. He did remark how it was odd for there to be a human in this area, but for that to be a dragon disguised as a human? That would be the last thing anyone could have predicted.*

“Yeah, maybe that’s true. So, aside from assessing the situation better, what could you have done to avoid this?”

“We should have investigated inside the fortress. If we had seen the mage for ourselves—”

“Exactly. And who was it that ordered you to only scout the outside of the fortress?” As I sighed, I could see Virossa flinch. “Maybe you didn’t perform as well as you should have. But really, the fault here falls on me for not utilizing you as effectively as possible.”

Virossa was silent.

“So if you want to apologize and keep bowing your head, I’ll just bow even lower.”

“But Your Highness—”

“That was a mistake I do not intend to repeat.” I pushed the sword into his hands with a grin. “Next time, if my orders aren’t up to par, speak up. It doesn’t matter how minor they are. Idiots repeat their mistakes over and over, and I do not intend to be that kind of idiot. I’ll be relying on your sword a lot from now on.”

After a long pause, Virossa finally responded. “Yes, Your Highness. I will give you my all.” Bowing deeply, he finally took the sword from me.

Whispers started behind me of “Wait, are you sure he’s five? Maybe he’s actually fifteen,” and “Even that’s too young,” but I ignored them. *Maybe it would be a good idea to start lying about my age.*

“Anyway Virossa, your sword is incredible.” Relaxing a bit, I pointed to Faravgi’s severed head. “If it was just some second-rate blade, no way I could’ve finished him off.”



“It looks like a phenomenal wound, Your Highness. Truly...”

“I wish I could teach you swordsmanship,” he failed to finish, glancing at the Rage soldiers behind us. *Yeah, I’d love to practice swordsmanship again too. But being able to see a sword and spear combo was kinda cool. I may be able to pass it off as “just a strange kind of spear” to other demons. Besides, the knife I used as a spearhead broke, so I need a new weapon anyway.*

“Something’s coming!” one of the Rage family soldiers suddenly shouted, turning to look outside the fortress. “It has stronger magic than the prince! From the sky!”

Tension in the fortress spiked. *Someone stronger than me, even as I am now? From the sky? The only explanation is a dragon.*

“Engage them outside! The fortress is too unstable. Anyone who can move, outside, now!”

With the Rage soldiers at the lead, we ventured out, where we could hear the heavy sound of wingbeats above us. As expected, we saw three dragons in the air descending toward us.

Everyone took battle-ready stances, Virossa shifting back into human form and drawing his sword. Bloodlust painted his face, a determination to succeed now where he had failed before. The Rage soldiers did a double take at his transformation.

“Wait, someone is riding them.”

“Dragon knights?”

“The magic I’m sensing is coming from one of the riders, not the dragons themselves!”

The dragons landed just outside the fortress, each with red or green scales and equipped with saddles. *Dragon knights.*

The demon warrior in the lead descended gracefully from his mount, a warrior with vibrant green hair and a sharp, malicious look to his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out.

It was the fourth demon prince, Emergias.

“I believe that’s my line. What is my little brother doing here of all places? Lost?” Emergias scowled at my question, as if it was totally unexpected. Though he couched it in sarcasm, the confusion in his voice was real.

Two other warriors dismounted from the dragons behind him. Though not quite as brightly colored as his, the man and woman also had green hair. They wore high-grade enchanted chain mail and carried large, savage-looking spears. *They are probably warriors from his family.*

“Young master, who are these people?” one of them asked.

“The bratty-looking guy in the center is the seventh demon prince, Zilbagias. Five years old, if you were curious.”

“He’s Zilbagias...?”

The woman, who seemed to very much be the older sister type, turned to me with a guarded gaze. “Five...?” the man beside her murmured in confusion. His expression was mirrored on the faces of everyone around me, even the beastfolk village chief digging at his ears as if he couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

As we exchanged careful gazes, an unpleasant silence filled the air. Emergias almost broke the silence, but he was clearly struggling to stomach the idea of advancing the conversation himself, and so he stayed quiet.

*So, how is this going to play out? A fight?* But since I also refused to speak, he eventually gave an exasperated sigh.

“I have an extermination mission in this fortress.”

“An extermination?”

“Yep. A beastfolk village in this area apparently requested emergency aid.” He pulled a document out from his chest pocket. “According to the report, there were concerns about goblins taking up residence here, and a group of ten beastfolk who went to dispose of them disappeared. There was a high possibility of a mid-level fiend hiding within. It sounded like a pretty rote mission...” He paused, glancing at the fortress behind me. “But on our way here, we couldn’t help but notice numerous strange beams of light emerging from the fortress. And now that we’ve arrived, here you are. As we are in the

middle of an official mission, you are obligated to give me your report, Esquire Zilbagias.”

Emergias’s two attendants snorted a laugh at that. *Well, I am at the lowest rank in the demonic kingdom, right? I guess he is my “superior” in this instance.*

“I am here under similar circumstances, sent on an exercise to this fortress.”

So my only option was to answer honestly. I was also here to exterminate goblins. *Did they double up on the assignment?* “We were told there was a risk of goblins taking up residence in a ruined fortress outside Kakou Village...but our orders didn’t mention anything about potential fiends, uh...” I hesitated. “What was your rank again?”

“Count!” Emergias snapped back. From the top, the ranks were Demon King, archduke, duke, marquis, and then count, so he was pretty far behind when it came to succession. *He probably took on a “rote” mission like this to rack up accomplishments.*

“Well, whatever. We’re brothers, so there’s no need for formalities, right?” I said with a smile.

Emergias clicked his tongue in displeasure before suddenly looking up to the sky with contempt. “Those useless hobgoblins! Those idiots mixed us up.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I accepted this mission three days ago. But when I went to the place in the report, it was just some run-down old ruins, housing ten goblins and a female human slave they had stolen.”

I could feel a chill run through me.

“Of course there was no sign of a fiend or anything. Even the villagers nearby said none of them had gone missing.” Emergias smacked the report in his hands with frustration. “So when I reported to the castle, I learned I had been sent to the wrong place! Those damn officials mixed up the village names since the missions are so similar!”

“That means I was actually supposed to go to that one...” *So, I was actually supposed to save a stolen slave from goblins at some small ruin.*

“That’s right. And my actual objective was this fortress here.” Emergias gave an exaggerated sigh.

“Out of curiosity, what happened to the human slave?”

“Huh? We killed her, of course. Not like she was going to be useful to us anymore.”

“I see.” It was hard to describe exactly how I felt. Regret seemed like the closest word, but there was this heat. Why did it feel like it was boiling just beneath the surface?

“Did you enter the fortress? What were those beams of light about?” he asked.

“Besides the goblins, there was the leader of the white dragons, calling himself Faravgi. It seems he participated in the assault on the castle years ago and survived, albeit wounded. So I killed him. That is all.”

“The leader of the white dragons?” The two other dragon knights’ eyes went wide. Even the dragons waiting behind them started sharing startled looks.

“You? You’re saying *you* killed him?”

“Yes. It appears you were a little too late.”

With a small twitch in his eyes, Emergias pushed past us and into the fortress, hurriedly followed by his subordinates.

“I’m speechless.” Virossa gave a small sigh, returning his sword to its sheath. “It seems a clerical error is the cause for our great hardship.”

“You said it. Let’s head back inside. It’d be best to keep an eye on my brother.” *Materials of incredible value can be harvested from Faravgi’s body; no way I’m letting him tamper with it. Plus, there’s the issue of the injured who are still unconscious.*

“Hey, if I drink Faravgi’s blood, will I be able to use **Anthromorphy**?” I whispered to Virossa as we walked.

“No. While drinking blood is part of the ritual, it requires the dragon’s intent to pass the magic on to you. Drinking blood from a corpse is pointless,” Virossa responded, a bit taken aback by the question. “But, Your Highness...are you

interested in learning it?”

“Well, it’d be best to use every opportunity I can to acquire magic, right? If I ever need to hide myself, who knows, it may come in handy one day.”

“I imagine you would still possess considerable magical power even in human form...much like Faravgi did.”

*Ah. So even with my power weakened in that form, I’d be conspicuous for being “pretty strong for a human,” just like Faravgi. Sounds like I’d need to learn how to properly disperse my magic like Virossa, or find some other magic to conceal myself.*

“Dammit!” We stepped inside just in time to hear Emergias curse. As if the sight itself infuriated him, the green toilet stain was on the verge of delivering a kick to Faravgi’s severed head.

“I’m going to have to ask you to refrain from kicking my prey,” I said with a calmness that surprised even myself. *What the hell is this guy doing?*

“This should have been *my* prey!” Emergias turned a furious glare on me.

“As I said before, I’m afraid you were a bit late.”

“Dammit!” Spitting on the dragon’s corpse, Emergias turned and walked away. “Damn you and your good luck!”

With a hateful glower as he walked past me, he took his subordinates outside, where they then mounted their dragons and flew off. *Not like I’m any happier. I couldn’t care less about whatever accolades I get for killing a white dragon. I wish I could’ve saved that human slave instead.*

In no time at all, the dragons carrying the other, unhappy prince vanished into the night.

## Chapter 2: Reviled Child of the Dragon

Hello again, it's me, Zilbagias, being rocked back and forth in this carriage on our way back to the castle. To be fair, due to the modified skeletons built into the carriage, there wasn't much rocking going on.

It had been about a full day since the battle with Faravgi. Out of an abundance of caution, we took a day to rest before leaving the cat beastfolk village.

*"Anyways, it looks like your instincts were spot-on all along,"* I told the village chief as we were departing, prompting him to drop face-first to the ground.

*"Ahhh! My deepest apologies!"*

*"Uh...what for?"*

*"If I had been brave enough to enter the fortress the first time, everything wouldn't have gotten worse!"*

*"If you did, you would've just been lizard food,"* I said with a shrug. As a veteran who had weathered numerous battlefields, his instincts were the real deal. They were quite admirable qualities.

By the way, the ten missing men were discovered on the second floor of the fortress, their bodies dried out like mummified husks. And here I thought stealing life force from people was the specialty of the denizens of the dark.

*"Most likely, he charmed them and forced them to give up their lives willingly."*

Was I the only one who thought that sounded somehow worse than just stealing it the old-fashioned way?

Losing ten strong, able-bodied men would be a brutal blow to the village, but with the nearby threat neutralized, hopefully they'd be able to work things out.

"For something that was supposed to be a light exercise, it ended up being quite intense, didn't it?" Sophia, lying down on the seat across from me, sighed



into her book. On one side I had Liliana, snoozing away, and on the other Garunya, enjoying some petting. Just like always.

Sophia had regained consciousness shortly before we left, going from a “charred black devil” to a “slightly overcooked devil.” When she woke up, the first thing she asked was who I was. It seemed my magic had grown so much that I was hardly recognizable to her anymore.

According to Ante, devils perceived things based on magical presence. After she figured out who I was, it was almost like I could hear her internal monologue blaming “that devil god” for the change. But once she heard this whole incident had been caused by the hobgoblins’ error, she quickly switched gears, flying into a rage.

*“I’m going to tear that brain-rotted hobgoblin limb from limb!”* It was the first time I’d ever seen Sophia that pissed off.

As for the remains of the second most responsible person for this incident, Faravgi himself, the night elves handily processed the body for me. The parts harvested had been divided up equally between all of our carriages. His head had been frozen with magic so the other dragons could confirm his identity. Besides that, his scales, claws, teeth, and horns were of particular value. The teeth, claws, and horns could be made into weapons, but since they’d be infused with light magic, they would be best used against denizens of the dark, making them practically useless for any demons.

Well, except for me, of course.

On the other hand, the scales could be fashioned into armor that boasted incredible magic resistance. Such items were hot commodities for those in constant conflict with the heroes and forest elves of the Alliance.

After all that was settled, we had just the meat left, which we cooked and ate. Well, mostly the villagers ate it. The ferocity in each bite they took was like they were getting revenge for each of the ten men they had lost.

I was pretty hesitant to give it a try. For starters, I had never eaten dragon meat before. But even more than that, he was someone I had spoken to and who had strong ties to my past life. Since I had killed him myself, it was hard to think about...but surprisingly, he was quite delicious. The meat was juicy, and

the remnants of light magic in his flesh popped in my mouth. I imagined with some more time to properly cure, it would probably taste even better. There was a bunch of meat left, way too much for us to even think about finishing off, so the leftovers were given to the beastfolk to cure and make dried meats from.

The only ones who didn't get to enjoy the feast were the night elves, since his light magic would have burned them at the touch.

"The first thing we should do once we're back at the castle is have the dwarves go to work on these scales. They are scales from the leader of the white dragons after all, they should be of the highest quality. Armor made from them would certainly be brilliant. We should have more than enough..." As if to cover for her injured state, Sophia continued to prattle on optimistically.

*So there are dwarves in the demonic kingdom too, huh?* It was more common for them to side with the Panhuman Alliance. Unlike the forest elves, who were united under a single cause, the dwarves were much more individualistic in a sense, for better or worse. Of course, there were nomadic smiths who made magical artifacts, plus there were some small tribes that remained hidden throughout the world. Some were captured on the battlefield and used for their blacksmithing skills until the day they died. The only materials those savage demons could use to make stuff was bones, stone, and leather.

"I guess I need to look for a new weapon too," I said, stroking the bones hanging from my belt. I felt bad for those forced to work against their will, but I could expect dwarves to make weapons of the best quality.

By the way, when I told Virossa about merging the sword and spear together, he had been quite amazed.

*"That is tremendous! Only Your Highness could have come up with such a novel idea!"*

He got quite excited over it. I attached his sword to the shaft of my spear again so he could try it out, but he didn't get the best results.

*"Using this is quite...difficult. I feel like I'm at the whims of the blade's weight. While the extended reach is appealing, I can cover this distance with a normal sword without issue,"* he said, casually declaring something quite terrifying.

Even with the strength of all the magic I had drawn out in the last fight, I still couldn't imagine myself ever beating him in a contest of skill.

Anyway, whining about it was pointless. On the way back, whenever we had some free time, I would practice with Virossa to help blaze a new trail with this spearspear I had invented.

"What's wrong, Garunya?"

Speaking of practice, there was also the situation with Garunya. She had seemed down ever since the fight with Faravgi. Whenever we rested, she would train with a hint of desperation. Even while I was petting her, she seemed somehow distracted.

"I was almost entirely useless. I couldn't even be a good shield..." she said, ears drooping.

"That's not true at all. You clawing at Faravgi's eyes made a big difference."

Faravgi's claws had stripped away all my defensive wards, so if I had charged at him like she did, my life would've ended then and there. But no matter how many times I tried to explain that to her, she wasn't hearing it. Considering she was lacking in the magic department, being a beastfolk and all, it only made sense she was helpless when going up against a boss-class dragon like Faravgi. She understood that, but that wasn't enough to quell her frustration. Back when I was a human, I had greatly envied the powerful magic used by demons and elves, so I knew exactly how she felt. Unfortunately, I wasn't in a position to share those feelings with her.

"Mr. Virossa said it took him fifty years to become a Swordmaster, right?" Garunya mumbled, looking down at her own extended claws. "Even if I trained my hardest...if it takes that long, I'd be an old lady before I even reach that level."

Beastfolk had relatively short lives. At best, some of them pushed sixty or seventy years. That was why even the demons showed respect to beastfolk Fistmasters. Reaching that height required a person of incredible character, willing to exhaust their entire life in the single-minded pursuit of their martial arts. One reason the beastfolk had been accepted into the demonic kingdom, even as a lesser race, was because of the Fistmasters in their ranks. It took

some of their ranks reaching the level of Fistmaster—the very prerequisite for being king of the beastfolk—to gain acknowledgment from the demonic kingdom.

There was even a legend about the first Demon King Raogias being thrown to the ground while engaged in an arm wrestling contest with the king of the beastfolk. Of course, the legend included the footnote that he hadn't been using magic to enhance his strength.

Can you believe that? Among the demons, a race that hated losing more than anything, there was a legend passed down through generations about their king losing a contest. That was how much respect the demons afforded Fistmasters. Enough that they were willing to stomach defeat at their hands.

"I... I'll get stronger," Garunya declared quietly, clenching her fists. "No matter how many years it takes...no matter how many decades, I will definitely become stronger." Though she didn't say as much, it was clear she was setting her sights on becoming a Fistmaster. "If that happens...if I'm a wrinkly old lady when that happens, will you still let me stay at your side?" she turned to me with an uneasy expression.

"Of course," I replied, giving her a hug, and earning a happy purr from her. She was really hopelessly loyal. As long as she was there supporting me, it didn't matter how she looked or if she was a wrinkly old lady, I'd be happy.

Well, assuming the demonic kingdom still existed when that happened.

+++

There was a certain room within the castle.

Considering demon standards, it was decorated quite lavishly. Tapestries hung from the walls, woven from green fabric and emblazoned with the family crest of its owner sewn in gold thread. Dwarven craftsmanship was on display with the chandelier made of crystal, gold, and silver hanging from the ceiling. Even portraits and landscape paintings made by human artists could be seen on each wall. A large obsidian sculpture of the first Demon King, Raogias, and another of pure gold depicting the current Demon King, Gordogias, sat on the edge of the room.

And in the center of it all, on a sofa covered in high elf skin, was a woman wearing an emerald necklace and a gorgeous, if extremely revealing, dress. Her long green hair rested on her shoulders, smoke wafting from her pipe. Her eyes glistened darkly, like those of a venomous snake—twin voids that swallowed all light, allowing nothing to escape.

“And so you just quietly tucked your tail between your legs and scurried home?” she said, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air.



Before her was the fourth demon prince Emergias, standing at attention as he nodded silently. “You truly lack even an ounce of luck, huh? Ever since the day you were born, it has been that way,” she murmured to herself, glancing at the statue of Gordogias. “You must’ve had the misfortune of being born under the wrong star. No luck, no talent. Your brother is five, isn’t he? Nothing more than a baby. Despite that, he showed you up. Doesn’t that frustrate you? Was there really nothing else you could do?”

As much as she heckled him, he stayed silent. If it were anyone else, he would fly into a rage at such treatment, but not for this woman.

Not for Nefradia, his own mother.

“This is all because you were dragging your feet. If you left immediately after realizing the mistake, you would have made it in time,” she continued, sighing a cloud of smoke over her son. Despite demons usually refraining from smoking due to its negative effects on the body, she always needed to smoke when dealing with her son. “Always dragging your feet and lagging behind. No wonder the other heirs are so far ahead. Do you get it? This isn’t about skill. This is an issue of your very nature, your character.”

Emergias held his silence.

“Are you even listening?”

“Yes, mother,” Emergias responded shortly, his face still a mask. There was no rationalizing or making excuses. Such actions were seen as quite pathetic to demons, much less Nefradia.

“A disappointment since the day you were born. I suppose I am used to it by now though.” She took another drag on her pipe, looking away with a bored expression.

To put it simply, their relationship was about as bad as it could be. Of course, it hadn’t been this way since the start. Emergias had carried the hopes and expectations of Nefradia and their entire family when he was born, but he had always seemed to be followed by bad luck. When Nefradia gave birth, the Demon King had been away at the front lines, so he had been late to come and name him.



When he finally received a name and they tried to celebrate, the castle had been struck by a storm. They had reluctantly postponed the party, and by the time the weather had cleared, the Alliance had launched a massive attack on the front lines. They still hadn't recovered from the devastation those battles dealt to their family.

No matter how major or minor, Emergias had terrible luck. He also wasn't particularly skilled. Among all demons he was hardly weak, but compared to his older siblings Aiogias, Rubifya, and Daiagias, he lacked what it took to stand alongside them.

Even so, he gave everything his all. He worked himself to the bone to answer his mother's and his family's expectations of him. He was a member of the Izanis family, whose members were quite the rarity in the demonic kingdom, producing a number of great civil officials and tacticians. Because of this, their presence was deeply entrenched in the war with the Alliance, and they had strong ties with the night elves.

Emergias absorbed everything his family taught him, becoming a superb commander and tactician. Before even reaching adulthood, he had conquered his first city. But at the last possible moment, a desperate group of heroes led a charge and made their last stand, leaving Emergias gravely wounded after fighting them off. Honestly, his opponents had been incredibly strong. It would have made more sense if Emergias had been killed. The fact he had survived at all was worthy of praise.

But not everyone saw it that way, including the other factions. It didn't help that he had stepped over plenty of other would-be commanders to get the position. *"Huh, he goes on his first mission and is so wounded he needs to go into rehab? He isn't all that great, is he?"* The mockery continued, and his reputation plummeted.

To be clear, Emergias was far from incompetent. But the Izanis family had no desire for another tactician. They wanted a champion, a true warrior inheriting the blood of the Demon King Gordogias to make up for what they lacked. Above all, Nefradia, his own mother, had been unsatisfied. She'd eventually come to the conclusion that he wasn't suitable to become king. So she'd decided to cut her losses, returning to the Demon King's bed. And, despite how difficult it was

for demons to become pregnant in the first place, she had been blessed with another child.

*“What a relief. Hopefully this one is a bit more talented.”*

Emergias happened to overhear those words from his mother one day...and was gripped with fear. He had tried so hard. He had endured so much. Never mind failing to live up to the expectations of the Izanis family, he was going to lose their love altogether. His new younger brother or sister was going to steal it all away from him.

So he poisoned her, using an abortifacient he had procured from the night elves.

The plot had been half success, half failure. Nefradia had miscarried as planned, but it was discovered that Emergias had been the culprit. To make matters worse, the poison had left her sterile. While the threat of being usurped by a younger sibling had been erased, the already unsteady relationship he had with his mother collapsed entirely.

Unable to bear children anymore, she gave up on her scheme to take the throne for the Izanis family, aligning with Aiogias's faction. One could say their whole family had awakened from their absurd dream of trying to give birth to the next Demon King and returned to reality.

But if you asked whether that improved Emergias's situation...

“Fine. You can go,” Nefradia coldly dismissed him. “Next time, try not to let your prey escape when it's dangling right in front of your face.”

Emergias nodded, turned, and then proceeded to leave his mother's room.

“You're the only one I have left, after all,” her sarcastic comment followed him out.

“Yes, mother,” he replied quietly, closing the door intensely behind him before walking down the dimly lit corridor.

And now, he was alone. Away from the mocking of his irritating family, away from the pestering of his subordinates trying to get a read on his mood.

“Dammit.” With a scowl, he punched the stone wall next to him.

We arrived back at the castle two days after leaving Kakou Village. The carriage was pretty comfortable, but I got to the point that I really missed my own bed. I slept outdoors a lot in my previous life, so it kind of felt like my life as a prince was spoiling me. *Next time I go out, maybe I'll bring a tent instead of sleeping in the carriage.*

"I will go and take care of business," Sophia said as she stomped off with a fistful of paperwork. She had made a full recovery on the journey back. *Quite the go-getter, isn't she?* While heading to my mother's room, I was starting to think she would be better off trying to become the Devil God of Office Work instead of the Devil God of Knowledge.

"Mother, I have returned."

"Welcome back, Zilbagias...what on earth happened?" Prati's eyes went wide at the sight of me, taking immediate notice of the growth in my magical power.

"Well...quite a bit, actually."

"And here I had hoped you would gain just a bit of experience from this little excursion. Truly, you always exceed my expectations." Clearly impressed, she nodded as she approached me and wrapped me in a hug. *Great perfume as always, huh?* "At any rate, I am glad to see you made it back safely." She couldn't suppress the flood of emotions in her voice. It seemed like she had been quite worried about me. I was just hoping she wouldn't faint after hearing what happened during the excursion.

"So, what happened?" she asked, making a graceful return to her sofa and taking out her fan.

"I am sure the escort you assigned me will also give you an overview, but there was an...unexpected development."

"Upon entering a battlefield, you must always be prepared for the unexpected. I guess you've had your first taste of that now."

"Yes, I suppose... The hobgoblin officials made a mistake, resulting in us being sent to the wrong place."

“Oh my. That sounds quite unfortunate.”

“Yes. Upon our arrival, we discovered a group of goblin deserters taking up residence in a nearby run-down fortress, as we expected—which was all well and good...but that wasn’t all we found.”

I clapped my hands and the door swung open. The Rage soldiers that had been escorting me stepped in, struggling to carry a frozen head atop a board.

“What?!” Prati gaped.

“As you can see, we came into contact with a white dragon. It quickly attacked us with its breath, nearly wiping us out, but somehow we managed to prevail. There were no casualties among our party, so you don’t need to worry.”

Prati’s fan slid from her fingers, clattering to the floor.

“Why did I even send you?!” As expected, she immediately snapped. The vein popping out of her forehead somewhat marred her cold beauty. There was also quite a bit of dark magic leaking out of her.

The escort stood their ground bravely, drenched in a cold sweat as Prati’s tirade began. Their leader, the one I had pegged as the oldest, was forced to sit in that pain in the ass bone chair. It had a great way of making even the biggest men look small and pathetic.

“I know I told you to position yourselves at a distance, but what’s the point if you aren’t close enough to intervene if something *does* happen?! Do you realize how lucky you are that things worked out?! Tell me, how exactly were you going to take responsibility if something had happened to him?!”

Completely losing her usual noble demeanor, she roared like a drill sergeant. But everything that came out of her mouth was completely correct, so the escort could only stand in silence, not daring to make any excuses. *At this rate, their punishment may be rather extreme.*

It wasn’t like I cared if a demon lost some social standing, but it wasn’t lost on me how even a single word here could buy some loyalty. However, the approach had to be balanced. Being too condescending would risk earning their hatred, but taking on too much blame would make me look weak. While I had told Virossa not to worry since we failed together, that wouldn’t fly with

demons.

So for starters, I stepped over to the wall directly beside the seat of reflection to take Prati's scolding alongside them.

"What are you doing, Zilbagias?" Prati took a break from her tirade, bewildered.

"I just thought I also had some reflecting to do regarding this incident," I replied, face composed. "It was under my orders that the night elves scouted the area beforehand, but I specifically told them only to investigate the area outside the fortress. The moment we realized something was strange about the situation, I should've sent them inside to investigate further, or used magic to smoke the enemy out of the fortress. At the very least, there was no excuse for letting the dragon get a surprise attack on us."

Stopping for a second, I glanced over at the escort. "Furthermore, an escaped white dragon hiding out while disguised in human form was beyond our expectations. I allowed my fear of appearing weak to cloud my judgment, so I acted recklessly. As I was put in charge of this exercise, it goes without saying I did not fulfill my duties to the best of my ability. So, I have no right to stand to the side and allow someone else to take the full blame." I never wanted to make the same mistake again, so I planned to learn well from this incident, I finished.

Without a word, Prati returned to her sofa, the venom gone from her expression. After sitting down, she finally spoke again.

"Kuviltal."

"Yes, my lady?" the man in the seat of reflection responded, straightening his posture. *So his name is Kuviltal, huh?*

"You once tried to persuade me, did you not? That I shouldn't treat my son so differently just because he is a prince. That I should raise him around other children his age."

"...Yes, my lady."

"This is my son. Do you still think that was necessary?"

“I am ashamed of my own ignorance, my lady,” he replied, bowing his head with his mouth drawn tight.

“In deference to Zilbagias, I’ll leave it at that for today. I will follow up with you shortly. I expect to see what you have learned from this failure on your next mission.”

The men straightened up again, responding with a chorus of “yes, my lady!” Kuvital stood from the seat of reflection, giving me a silent bow before stepping outside.

“Those are men of some discretion, so there’s no need for you to worry in this particular case. However, an attitude like that can be seen as a sign of weakness. The parties involved may not see it that way, but the same can’t be said for those leering from the sidelines. Remember that.” Snapping her fan open again, she returned her gaze to me.

*Yeah, that’s about what I figured.* “I will be careful. To be quite honest, I was unsure how to approach the situation. That may be a result of my lack of experience when it comes to dealing with other demons.”

“True. That was a measure to ensure you wouldn’t be influenced by the insolence of others at such a young age, but perhaps that is no longer necessary,” Prati said, barely containing a sigh. *Honestly, not knowing how to act around other demon children my age kinda helped me get through this situation.*

“Anyway, we can worry about that later. Next order of business is to punish the official that made the error in the first place.” With a snap, Prati closed her fan. Once again, her face took on a dark look.

“If I may, my lady,” Sophia said, entering the room. She didn’t look pleased at all. “I went to the office to rip that damn hobgoblin apart with my own two hands, but unfortunately the fourth prince’s faction had already given him the axe.”

“Ah, is that so? I suppose that is to be expected.”

“I trust you do not mind me electing not to bring such a disgusting thing here?”

“Of course not. I have no desire to see such a thing.”

*Wait.* “When you say they ‘gave him the axe,’ do you mean that literally?” I asked.

“Yes?” Sophia responded, slightly confused. “What else would I mean?”

“Oh...um, it’s nothing.”

*So they really beheaded him? I figured hobgoblins had it nice with their cushy desk jobs and all. I guess it’s risky business being a parasite on the system.*

“At any rate, mother, I would like your advice on weapons.”

“What is it?”

“The knife I was using as a spearhead broke in the fight,” I began. I told her about how successful I had been in attaching Virossa’s sword to the end of my spear, and that I liked the versatility of being able to not just stab, but also slash and cut. Also how I was hoping to talk to a dwarven blacksmith about it.

Prati hummed thoughtfully. “The stubborn old men won’t look kindly on it, but I suppose it is worth giving it a try.” Unexpectedly, Prati accepted the idea quite easily.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“For a normal child, I would obviously refuse, as it would teach you bad habits. However, you are different, having bested the leader of the white dragons at your age. Clearly, you are a boy of considerable strength. If others dare spout their complaints, you can merely crush their grumblings with force.”

*Thank goodness demons are savages! Being strong sure has its perks!*

“Besides, during your training I have noticed that your movements are strangely stiff.”

“Stiff?”

“Yes. But now I think I know why that is. You often try to cut with your spear, don’t you? You always seem quite frustrated that you end up striking your opponent with the shaft of the spear instead of the blade.”

*She noticed all that? Prati’s skill as a warrior is really something not to be*



*taken lightly.*

“On top of that, I am surprised to hear of this night elf Swordmaster. To be recognized by a man of such talent speaks volumes to your talent for swordsmanship. Of course, becoming a swordsman is out of the question, but there should be no issue in modifying your spear to not waste your talent.” Prati smiled, slapping her palm with her fan.

“I can say this with complete certainty now. *You have what it takes to succeed the Demon King.* Do whatever it takes to become stronger, Zilbagias.”

*Gladly.*

I gave a respectful bow.

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*“Would it kill you to be a bit more careful with these?”*

The dwarven smith I frequented sighed as I once again returned my sword.

*“If I wasn’t careful it would’ve broken a long time ago,”* I replied, a bit taken aback. *“It’s killed dozens of goblins and ogres, clashed with demons’ spears, been raked by devils’ claws, and it still hasn’t broken. If anything, you should be praising me.”*

The dwarf and I shifted our gazes to the blade resting on the anvil. The blade was so chipped it hardly resembled a sword and was more akin to a saw. The impact of demonic spears and being forced back into shape on the spot had really bent it out of shape, so much so that it was a challenge to even return it to its sheath.

Despite everything it had gone through, it still hadn’t broken. Honestly, I was pretty impressed by my achievement.

Without saying a word, the dwarf picked up a hammer and, with a small bit of magic, tapped lightly at the base of the blade. With a sharp snap, the blade easily broke in two.

*“Guess it was kind of foolish of me to have a sliver of hope...”* the dwarf muttered. The silence that was filling the air made the atmosphere quite awkward. *“I can’t take this anymore.”*

*“Huh?”*

*“I said! I can’t take this anymore!!!”* he roared, pulling at his enormous beard, throwing the bandana from his head and yanking at his hair. *“Over and over and over I do what I can to fix up your weapons, and every single time they come back all mangled! I can’t stand it!”*

*“What do you expect me to do?! Do you think I have the luxury of worrying about the sword while I’m in the middle of a fight?!”* I roared back.

*“Fine. All right kid, how much are you going to pay?!”*

*“What the heck do you mean?!”*

*“We dwarves have an ironclad rule! None of our work is free! We expect compensation for our work! Otherwise we can’t do the work that matches the job!”* he began to growl ominously. *“And the only thing you humans have to offer is money! Especially you! It won’t be as good as a trueforged sword, but I’ll make you a magic sword...no, a holy sword that will live longer than you!”* Breathing ragged, he pressed his face close to mine. *“So show me the money!”*

*“Fine! I’ll give you everything I’ve got!”* I shouted back, uncowed. After getting paid, I had more money than I knew what to do with anyway. *“But if it gets even a single chip in it, I’m coming for you!”*

*“I’ll make a sword ten times harder than that thick skull of yours! Heck, if it breaks, I’ll shave my beard and dance naked for you!”*

Every verbal swing was countered by another. After I gave him all the money I had, he went right to work forging an incredibly resilient holy sword with a terrifying vigor.

In the end, he kept his word. He made quite the sturdy sword. Shields layered in countless defensive prayers and miracles had been crumpled effortlessly by the force of the Demon King’s Lance. But that sword traded multiple blows with him. It never broke, fighting at my side until the very end.

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Together with Sophia, Garunya, and for some reason the puppy Liliana, I was strolling through the southern wing of the castle. Apparently there was a

dwarven forge here, but it was on the opposite side of the castle from the night elf quarters. There was a common saying about how elves and dwarves mixed like water and oil.

“They really don’t get along with forest elves,” I said, glancing at the excitedly prancing Liliana. I had really wanted her to stay back in my room, but when I tried to leave she wouldn’t stop whining. It was hard for me not to be at least a bit worried about how the dwarves might react to her. “But what kind of relationship is there between the night elves and the dwarves?” I asked.

All the dwarves kept here fell under two categories: captured or forced due to extreme circumstances. Apparently they were treated fairly well. Well, as long as they kept working.

“If you ask a night elf, they usually say they just can’t see eye to eye,” Sophia explained. According to her, the night elves greatly treasured dwarven weapons, and were quite proactive about trying to acquire them, but they still weren’t able to get along with dwarves. And that made complete sense to me. The night elves were anything but straightforward, and the dwarves hated anyone who distorted the sincerity of a craftsman. It would be strange if they somehow did get along.

By the way, even the forest elves and dwarves of the Alliance were originally enemies. In the distant past, there had been several military confrontations between them. It was obvious enough that the elves practiced a form of strict naturalism. This fact made it easy to figure out the source of the problem, considering the racial weapons of the dwarves were hammers and axes—weapons frequently used to topple trees in the pursuit of their steelcraft. Once the dwarves discovered coal, things were looking up. But that didn’t stop both sides from treating the other with a great deal of cynicism. It was nowhere near as bad as the situation between the forest elves and the night elves, though. As I looked at Liliana with a conflicted expression, she answered back with a confused bark.

As we got closer, the sound of hammers striking metal filled the air. It was starting to feel warmer too, as if the heat of the forge was leaking out into the air of the corridor.

“There it is,” Sophia said. She motioned to a majestic metal door fitting of the dwarves. It stood with vigor while watching over the surrounding corridor. Depictions of the armor and hammers of the dwarves as well as their mountain homelands were engraved on it in bold yet delicate detail. Furthermore, as much as it was exceptionally sturdy looking, it didn’t have even the faintest traces of magic on it. The most likely explanation was that they weren’t allowed to have anything like that. I felt a real sense of the grief and rebellious spirit of the captured craftsmen. Standing on either side of the door were two dwarven guards, wielding poor excuses for war hammers.

“This is His Highness, seventh demon prince Zilbagias. He has business with the craftsmen.”

At Sophia’s declaration, the guards gave a curt bow, opening the door for us. As soon as the door opened, we were struck by a blast of hot air. The space inside was so open it was hard to believe we were still in the castle. Furnaces were placed all over, accompanied by plenty of lighting and ventilation. And, of course, plenty of iron bars. Though they would be easy enough for the dwarves to dismantle if they so choose, they were a light reminder of their status as prisoners. The dwarven craftsmen swung their hammers freely, from those doing simple adjustments to basic equipment, to those crafting the finest of magical arms.

“It’s...really hot in here,” I murmured.

The dwarves remained absorbed in their work, paying no attention to us newcomers who entered their den. Strangely enough, there wasn’t much of an oppressive feeling to the way they worked. Though that’s not to say they seemed particularly excited about their work either. That said, there were quite a few who walked with obvious limps or wore eye patches, marking them as clear casualties of war. The few dwarves not hard at work gave double takes at Liliana, who was now whining about the heat.

“Do you want to wait outside?”

Another sad whine seemed to indicate “no.” As such, we were forced to bear the confused looks and comments of the dwarves we walked past.

“Welcome to the dwarven forge, Lord Zilbagias,” a hoarse voice called out to

us. The speaker was a dwarf with a stark white beard and a rather aloof expression, giving the impression of a cunning old geezer. His narrowed, brown eyes seemed to pick out every single detail about us in one fell swoop. “I am Fisero, the one currently tasked with managing the forge. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Otherwise, he had one more notable characteristic: his right arm was gone.

“Because of my condition, there’s not much I can do but greet visitors,” he remarked sarcastically, patting his empty right sleeve as he noticed my gaze on it. I was left speechless, unsure how to respond.

“Looks like everyone is working pretty hard. It’s almost like they aren’t prisoners at all.” So I changed the subject, looking around the forge.

“We spare no effort when it comes to our work. Even if we are prisoners, even if our wives and children are held hostage, we always produce results that match the price we’re paid.”

*Quite bold words to say to a prince.* Not a single dwarf intervened to chastise him, as if that was the general consensus here. They all understood their value and took pride in it.

“I’m impressed by your pride as craftsmen.” The best I could do was play the part of the demon prince, replying with an arrogant grin.

“Now then, Your Highness, what may we do for you?”

“Right. First, please take a look at this.”

At my instruction, Garunya approached a nearby table and laid out the huge cloth she had been carrying.

“Oh. These are...”

“White dragon scales.”

Within the cloth was a mountain of white scales, still gleaming with a dull light. The smell of the light magic wafting up into the air was enough to snatch the attention of the dwarves who were diligently working, all of them looking up from their anvils.

His cynical attitude immediately blown away, Fisero’s inner craftsman came

out, carefully lifting a scale in his fingers to inspect in the light of a nearby furnace. “Incredible. How did these come into your possession?”

“I hunted them myself. I bumped into a white dragon by complete chance. Almost burned all of us to a crisp.”

“You hunted it yourself? These seem to be the scales of a rather impressive dragon.”

“As expected, you’ve got a good eye. The dragon called himself their leader. He said his name was Faravgi.”

Fisero froze. “I...see.” For a moment he closed his eyes, but when they opened again, there wasn’t even a hint of emotion in them. “So, what would you like to be done with these?”

“I want them made into a suit of armor. Of course, I want it enchanted with wards for protection against curses. Can you do it?”

“If it’s simply a question of ability, then by all means. However, the piece these materials will make will be rather impressive. As such, the price will be...substantial.”

“The dwarves’ ironclad rule, right?”

“Precisely. Whether the customer is a demon prince or the gods themselves, we do not bend.”

This rule of the dwarves was not handled on some arbitrary whim. Their blacksmithing had transcended its typical nature to become a magical art. And with that also came its own restrictions. When making something for someone else, they had to demand a price for it. Receiving the proper reward was the first step in drawing out the true value of their creations.

While stealing their pieces or taking them by force were options, something was invariably lost by doing so. If it was a magical item, the effect would worsen. That magic, created by the ancestors of the dwarves, had guaranteed their high standing even in today’s society.

“What kind of payment do they normally take?” I asked Sophia, rather than Fisero.

“Precious metals, enchanted jewels, improved treatment, healing. In the rarest of circumstances, they can be paid with their freedom.”

“I see. What if I did something about your arm, Fisero?”

“I received this wound from the curse of a powerful devil.” With a discouraged voice, Fisero rolled up his empty sleeve. A sturdy, enchanted steel cap had been fastened to the stump of his arm. “A poisonous curse that causes the flesh to rot. Even sealed as it is, it continues to slowly eat away at me. Not even the Rage family **Transposition** can do anything about it. Nothing short of purification via light magic could help.” *And that’s entirely out of the question for someone like you*, the venom in his tone finished for him.

“I think something can be arranged,” I said, lifting Liliana from where she was curled up at my feet.

“What about her? Wait...you don’t mean...” As he looked her over, it seemed he noticed the light magic hidden within her.

“Exactly. Although I destroyed her sense of self and turned her into a mere dog, she’s a high elf saint.”

In complete shock, Fisero watched as Liliana twisted up to lick at my face.

“And as you can see, she’s quite fond of me.”

Fisero looked over Liliana again, his face full of grief and pity.

“We can purify the curse with her light magic. Then I can use **Transposition** to restore your arm. From what I can tell, you seem like a pretty impressive smith. Giving you the chance to work again should be of unprecedented value. How does that sound?”

Fisero accepted the deal immediately.

With a single lick from Liliana—despite Fisero’s rather disgusted expression—the curse afflicting his arm was instantly obliterated. Without a moment’s hesitation, I took his wound, the flesh of his arm swelling up and rebuilding itself while mine rotted and shriveled away. It hurt like hell, and must have been quite the sight, as all the surrounding dwarves (including Fisero) cringed at its appearance. With a sad whine, Liliana licked at my freshly decomposed arm,



restoring it in no time.

“I shall produce an incredible piece of armor for you,” Fisero spoke with some difficulty, flexing his freshly reconstituted hand. It seemed the potential number of casualties to the Alliance this armor would bring ran through his head. That was something that weighed on my mind as well.

“Besides that, there’s one more thing I’d like.”

“What is it, Your Highness?”

“I want a sword.”

“Excuse me?” Not just Fisero, the busy forge went dead silent as all the dwarves stopped to turn their attention to me with dumbfounded expressions.

“Actually...”

I gave him a brief summary of my situation. Apparently my idea of attaching a sword blade to the end of a spear piqued the dwarves’ interest, as murmurs of “I’ve never thought of that” and “sounds interesting” resounded.

“Of course I do not mind. But a sword, is it? What kind of sword do you have in mind?”

“Hm. Good question.” It wasn’t until he had asked that I realized I had never really thought about it. “I was hoping to also discuss that with you.”

“I see. Perhaps it would be best if I present you with some examples.” Standing up, Fisero stepped over to a nearby large metal door. “Please, come in. This is our storehouse.” It was piled high haphazardly with old weapons and armor. “All of these were retrieved from the battlefield, so now they have no wielders,” Fisero said, a hint of sadness in his voice. “For the most part, we use them as material. There should be plenty of swords inside. If you try swinging a few for yourself, you will probably...”

Partway through Fisero’s explanation, I completely lost him. A pile of discarded weapons and armor, basically a graveyard. And within that graveyard, illuminated by the light coming from the door behind us, sticking out from the pile was a single sword shining with a dull light.

“Oh...” I blurted out. Perfectly straight. Sturdy as hell. The crystallization of

both of our obstinacy. It was *my* holy sword.

“Your Highness! Wait!” Fisero leaped forward, blocking my hand. Without realizing it I had approached it, reaching for its handle. “This sword belonged to a human hero,” he spoke gently. “It contains powerful holy magic. It will harm you if you touch it.”

“...Of course.” Obviously I knew that. I was the one who had filled it with that magic.

“But the dwarf who forged it must’ve had incredible skill. Dwarves like us can handle it no problem, but in the case of Your Highness, that’s a different story.”

*Even Fisero, the one put in charge of the forge, acknowledged his skill, huh? He truly was an incredible smith.* No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remember his name. While that hurt quite a bit, there was one thing I could remember: the sight of him crafting this sword. Even before the first hammer strike I began infusing it with holy magic, followed by him pouring his whole spirit into it. By the time he was finished and we sealed the magic inside it, the two of us were both on the verge of passing out.

While it might not have been on the same level as a trueforged weapon, a literally once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a dwarf, it was still without a doubt a masterpiece. The holy magic infused in it empowered the wielder many times over, and dealt grievous wounds to denizens of the dark. I knew well the pain of using holy magic as a demon. So it didn’t take much of my imagination to figure out what would happen if I touched the sword now. But...even so.

“Fisero. I’ve heard your warning. So whatever happens next, I absolve you of responsibility.” I pushed Fisero aside.

*It has been quite a while, huh? Seven years? Your owner was cut down by the Demon King, and here you are, thrown into an old storehouse to await a new wielder while avoiding being melted down for materials. Almost makes me want to tear up a bit just thinking about it.*

The light of the lamps and furnaces outside gave it a dangerous gleam. It was as if the sword was saying, “Who the hell are you?” As I now wore the flesh of a denizen of the dark, it was an understandable reaction.

I reached for the sword's hilt, clenching my fingers around it. A sizzling sound, like water hitting hot steel, filled the room as my hand started to smoke.

"I told you!" Fisero shouted, before quickly starting to panic. Because even with the pain, I didn't let go.

It hurt like hell so of course I groaned. My fingers and my palm weren't just burning. The holy magic was flowing from the sword up into my arm, filling the whole thing with searing pain.

And yet somehow, that pain felt...nostalgic. It felt so familiar. Likely a small remnant of the hero Alexander lingering within me. This sword had been my faithful companion, a part of me.

I couldn't help but smile bitterly at the tenacious hostility it displayed toward me.

*But you know, holy sword, the one you're burning is your old owner.*

With a snap of my fingers of my left hand, I put up a soundproof barrier. The sound of the dwarves working vanished, all I could hear was the sizzling of my own flesh.

"I'm glad I got to see you again," I murmured, keeping my lips as still as possible on the off chance that Sophia could read lips. I stood quietly bearing the pain. Still. Still.

"Hey, can you give it a rest already? My arm's going to burn off at this rate."

I had already lost all sensation in my fingers. It felt like I'd actually be charred black. *Quite a common occurrence for me nowadays, huh?*

Eventually, the pain felt like it was starting to subside. It was almost like the sword was confused, saying, "How long does this guy plan on holding on?"

*How long? Until you understand! Because...*

*"My name is Zilbagias"—but at the same time—"and Alexander."*

I felt the sword tremble slightly.

"That smith wasn't kidding. This guy didn't break, even after fighting the Demon King."

Even after trading blows with the first Demon King's Lance, empowered by countless souls, it hadn't so much as bent. That smith would have been so proud.

*"I crammed it with as much sturdiness as I could manage,"* he had managed to gasp after finishing the weapon. *"Sharpness, strengthening the user, protection from curses, all of that came second! In exchange, it's super tough! It'll never break! It'll never let you down! That's the kind of sword I made!"*

He then shoved the newly forged weapon into my hands. *"The rest is up to this thing!"* he said, jabbing a finger at my head. *"Use that to figure something out yourself!"*

After he smacked me on the arm, I asked him about the inscription I had noticed on the blade.

*"I used some of the old tongue. It means tenacious, or indomitable."*

*This sword's inscription...*

*"Adamas."*

I remembered. The holy sword, Adamas—that was my blade.

With a snapping sound like lightning, the sword began to shine, a powerful impact striking my hand gripping the hilt. It almost felt like it'd blow my arm right off. *Is it rejecting me?*

No...it was just reclaiming its true power after I called its name. It was trembling with joy. Despite the almost impossible circumstances, its old owner had come back from the dead to retrieve it. The sword's confusion was completely warranted. Like a horse that had lost control, it couldn't keep its power attempting to protect its wielder and hurt a denizen of the dark in check, coming into conflict with itself.

*"I can't stand this,"* I felt like I heard someone sigh. The bones of the soldiers at my belt started to move. Taking the shape of a snake, they slithered up my arm...and toward the hilt of the sword.



As if to protect my hand. Or as if to console a crying child.

As the bones wrapped around the hilt, the sword's glow weakened...and the pain in my arm started to dissipate.

*"Go to sleep now. You are just a sword."*

*When the time comes, I'll wake you up. When I do, please help me.*

The blade's silver glow started to fade, taking on the appearance of a simple antique. The holy magic within it had gone dormant. While it was still sturdier than average, it was now just a typical sword. Simply touching it would no longer burn me.

I tried giving it a swing. It was the perfect length for me in my previous life, but its weight now felt a bit overbearing. Filling myself with magic, I tried again, getting a sharp whistle as the blade properly cut through the air.

*Nice.*

Extending the grip of the bones around the hilt, I made it into a spear. I thrust, I swept. I *slashed*.

*"This is great." Once my body grows a bit more, this will be perfect.*

Finally satisfied, I released the soundproof barrier and turned back to those who were watching me with nervous looks. Liliana immediately began barking angrily, as if to say, "Why is your hand all messed up again?! I just fixed it!" as she leaped to my side and started licking me. Sensation returned to my numb hand. *I don't know what I'd do without you, Liliana...*

*"I like it. Maybe I'll just take this one."*

"But...Your Highness..." Fisero frowned, a mixture of bewilderment and disappointment on his face. "There was no need to take that one. I could have forged something for you." His eyes were filled with sorrow at the light fading from the blade. He must have thought the true value of the blade would be lost forever now that I had inherited it.

Dwarven weapons had a tendency to be just as moody as their creators. There were even some weapons that failed to be inherited properly by their dwarven wielders. All it took was to fail once to cause irreversible damage to

the weapon. Of course, this was probably the first and last time such a moody weapon had been reclaimed by its owner, who was somehow back from the dead. Though, that wasn't exactly something I was planning on sharing with anyone.

"Fisero, what do you think about this sword?" I handed the now sleeping holy sword, seemingly devoid of its magic, over to the dwarf.

"It is a good piece...even in this state," he replied, as if he was inspecting an enormous, albeit cracked, jewel. "Although the remaining magic is rather faint, it should be sturdier than most other weapons. Even a dragon's bite probably wouldn't leave a scratch. I can only imagine the passion and prayer that went into its forging." Fisero's words grew short and clipped, and he ended his thought with a sigh.

"In that case, it's good enough for me. I'll be taking it then. Do I need to pay?"

"I am neither its creator nor its owner. Do with it as you like." With a grimace, he handed the weapon back to me. "But...are you sure? In its current state, anyone in this forge could craft a better piece for you... There is no need for you to take the relic of a fallen hero..." Though his words trailed off, it was clear by his tone he wanted to add "there is no need to do something in such bad taste."

*I guess not.* From his perspective, it was a natural response considering he was likely thinking of the many lives that would be taken by the demon prince wielding the weapon. "Hm. Then, do you think you could make a sword that would surpass this one in its prime?"

"Well..." Fisero opened his mouth, but no words came out. The dwarves around us made similarly conflicted expressions. Despite the heat of the forge, a chill filled the air. "The truth is, Your Highness, the magic of forging..." Fisero finally managed to squeeze out, "...is based on prayer. Prayer for the good fortune and strong spirit of the wielder. It is based on prayer and wishes."

The dwarves swung their hammers with pride. Even though they were enslaved, they took great pride in their craft. Even if they were working for the denizens of the dark, they spared no effort to make the highest class of weapons they could manage.

But...they were still our enemies. They worked themselves to the bone for

people they hated, crafting weapons which would bring harm to their friends. How many of them could pray for the success of the wielders? Even if the weapons were top-of-the-line, their hearts weren't in it.

"I know. Magic...miracles are like that." I gave a small smile, patting Lilitana on the head. "So this one will be fine." I raised the sleeping holy sword. "This sword is perfect." *This time, I fully intend to answer that smith's passion.*

"Though on that note, Fisero..."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"About the scale armor."

Fisero's face paled. While he had promised to make the best quality armor possible in exchange for healing his arm, he basically admitted that wouldn't be possible. "In exchange for your kindness today, I will spare no effort. There will be no issues with its construction."

"I know that. But what about the heart?"

Fisero was silent.

"Exactly. So I'll swear an oath for you right now." I met Fisero's gaze, staring into the eyes of the proud craftsman. *"As long as I wear that armor, I will never harm a single one of your comrades—I will never harm a single dwarf."*

Fisero and the dwarves around us gulped as one.

"This is the greatest act of sincerity I can show you."

Fisero bowed his head deeply. "I am a craftsman at heart." His eyes were lit by a new fire. "And there is no craftsman, no dwarf, whose heart would not be set alight by those words."

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"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Sophia asked a short time after we left the dwarven forge.

"Which?"

"Both. The sword and the armor." She eyed my belt, and the holy sword Adamas hanging from it.



Currently, it was being held in a brand-new scabbard I had made in exchange for healing another dwarf. They had finished it while I was still taking measurements for my armor. It even came with magic to preserve the condition of the sword it carried. Dwarven craftsmen were quite something. The craftsmen of other races couldn't even begin to compare.

By the way, Fisero claimed he would have the scale armor ready by the end of the day.

*"I swear on my arm and my beard, I will create a suit of armor that matches the true power of that sword."*

According to him, as long as I kept my oath, it would provide incredible magical and physical protection. It was like his spirit had been reinvigorated, or like he had started to take things seriously. That's the impression I had. It wasn't much different from when the dwarf made Adamas for me.

"On a battlefield, you cannot choose who is on the other side." What was my plan if I encountered a dwarf on the battlefield, Sophia asked.

"That is true. But I *can* choose my battlefields. In open warfare it should be possible to spot dwarven soldiers from a distance away. I just need to ensure I avoid contact with them," I shrugged. If an ordinary soldier said that it would be utterly ridiculous, but I was a prince. I might have been a little baby esquire, but I still had enough authority to influence where I was deployed. "Besides, isn't it rare for dwarves to fight on the front lines?" Smiths were far too valuable. Most of them were kept safe in the rear.

"Perhaps that is true...but that won't hold true when attacking an enemy fortress. I'm sure you recall those battle reports I gave you."

"Yeah, I guess. If I come across any in that case...well, I'll cross that bridge when we get to it." I could either take the armor off, or leave them to my subordinates. Though if Fisero had happened to design the armor to make it difficult to remove in order to avoid that loophole, I'd only be able to laugh about it.

"Besides," I said, snapping my fingers to create a soundproof barrier, "I primarily intend to use this armor against my brothers and sisters."

“Ah, I see.”

And that had her convinced. If I wanted to fend off Aiogias or Rubifya, I needed every bit of strength that armor could muster. While I didn't mention him, I had every intention of using it to fight against the Demon King. Having the demerit of being unable to fight against dwarves was a small price to pay. Rather, that stricture would give me a just excuse to avoid any conflict with dwarves in the first place.

*“Though of course, that increases your chances of fighting your precious humans,”* Ante pointed out mercilessly. Yeah, she was right... I'd most likely be fighting humans since they were the most common enemies. If you ordered the races by their frequency on the battlefield, it would be humans, beastfolk, then elves, and far behind them the dwarves. It was the worst possible situation for me.

“Okay, I understand about the armor, but then what about the sword?” She looked again at the holy sword on my belt with an expression of open disgust. Apparently the faint traces of holy magic in it were enough to upset her.

“This is the perfect weapon for gaining power from my pact.” Sophia knew I had made a contract with the Devil God of Taboo.

Sophia closed her mouth tight, expression turning meek. The air around us suddenly grew quite tense. Feeling the change in atmosphere, Liliana started barking.

“Ah, Liliana! You can't go that way!” As Liliana started frolicking around, the only one left acting with any sort of normalcy was Garunya chasing her.

“Using a hero's sword to kill humans. Can you think of anything more blasphemous?”

“Not many, I suppose.”

“That's the deal. I'll give my mother a similar explanation.” That way Sophia wouldn't have to say anything, giving her an escape route.

Catching my drift, she gave a small nod, feigning ignorance.

The next day, as promised, my white dragon scale armor arrived. The suit covered my torso, upper arms, and legs, boasting incredible physical strength while maintaining flexibility. Its magic resistance gave off such a strong pressure it was physically palpable. So much so it could probably easily fend off something like my **Taboo** magic. Fisero had truly displayed his skill as a craftsman.

On top of that, it included magic that allowed it to change sizes to accommodate my body. This made it suitable as my body continued growing without the need to have it physically adjusted. What's more, it could be donned just by slipping it on over my head and cinching the belt. The letter that accompanied the armor said, "It has been called *Syndikyos*. As long as you protect your oath, the magic within it will always protect you." While it was written in the demonic script, it had the unmistakable precision of a dwarf's hand.

*Syndikyos*...apparently, in the old tongue it meant something like "to believe in something together" or to have a "shared conviction." I could really feel the implicit demand that I keep my promise.

*Don't you worry, Fisero. I will. No matter how many humans or elves I have to cut down to keep my oath, I shall never bring harm to a dwarf.*

*"At this rate, harming a dwarf will become a significant taboo for you. It's basically a win-win."*

*Shut up, Ante! Don't ruin the moment!*

"By the way, Lord Zilbagias, a representative of the dragons has requested an audience with you," Sophia reported while I was finishing my waking meal, looking over my new suit of armor.

"An audience? Who's this representative?"

"Oruphen, the leader of the dark dragons. Practically speaking, he is the king of the dragons. He claims he wishes to make a formal apology for one of his kind harming you, as well as confirming Faravgi's identity."

"Huh..." *So the leader of the dark dragons Faravgi talked about is making an appearance, huh? "What do you think he really wants?"*

“I imagine his intentions are as declared. The fact of the matter is a dragon injured a demon prince, so he likely wants to get his apology in before it blows up into a bigger issue.”

I figured it would be something like that. If I wanted to worsen the rift between the dragons and the demons, I could reject the audience, causing things to turn further against the dragons. Or I could accept, and in acting exceptionally arrogant, inspire further rebellion among them.

*“If those are the two options, I expect summoning him would be more impactful than spurning him,”* Ante commented.

I felt the same way. Playing the role of the shithead demon prince sounded like it would be way more impactful. I looked over my new set of armor again, a memento of my fight with Faravgi.

“Let’s do it. I’ll greet him with Faravgi’s head on one side and the armor made from his scales on the other.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sophia replied with a snort. “Considering the injuries we took in that fight.” The other attendants, particularly those who had been roasted by Faravgi’s attack, wore similar vindictive expressions.

Although no one actually died, it seemed getting charred to a crisp without much of a chance to retaliate had left them rather irritated. It sure would have been nice if the dragons had mentioned to anyone that Faravgi had escaped after the attack on the castle.

*Heh heh heh...let’s make those oh so proud dragons squirm!*

To that end, I had Faravgi’s preserved head brought back out.

*Sorry, Faravgi. I don’t mean to insult your death. But thanks to you, I’ll be able to stir up some trouble. Hope that’s enough for you to forgive me.*

So with Faravgi’s head on my left and my new suit of armor on my right, I relaxed on the sofa in my room, waiting for this dark dragon boss guy to show up.

After a short wait, the leader of the dark dragons arrived. He was a tall man,

clothed in loose-fitting dark robes. His skin, hair, and even his eyes were all pitch black; the only color on him was the icy blue of his irises. He carried himself with an air of gentleness, but there was also something rather disingenuous about him. The final confirmation he wasn't human was the two horns growing from the sides of his head. As much as he had adjusted the results of his **Anthromorphy**, it seemed he left those horns perfectly intact.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Zilbagias. It is an honor to meet you," he greeted me. It seemed he was quite accustomed to talking in human form, as most of the metallic rasp common to draconic speech was missing, making him much easier to understand. "I am Oruphen, leader of the dark dragons, and head of the dragon race within the demonic kingdom."

"Seventh demon prince Zilbagias," I responded curtly. "Let's not make this more of a hassle than it needs to be. I'm flattered you came to offer your own apology."

"Yes. News of the incident which befell you has pained us dragons deeply," Oruphen nodded, reciting lines as if from a script, totally unfazed by my condescension. "As representative of the dragons, I offer my sincerest apologies for the great trouble Your Highness has suffered." He gave a deep bow, dodging the insult by assuming an attitude of perfect submission. "And that disgusting visage! It is without a doubt that of the head of the white dragons, Faravgi. To see one of our own fall to such disgrace as to attempt to curry favor with the apes of the Alliance is truly a mark of shame against all of us. To think that he had not only escaped the battle but also remained hidden within our borders..."

*Apes of the Alliance? Was he talking about humans? Yeah, I'm gonna have to kill this guy. No, hold on. Don't get swept away by his attitude.*

It was time to try being a bit more disagreeable.

"Faravgi said his wings had been cursed, making him unable to fly. Are our dragons really so pathetic that a lizard that couldn't fly was able to evade their grasps?"

But in response to my blatant provocation, Oruphen said, "Ah, so in the end Faravgi also fell victim to the curse. I had assumed his magic resistance had deflected it." He was really playing up how surprised he was. "That curse is one

of delayed impact. Once a certain amount of time passes, it robs its victim of their flight. A great number of the white dragons were brought to the ground and shredded to pieces. Due to the intensity of the battle, inspecting each of the bodies was a challenge. Even so, the fact Faravgi was permitted to escape is inexcusable. I shall endeavor to punish those responsible.”

This guy was good. He was overturning the idea that dragons were proud to a fault. If it would accomplish his goals, I could see him licking my boots with a smile, or drinking muddy water with a grin.

But I knew exactly the kind of guy he was, the type to never forget that shame. Though he tried to hide it behind a gentle smile and his practiced lines, he couldn't hide his icy eyes behind that mask.

“And is that armor made from Faravgi's scales? I sense a profound power from it. Dwarven craftsmanship?” He seemed entirely unperturbed by seeing armor made from the remains of one of his own kind.

“That's right.”

“If in death he can provide you some value, then perhaps the shame we face shall have some small amount of relief,” Oruphen said, looking back to me with a grin. A grin revealing some rather sharp teeth. “In addition, out of our desire to express our deepest apologies, I have prepared a gift for you.”

*This guy's head is just full of ways to pull out all the stops, huh?* Trying to provoke him to make relations deteriorate with the dragons was going to be difficult. Or maybe I should think of it like the situation between the dragons and demons was already in such dire straits that he felt it necessary to be such a bootlicker? That said, I was quite curious about this gift.

“I have been informed that Your Highness has taken a high elf pet into his care,” Oruphen said before turning, giving a grating, metallic signal to someone waiting outside. “In that case, we thought you may be interested in this.”

The door opened...and in stepped a girl.

Her skin was so pale as to be almost translucent. Her hair shone like silver, her eyes gold like the sun. Mature features that almost clung to a childlike innocence. Yet under her eyes were thick, dark circles speaking of sleep

deprivation, giving the paleness of her skin more of a sickly look. And sprouting from the sides of her head were a pair of horns.

Timidly she stepped into the room, her face immediately twisting in anguish as she saw Faravgi's head...but she forced the expression away, adopting a desperate smile in its place.

"A p-pleasure to meet, you...Your Highness..." Her voice was exceptionally quiet. "My name is Layla...Faravgi's daughter..." As she spoke, tears began pouring down her face. "I... I'm sorry...my father caused you, so much trouble..."

And I remembered.

*"Faravgi, why are you so angry? What did the Demon King ever do to you?"*

*"Like you don't know! He joined hands with the dark dragons! Kidnapped my daughter, murdered my wife!"*

He had said his wife had been murdered, but that his daughter had been kidnapped.

I looked to my left and right, seeing Faravgi's head and the suit of armor he had become.

*W-Wait...this isn't going as planned...Ante, quick! Take the power!*

*"Relax. I'm already on it,"* Ante breathed. *"I have to say, it's coming in fast and strong."* I couldn't quite tell if it was a sigh or a laugh.

"Your Highness, I present to you this girl, Layla, as a symbol of our sincerity."





Grabbing Layla's shoulders, Oruphen pushed her toward me.

"There's no need for you to make considerations for us. After all, she's the daughter of a criminal. I am sure the incident with Faravgi has caused you a great deal of headache. I believe this girl will prove an ideal outlet for your anger." A sadistic smile rose to his face.

"Whether you wish to enslave her, torture her, even strangle her to death right here"—a smile of pure evil—"please use her however you see fit."

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After leaving seventh demon prince Zilbagias's room, the king of the dark dragons, Oruphen, took slow yet calculated steps down the corridor.

*I have grown quite accustomed to the frustrations that come with these bodies.*

A slight tint of sarcasm entered into the smile pasted on his face. When he had first begun living in his human form, the shortness of his stride and his slow walking pace had irritated him, to the point he had often sped up his pace to something akin to a jog.

However, once he realized people were talking behind his back about how he was "so impatient despite being so big" and "always so quick as a lizard," he learned to slow himself down. To him, it was a small price to pay if he could avoid staining the pride of the dragons. And so, with slow, leisurely steps, he navigated through the castle to the departure point for dragons.

"Take this," he said, stripping off his night-black robe and handing it to a nearby night elf maid. "I'm going on a brief excursion. I shall return within the hour."

Oruphen's already tall body wavered, swelling and expanding along with his magical power. In moments, he had transformed into an enormous dark dragon, covered from head to toe in jet-black scales.

"We shall await your return," the maid said with a bow as a gust of wind from Oruphen's wings blew past her, carrying the dragon up into the night sky.

A powerful, exultant roar echoed among the stars.

What freedom! Like for any dragon, his mood was at its peak when he was soaring in the skies. Every aspect of the world, down to the laws of nature, could do nothing but bow down to the tyranny that was his body. Contrast that with the minuscule bodies of the apes, constrained to the earth under their feet. But as that feeling of omnipotence flooded him, he brought his gaze back to the starlit marble castle below him, and his mood immediately dampened.

For hundreds of years, he had been forced to bend a knee to the one calling himself the Demon King. He had witnessed the place he called home be dug into and remodeled into a pathetic excuse for a castle. It was the greatest trial that had beset the glorious dragonkind since the time of creation.

*Why?! Why must we bow to worms that are bound to the ground?!*

His rage threatened to boil out of him as a dark breath. Why would the dragons, whose wings could take them anywhere they wished, submit to the Demon King?

Of course, because their hatchery beneath the castle had been taken hostage.

By leaving their eggs to incubate in soil rich with magical energy, the dragons had ensured the children that eventually hatched would emerge stronger and smarter. Given the boon the area provided, it had become so incredibly popular that it had even led to various conflicts over securing space for one's eggs. A gentleman's agreement of sorts had been established among the dragons to not bring harm to the eggs. Although, considering the benefits they could provide to their children, parents were desperate to secure the best possible hatching grounds.

Naturally, that meant it was much easier for the more powerful dragons to secure the best ground possible, leading to them giving birth to stronger young. The hatchery here had become one for the true elites among dragonkind, what humans would call "nobility." This made it so the hatchery beneath this mountain had become synonymous with and almost symbolic of those bloodlines and power. And then the worm calling himself the Demon King had attacked it.

The dragons never imagined they would face such defeat, believing they could clear away any opposition with just a single breath. But when they faced

the Demon King, half of dragonkind was wiped out.

Being quite young at the time, Oruphen had not seen the actual battle with his own eyes. But that didn't stop the stories passed down of the first Demon King Raogias from making his blood run cold. His spear effortlessly pierced through dragon scales as if they were a lamb's skin. He fended off every curse with ease, and even made their breath attacks look like child's play.

And when the dragons realized they were outmatched and fled to the skies, what did he do? He invaded the hatchery and began smashing the eggs within! What barbarism! What malice! Even the cruel and coldhearted dark dragons would never lay a finger on the eggs. That was a line that no dragon would ever cross, the greatest of taboos among them.

And yet the first Demon King Raogias crushed those eggs without a care in the world. In a panic, the parents of those eggs returned to the hatchery, desperate to stop him. The slaughter continued. In the end, it took the leaders of the dragons begging for mercy to bring an end to the massacre.

Ever since, the Demon King had had complete control over the hatchery, forcing the dragons to obey his every whim. Abandoning the hatchery and finding a new place to lay eggs was an option; in fact, some tribes did just that. However, dragons born in the wild would certainly be weaker and much more simpleminded than those born in the hatchery.

This made it so the more powerful parents were less likely to leave the hatchery behind. Even if it meant having their eggs supervised by those disgusting undead feeding on the same magic nurturing their own young. Even if their eggs were taken hostage, and the parents were forced to act like horses drawing carriages...! Abandoning their strength to save their pride was getting their priorities backward.

"Vile demons!" Oruphen roared to the stars, a howl of magic indecipherable to all but other dragons.

"Chief!" another roar reached up to him from below. Looking down, he saw a number of his protégés flying toward him. "I see you have returned from your meeting with the prince."

"Indeed."

His subordinates lined up in the air before him. The sky was their domain, where they had complete freedom. No need to worry about night elf spies, and, with their specialized manner of speech, no threat of any other nosy pests understanding them.

“How was this seventh demon prince?”

“Hah. For a child his age, he possesses considerable power. As a result, he’s full of himself. Quite the intolerable brat.”

“Then the cursed child...?”

The disgusting daughter of the white dragons, Layla.

“Of course, the handover went without incident. He seemed quite flustered by the gift, but I assured him she wouldn’t bite.”

His subordinates growled in laughter, both at the cowardly prince and the fate of the pathetic white dragon.

*Vile things. No number of curses could possibly be enough.*

With the death of the ever-hated Faravgi and his daughter offered up as a sacrifice, the debt of the dragons was surely paid. Let the daughter pay for the sins of her father.

With a laugh of his own, Oruphen glared at the horizon.

*We may lay low for now...but someday, I will tear the throats of those demons out with my own teeth!*

Irritatingly enough, the demons had sensed the growing spirit of rebellion among the dragons. Even so, they continued holding them on a tight yet close leash, as if daring them to attempt something. The proof in that was that while the demons continued to treat dragons like livestock, the Demon King himself never rode one. Not even the Demon King could withstand being thrown to the earth from a high altitude.

If the Demon King were injured or weakened, the whole kingdom would start to collapse. When the last Demon King died, the dragons had failed to capitalize on the opportunity. They had not been privy to the politics of the kingdom, the culture of the demons, the magic of the devils, or the behavior of the undead.

Things were much different now. So Oruphen hid his shame, bore his humiliation, and watched carefully for his moment, keeping his fangs and claws sharp. When Demon King Gordogias fell, the dragons would be ready.

“Damned worms! You will learn who the true rulers of this world are!” He roared his oath to the stars above.

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A heavy silence settled over my room.

While I was sitting on my sofa, Faravgi’s daughter Layla sat on the floor before me. When Oruphen had been present, she seemed desperate to maintain her smile even while tears kept pouring down her face. But with Oruphen no longer present, she stared vacantly at the floor as if she had been completely burned out.

This wasn’t how that meeting was supposed to have gone. Why had I done this? The pain and anger one felt in the face of their parents getting killed was something I knew all too well. What I had done today made me no better than that green-haired piece of garbage.

*No... I’ve killed so many of my own people up to this point. I fell that low long ago, didn’t I?*

*“There was nothing else you could’ve done. As I’m not a devil of prophecy, foresight was not an option.”*

Despite Ante’s indifferent response to the situation, I couldn’t bring myself to write it off so easily. Guilt billowed out of my heart like smoke from a volcano every time my eyes caught a glimpse of the shell of a girl before me.

It made me hate my own guts, which was pretty much old news at this point. I had sworn revenge on the demons and the night elves, people who had their own parents, their own children. Was I going to hem and haw about every single one of them? Why was I allowing myself to be overwhelmed by my emotions over something like this?

*You have no right to feel guilty,* a cold part of my heart chastised me.

“Um...” Layla suddenly raised her face to look at me. “Uh...um...” Layla tried

to revive her smile from earlier but ultimately failed. Face twisting in anguish again, she dropped her gaze. She belonged to me. Oruphen had said I could do whatever I wanted with her as the dragons didn't care one way or another what happened to her.

Her imprisonment had been used as a tool to keep the rebellious white dragons in check. With Faravgi dead, she was now useless to them...or rather, gifting her to me was the exhaustion of her purpose.

As a demon prince and the one who had been attacked by Faravgi, how was I expected to make use of her? Just pondering the thought gave me a headache.

"I'm back!"

At that moment, a fluffier-than-ever Garunya entered the room with a flushed and damp-haired Liliana in tow. They had gone to take a bath while I met with Oruphen. With Liliana unable to wash herself, the responsibility fell to Garunya.

"Oh, who is this?" Garunya asked, noticing Layla sitting in front of me.

"Uh... She is...from the dragons..." *How in the world do I explain this?* "She was given to me as an apology for what happened. Her name is Layla. She's Faravgi's daughter."

"What?! Faravgi's daughter?!" Garunya immediately jumped, glaring at Layla with hair standing on end. Layla, in turn, shrank back with a small cry. Confused by behavior that hardly seemed becoming of a white dragon, Garunya looked to me for an explanation. At the same time, Liliana stomped her way over to Layla on her stubby limbs, peering into the dragon's face.

"Ah! Wh-Who is this?" Layla asked, scuttling backward on the floor.

"Right. This is...hmm..." *How in the world am I supposed to explain her?* "She's a high elf saint taken from the night elf prison. Right now...her sense of self has been destroyed, so she thinks she's a dog."

"*Bark bark!*" Apparently realizing the conversation had shifted to being about her, Liliana started barking happily. Layla, in turn, all but squealed, face paling. *All of us are pretty used to it, but I guess seeing a high elf entirely devoid of intelligence can be kinda off-putting, huh?*

Layla soon started shaking, laughing quietly as the tears started again. “I’ll... I’ll take whatever punishment you desire...” she said, bowing down at my feet. “I will...take responsibility for my father’s sins...so...please...have mercy on the dragons...”

I could only answer with a silent stare.

“But...if I could make one request...if, if you’re going to cut off my hands and feet like that...please do so after...you destroy my sense of self...please...” she began to beg, repeating herself over and over.

Liliana began barking in confusion, as if to ask what was wrong. Concerned about Layla, she began to lick at the dragon’s face, prompting Layla to break down in tears again. It was as if looking at Liliana was like looking into her own future.





As I sat there in stunned silence, Sophia, Veene, and Garunya looked to me for guidance.

“Why...?”

*Why did things turn out like this?*

The most I could do was cover my face with my hands to block out the disaster unfolding before me.

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Layla had spent half of her life in darkness. When she had first emerged from her egg, she had been within a dark cave. Rare for a white dragon, she had been born in the hatchery below the castle.

White dragons were creatures of light magic, so bathing their eggs in sunlight was enough to make them reasonably strong and smart. They were much less reliant on the hatchery than other dragons.

But in order to ensure a brighter future for the white dragons, Faravgi had secured a place at the very center of the hatchery for his own daughter.

*“Look! She’s adorable. She even has your eyes.”*

*“Ha ha ha, and her scales glitter just like yours!”*

Her parents showered her with love. While her memories from before she could fly were vague and cloudy, they were also brimming with happiness. But as relations with the dark dragons soured, the future became darker. Negotiations with the Demon King were left to the dark dragons, as they were more in tune with the denizens of the dark. Relations between the white and dark dragons had always been bad, but time and again the white dragons found themselves drawing the short straw. They were more often dispatched to the precarious front lines, found themselves with insufficient access to food and hunting grounds, and were always last on the list when it came to healing. Over the course of centuries, little by little, unrest boiled among the white dragons until one day it all exploded. In rebellion against the dark dragons, Faravgi had led an assassination attempt on Oruphen...or at least, so Layla had been told.

It had been a fierce battle between dragons resulting in the deaths of many

white dragons, including Layla's own mother. The survivors had fled, leaving the rest of them—Layla included—behind. So she had been told.

*“Normally we would have you killed,”* Oruphen had said while he and the other dark dragons surrounded her. *“You may be a white dragon, but I cannot bring myself to harm a young girl like yourself. As a special gift, I shall spare your life.”*

However, life among the dark dragons was brutal. She lived in a state of perpetual fear and pain as she would be constantly bitten or slapped with their tails without reason. Despite her constant apologies, her only means of fighting against the pain was to beg for mercy. At least, until she learned **Anthromorphy**. The fragile nature of a human body would not be able to endure the beatings or bites from the dragons. As much as the dark dragons tormented her, they had never threatened her life.

When the white dragons joined hands with the Panhuman Alliance to attack the castle, her position grew even worse. She was scorned, abused, and worked like a slave, but nevertheless survived. However, that all seemed to be ending today.

*“Layla, your father is dead.”*

After she hadn't seen Oruphen for quite some time, those were his first words to her.

*“What...?”*

*“He had been hiding within the kingdom. Apparently he attacked a demon prince and wounded him. The prince retaliated and killed him.”*

All strength fled her legs. Among the eternal darkness that had been her life, the dream of her father coming to rescue her had been her one ray of hope, her sole consolation.

*“The prince he attacked seems quite irate. Because of your father, because of you white dragons, the rest of us are now in jeopardy.”* He grabbed her shoulders, fingernails biting deep into her skin. *“It seems you people are no more than a curse on us. But it's for that exact reason that I kept you alive, useless and pathetic as you are.”*

Oruphen's frigid gaze bore into her.

*"You will be given to the prince. Use your own body to pay for your father's sins."*

+++

Eventually, Layla started losing steam. Her loud wailing gradually died down to soft whimpering. Liliana was still sitting beside her, watching her with concern.

"First of all," I managed to squeeze out, feeling like I had just swallowed a cup of lead, "I want to talk with her. Everyone except Liliana, please give us a minute."

"Um, but, Master Zilbagias...do you not think that would be dangerous?" Garunya immediately objected. "I mean...she *is* a dragon..." she said, glancing over at the timid and defeated girl.

"Ah, you missed that part," I said, pointing to the metal collar fastened around Layla's neck. "This is dwarven-made. If she undoes her **Anthromorphy** without taking off this collar, it'll crush her throat, killing her. Sophia's in charge of the key for now."

For the most part, anything you wore stayed on you when you transformed with **Anthromorphy**. For example, any clothes you were wearing would be torn to shreds after dispelling the magic. In that vein, if you were wearing something solid like human-sized armor, it would crush you as you tried to return to your normal shape. Layla's collar was a perfect fit for her slender, human neck. Honestly, I didn't want to begin to imagine what might happen if she tempted fate and tried to revert to her dragon form.

"So no need to worry about safety."

That said, it was hard to imagine her trying anything even without the collar. If the sense of despair she displayed was all a charade to lure me into a false sense of security, she was an incredible actor.

Apparently satisfied by my explanation, Garunya and the others stepped out of the room, leaving me, Liliana, and a dead-eyed Layla. I put up a soundproof barrier.

*“Ah, it’s come to that, has it? Assaulting the daughter after killing her father will net you quite a bit of power.”*

*Ante, c’mon. Now’s not the time for those kinds of jokes.*

I gave a heavy sigh—which apparently scared Layla, as she immediately flinched at the gesture—as I stood up, getting a cup from a nearby shelf.

“It’ll be kind of hard to talk like this. Take a seat.”

I figured it would be pretty difficult for her to sit right beside me, so I motioned to the edge of the sofa opposite me as I took the other end. Hesitantly, Layla finally picked herself up off the floor and moved over to the sofa. She was clearly torn between wanting to avoid getting too close to me while also being too afraid to disobey me. Taking a pot from the desk beside me, I poured a fresh cup of herb tea into the cup.

*If I were in her shoes, what would I do?*

“As I’m the one who killed your father, I’m sure you couldn’t care less about what I have to say...but it would help me a lot if you heard me out.”

She flinched again.

“Th-That’s...not true. It is...an honor t-to speak with you...Your Highness...”

Watching her force a smile, when her eyes were still raw from crying, stung me at my core.

Apologizing for killing Faravgi was out of the question. Heck, if that green-haired shithead came to me with an “oh, I’m so sorry I killed your daddy,” my only response would be to say, “If you’re sorry, then go kill yourself.” Apologies lacked weight when there was no way to take back what you’d done.

Plus, given our relative standings here, Layla would have no choice but to accept any apology I provided. Being forced to accept an apology under those circumstances regardless of her actual feelings would hurt her more than anything. If I remained her enemy, it would likely be easier for her.

“The first thing I want you to understand is that I have no intention of holding you or any other dragon responsible for Faravgi’s actions,” I said, taking a sip of tea. “Yes, we did fight. One could even say he committed the crime of attacking

me, but that is a crime paid for in full with his life.”

Layla listened silently, staring intently at the steaming cup in my hands.

“As a prince, it would probably be in my best interest to utilize this opportunity to put more pressure on the dragons. But Oruphen giving you to me offsets that.” And as much as I tried to keep a straight face, I let a little bit of displeasure seep through. “Honestly, it kind of hurts. I’m sure Oruphen painted me as a coldhearted brute to you.”

Layla looked up at me in shock, as if surprised to hear that wasn’t the case. Her naivety was so great it hurt.

“Guess I can’t blame anyone for getting that impression after taking a look at Liliana.” Hearing her name, Liliana trotted over to me. “Layla, do you know about the conflict between the forest elves and the night elves?”

“Huh? Ah, yes...to some extent...”

“Liliana was taken prisoner by the night elves. Her hands and feet were taken from her, she was hung up by chains and tortured for seven long years.”

As I stroked Liliana’s hair, her head resting on my lap, Layla watched her with clear disbelief.

“I felt so bad for her, I couldn’t stand it. So I...”

*How should I put it?*

“I overwrote her personality with that of a dog, putting her under my control and making her my pet. I’m well aware that being presented with the choice of ‘stay and be tortured’ or ‘turn into a dog and leave’ is an awful choice to give to someone...but that’s the choice she made.”

Liliana licked at my hand before rubbing her face into my stomach. At the very least, she seemed happy enough now.

“I intended to return her hands and feet, but a combination of opposition from the night elves and a means to properly cut off the metal caps has made that not possible, for now.” I gave Layla a somewhat shy look. “To be clear, I definitely *do not* have a habit of taking girls of other races, cutting off their limbs, and turning them into pets. So please, don’t worry about that!”

“O-Okay...” Layla nodded, swept along by my intensity.

“So, with that established, I want to talk about what to do with you.”

Layla swallowed, fingers clenching tight on her lap.

“But before that, I have a question for you. Or rather, a request.”

“I, see. If I can do it, I will do anything...” she replied, returning to her fake smile. So I asked her directly.

“Could you teach me how to use **Anthromorphy**?”

“Huh?” Layla stared at me in undisguised shock. “Um...you wish to become...human?”

Completely forgetting to preserve her forced smile, she looked at me with unveiled confusion...before realizing she had just talked back to me as a look of terror returned to her face. Clearly she was worried I might get angry at her.

“Yes, I’m interested in it. Can’t hurt to have as many cards up my sleeve as possible.”

“I suppose I could teach you, but...” Layla hesitated. “In order to inherit that magic, you would have to drink my blood...”

I kept my lips shut tight as the words “I know” almost came out. Requesting such a thing while knowing I’d have to drink her blood would make me look like a pervert who was looking forward to it, right?

“O-Oh, really? I had no idea.” So I pretended like it was the first I’d heard of it.

“I would feel bad...to make you drink the dirty, light-magic-filled blood of someone like me...” she said haltingly. She really seemed more apologetic than displeased by the idea.

*Her self-esteem is nearly nonexistent, huh?*

*“After growing up around denizens of the dark, what did you expect? For her to be bright and positive? She spent her whole life being oppressed, only to finally be given as a gift to the man who killed her father,” Ante said. “At this point, she has conceded and accepted that her existence lacks value. In order to protect her own heart, she came to the conclusion that everything she*

*experienced, the very environment she was in, was just a natural result of that. Without believing that, she never would have made it through life up to this point."*

All I wanted to do was apologize for killing her father, reveal my identity to her, swear to protect her, and assure her there was no need to treat herself so poorly. Yet, doing any of that was impossible. As much as it pained me...I couldn't trust her yet. For all I knew she had sworn in her heart to get revenge on me, or had been set up by the dark dragons to spy on me. Regardless of her intentions, I couldn't rule out the possibilities that she had been cursed, or brainwashed, or had something embedded deep within her subconscious. Liliana could potentially obliterate any curse, but a personal grudge wouldn't be so simple. Taking my time and gradually building up trust with her would be key before I could frankly speak to her.

*"You intend to share your identity with her?"* Ante asked, surprised.

*It's definitely a possibility.* As a dragon, Layla could expand my options by leaps and bounds. If the day came, she might even be able to deliver Liliana back to the Alliance. However, just using Layla as a pair of legs would be foolish. It would be quite trivial for her to throw me from her back while up in the sky, sentencing me to a quick and painful death. I needed to develop a real, authentic, and cooperative relationship with her. If she learned I planned on taking revenge on Oruphen, the king of the dark dragons, and the Demon King himself, she might be willing to help.

Assuming she wanted her own revenge on me for killing her father, once it was all over, I would gladly take the fall for her. She had the right to ask for it, and I had a duty to oblige.

"Um..." Layla spoke up, her face paling with unease as I sat in silence.

"Ah, sorry. I got lost in thought a bit." Scaring her would kind of defeat the purpose of all my worries about what was to come. Not even being able to give her a reassuring smile made things quite difficult. No smile, especially from me, could make her feel better. "Regarding your blood, that won't be a concern. It's not like I view it as tainted or anything, and I *am* a demon. A little bit of light magic won't be a problem." At the very least, it wasn't enough to halt my desire

to learn **Anthromorphy**. “This arrangement will also strengthen your position here with me.”

Layla gave me a confused look.

“I’m certain the dark dragons gave you to me in hopes I’d take out my frustrations on you. But like I said, I’m not in the habit of hurting my subordinates.”

*Honestly, the fact people think that about me is really hurtful. But it sure makes my life easier!*

“For you to stay with me, I only need one thing: for you to be useful. As long as you do your part, I shall reward you appropriately. Teaching me magic is without a doubt a huge contribution, so no one can complain if I treat you well in exchange for that.”

That was the best way I could phrase it. Me treating her with kindness would probably fill her with uneasiness more than anything. And that wasn’t accounting for the fact we were practically strangers, and in many ways, we were enemies. It would be asking a lot for her to trust any goodwill coming from me. But if she was an actual asset to me, it would lend some authenticity to my good intentions toward her. The most I could do besides that was treating her with honesty and sincerity over time.

“In other words, teaching me **Anthromorphy** will be a benefit to both of us.”

“If you wish for it that badly, then...” Layla hesitantly lifted her hand. “Um...do you have...a knife? Something to draw blood?”

“Ah, right. Is this okay? Don’t worry, I’ll heal you afterward.”

“Understood.”

As I drew the dull sword from my belt, Layla didn’t hesitate before pressing it to her wrist. She had almost no reaction aside from a faint frown as the blade bit into her skin, a show of just how accustomed she was to pain. Cupping her other hand, she used it to catch the blood pouring from her wrist.

“Th-Then, please go ahead...” She held out her cupped hand to me with another fake smile.



I couldn't help but hesitate. The consideration she had for her own well-being was extremely lacking. But backing out or showing any more hesitation could give her the wrong impression that I viewed her blood as being dirty or something.

So I drank. It was unexpectedly smooth, the light magic popping in my mouth, with a sweet and sour taste to it.

And I saw a vision, the life of a certain dragon.

It was a dragon that was obsessed with anything shiny. Attacking other races, subduing them, and demanding tribute in the form of precious metals and treasures. These gifts satisfied them for a time, but over time it grew tired of simply looking over them. The dragon yearned to indulge in the treasures the same way others did! Not that it envied their frail, brittle bodies, but its powerful teeth and claws could not be adorned by the fragile treasures it had collected.

It lusted after something it couldn't have. That was the pride of a dragon. For hundreds of years it longed for this, driven mad by desire...until eventually reality warped to its powerful magic to answer that wish. At last, there stood a man adorned with crowns, rings, and necklaces, staring at himself in a glass mirror—with a pair of dragon horns emerging from his head.

And so I smoothly inherited the magic.

"So that's where it came from..."

I muttered, lifting my face from Layla's hand. *That had to be the memories of the one who created **Anthromorphy**. To think it all started because a dragon wanted to look fashionable...*

"Um, yes..." Layla nodded, a look on her face like a secret family scandal had just been exposed. The blood still poured freely from her wrist, threatening to overflow onto the floor, so I quickly used **Transposition** to take her wound. Layla quietly gasped, shocked by the wound's sudden disappearance. At the same time, Liliana whined, licking at my freshly cut wrist and healing it.

"Good girl. Thank you."

*“Bark!”*

“You’re really hopeless, you know that?” Her face spoke for her through the barks.

“So now I have the magic?” I asked.

“Yes. If you wish for it, you should be able to transform. But if you don’t have even the slightest desire to become human, it won’t work, so...” she explained, as if afraid she would be somehow blamed if the magic failed to activate.

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue.” *My desire to become human far exceeds even that of the guy who invented this magic.*

According to Virossa, you could adjust how you looked in human form to some degree. Just like how the dragons couldn’t get rid of their horns, drastic changes to things like your build, age, hairstyle, or eye and skin color weren’t really possible, but you could make small changes here and there. In simple terms, it was almost too useful when it came to disguising yourself. It was the kind of thing which would make wanted posters pretty pointless. And quite frankly, I couldn’t help but get excited as it started to sink in that I could use it. Though it was like pearls before swine here in the demonic kingdom, if I could get back to the Alliance...

“Okay, I’m going to give it a try.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. For age, I’d stick close to my current appearance. My hair could stay silver. My eyes would be dark, and my skin the healthy tan of my previous life.

*Here I go.*

I was beset by a strange sensation, like every ounce of my power was escaping my body, as if my own existence was growing hazy. Suddenly the world seemed to lose color. No, that wasn’t quite right. I had just lost the ability to perceive magic. Reaching up to my head, all I could feel was hair.

“My horns are gone!”

*A mirror! I need a mirror!*

Looking around the room, I found a glass mirror reflecting the face of a

tanned, silver-haired youth that was, in all honesty, rather handsome.

“Whoa! This is amazing!”

I was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, human.

Liliana started barking excitedly, surprised by my sudden transformation. She started sniffing me energetically, but since she wasn't an actual dog, she lacked a strong enough sense of smell to properly identify a person. Failing to recognize anything about me, she just tilted her head in confusion.

*I did it! If I could figure out a way to get there, maybe I could sneak into the Alliance! And most importantly, my horns are gone!*

“I can finally sleep on my side again!”

*I thought the day would never come!*

But, in all of my excitement, I had completely forgotten Layla was still here. She watched me with a look of unadulterated shock.

“Ah...ahem. Looks like it worked. Thank you.” Clearing my throat, I tried to regain a serious expression.

“Ah, no...um, you're welcome,” she said, dropping her face as her shoulders started to shake. I could've been seeing things, but it looked like, ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth had turned just a tiny bit upward.

“I heard a voice, did something happen?” Sophia stepped into the room without so much as knocking. It seemed taking human form had weakened my magic enough that my soundproof barrier had collapsed. “Ah. Heh. Congratulations on your new magic,” she said, having to stifle a laugh after her initial surprise at the sight of me.

“What's so funny?”

“I'm sorry...you just suddenly look so...weak.”

*So I'm that much weaker, huh? I guess from a human perspective, it would be like I transformed into an adorable little gnome.*

“Are you done with your conversation?”

“Ah, Master Zilbagias is a human...”

Not long after, Veene and Garunya followed Sophia in. There wasn't much need to keep anything else secret, so it didn't seem like a problem. Although, the shock on Garunya's face when she got a look at my new appearance made me crack a smile.

I tried flexing my magic, but it was pretty weak. By human standards, I was stronger than the average human, about on par with a decent human mage. I tried putting up one of my usual defensive barriers, but it felt flimsy and unreliable. That made it likely my soundproof barrier had failed because I no longer had the strength to cover the entire room. The best I could maybe do was no more than the distance my arms could reach.

"Interesting. It's kinda like before my horns grew in," I said, placing my hands on my hair as I released the magic. In no time at all, my horns slipped back into place. The world returned to its sharp, colorful self. Apparently I had already started taking my magical senses for granted.

"In some regards, your horns only grew in relatively recently, didn't they? I wonder, do you think I could learn **Anthromorphy**?" Sophia asked while looking at Layla, her interest clearly piqued by this new magic.

"Huh? Um...I do not know. I have never tried to teach it to a devil..."

"Lord Zilbagias, do you mind if I try?"

"If Layla doesn't mind, then go ahead."

I suppose it would be somewhat foolish of me to think Sophia would be able to sit idly while someone was learning a brand-new magic right in front of her. This time, Layla used a knife Sophia gave her to cut her hand.

"Hmm. So that's the source of it..." Sophia muttered, clearly quite taken aback by the sight she had seen after drinking Layla's blood. *If she saw that, does that mean she acquired the magic?* I watched the devil closely as I healed Layla's hand.

"Okay, here I go. Yah!" Sophia's form wavered, the whirlwind that was her magic shrinking down and down, taking the form of a tiny creature. In the devil's place was now an ordinary looking little girl. Well, ordinary if you ignored her butler's outfit and monocle. It seemed devils could use **Anthromorphy** too.

“Uh...what?!” Sophia looked around, patting at her own face in shock. “What is this? What’s going on?! Is this how humans live?! I can barely feel anything at all!” She started to tremble, wrapping her arms around herself and collapsing to the floor.

“You okay?” I lifted her from the floor and carried her over to the mirror. She actually had a physical weight and warmth to her now.

“That’s...me?” she muttered, looking intently at the mirror. Devils’ bodies were made from magic. Losing those sensory organs probably wasn’t much different from a human losing their sense of touch.

“This looks like fun,” Ante said, leaping out from my body. Seeing a girl her own size suddenly appear beside me, Layla jumped back with a soft cry.

“This is Ante, the devil I made a pact with. Normally she’s lazing away inside me.”

“No need to put it like that. Come, dragon girl, lend me some of your blood. I wish to try for myself.”

“Layla, are you sure you’re okay cutting your hand over and over like this?” I asked. “If not, just say the word.”

“D-Don’t worry! I’m honored to be of service!” With another smile plastered on her face, she didn’t hesitate to slice at her hand again for Ante.

“Ugh!” Ante transformed, shrinking smaller. Her skin was just as dark as before, but her horns were gone, giving her the appearance of an ordinary girl. “What...what is this?!” Eyes wide, she started to tremble, falling onto her backside. “It’s...”

“‘It’s’?” I echoed.

“It’s so scary!”

*Scary?*

“I cannot see or feel anything! It is like nothing exists other than the material realm! This is terrifying! In all my years, I’ve never felt something like this!” As she spoke she started to squirm, face flushing. *How the heck is being scared turning you on?! What are you, invincible?!*

“Right?! It’s terrifying!” Sophia said, stumbling her way over to Ante.

“Indeed. So those lacking in magic have such a bland view of the world?”

“It is quite intriguing. Honestly, I’m quite impressed they can survive at all like this.”

“And you are the same! Just a lump of meat! You’ve turned into one of the lesser races!”

“You too! You’re now no more than a lump of meat!”

For some reason they started pulling at each other’s cheeks. It seemed the two devils had bonded in a way us mortals couldn’t possibly understand.

*But there’s no need to call us lesser races just because our magic is weaker, okay? I was a human once, and Garunya is still here.*

And so we learned that devils could also use **Anthromorphy**.

“Although, it’s hard to imagine anyone would want to utilize this,” Sophia said bluntly, returning to her original form. “Losing the ability to perceive magic is somehow indescribable... I guess if I had to put it into words, I would say it’s a negative feeling. Becoming incredibly weaker would make anyone uneasy.”

“However, it does help to preserve magical energy while manifesting in the material world. With our forms made more concrete, we can exist without consuming magical energy. As long as we stay still, of course,” Ante explained the benefits. Still in human form, by the way.

“But wouldn’t that require you to eat food to maintain your physical body?” Sophia asked.

“Perhaps, but such is a much simpler task than acquiring magical sustenance. Ah, good idea by the way. I want to try eating something. In fact, I want to try alcohol.”

“Alcohol? Doesn’t that alter your mind? I’m quite curious about it myself.”

“While we are at it, we should try some of those suspicious drugs and poisons —”

*Stop it! Stop hunting down taboos like they’re no more than tobacco!*

“Veene, this is a strict order for you and all the other night elves. If Ante asks any of you for any kind of medicine, do not give it to her.”

“Understood.”

“What? Why?! Why can’t I try things?!” Ante whined.

“No! You’re going to destroy everything!”

“A little bit of alcohol and drugs won’t hurt anyone!” she argued, which I ignored.

*I don’t want you anywhere near alcohol! Who knows what would happen?!*

Though I supposed if she got drunk while in human form, she probably couldn’t cause too much of a ruckus. While a bit of alcohol might be fine, addictive drugs were a firm and absolute no.

“Ah, what if I tried transforming without losing my horns? Is skin and hair color the most I can change?” Sophia asked.

“Hm, perhaps I should limit how much I take on human form in the material world. I could become too accustomed to this feeling of constraint...”

Despite Sophia’s earlier claims, we now had two devils who were quite happy to take human form: one repeatedly transforming to test her limits, the other making a fetish out of choking herself off from magic. The other servants watched it all with no small measure of exasperation, but I was more than used to their behavior by this point.

Completely overpowered by the atmosphere, Layla stood watching everyone’s antics with her mouth agape.

“Well, that’s just how they are,” I said with a shrug, turning to face her. “Once again, thank you for giving me this magic. You may have been given to me as a slave,” I said, looking down to Liliana at my feet, “but I have no desire to treat you like one. Nor like a pet.”

“How shall we treat her, then? Like one of your soldiers? A guest? A servant? Your personal attendant?” With Sophia caught up in testing out her new magic, it fell to Veene to broach the topic. In truth, I’d be more than happy to have her treated as a guest or pet.

“U-Um...i-if there is anything I can do...I want to help,” Layla interjected, clenching her hands into fists.

“All right then. What kind of things are you good at?”

“Ah...um...” I posed the question to get an idea about what she wanted to do, but her determination immediately folded into a dejected look. “Um...cleaning, I suppose.”

“Cleaning?”

“A-Also...ironing...”

Veene and I shared a look. *What exactly did they do with this girl?*

“What about paperwork?”

“Ah...I’m sorry, but...I can’t read...”

“Wh-What about magic?”

“I’ve only been taught **Anthromorphy**... I’m sorry...”

“You’re a dragon, right? What about breath attacks, or flying?”

“When I was very little I used my breath a bit. But when I got bigger, I stopped, because people started getting angry at me. Besides that...” Clenching her fingers around the hem of her skirt, she seemed to shrink. “I...cannot fly since I was given the wing-rotting curse... I’m sorry...” She looked to be on the verge of tears, like she was afraid I’d be angry at her.

*They really only gave this girl the bare subsistence, huh? But now I’m starting to get the picture.*

It did make some sense. There was no way the dark dragons would teach her what she needed to be a dragon out of the kindness of their hearts. I could feel something welling up inside me. Righteous indignation, maybe.

“Layla.”

“Y-Yes...?” she all but squealed.

“As of today, you are my subordinate. The opinions of the dark dragons don’t matter anymore.” I lowered myself to look her in the eye, putting my hands on her shoulders. “And if you’re going to be my subordinate, I’m going to have you



become a proud dragon that can present herself anywhere without shame!”

“O-Okay?” Layla stared back at me with bewilderment.

“First of all, let’s get rid of that curse on your wings! Liliana, you’re up!”

*“Bark!”*

*And any other curses the dark dragons put on you can go with it!*

Though I couldn’t say that part out loud. I would make Layla a strong and proud dragon that could leave the demonic kingdom whenever it suited her, entirely capable of living on her own.

That was my responsibility as the one who had brought down Faravgi.

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Just before dawn, when most of the castle’s residents (including myself) were usually snoozing like babies, I was instead hard at work trying to restore Layla’s wings. We were on the parade ground, where I had given Layla permission to return to her dragon form. After all, it would be pretty difficult to break the curse on her wings without actually seeing her wings.

As the morning light dispersed through the parade ground, it was still filled with beastfolk deep in their training with no demons or night elves in sight.

“O-Okay, then...um, are you sure this is okay?” Layla asked again, rubbing her neck now free from its collar.

*“It’s too dangerous. There’s no telling what she’ll do.”*

Naturally, my subordinates voiced their opposition to my plan of allowing her to retake her dragon form.

*“Your fears are understandable and well warranted. But Layla is different. She wouldn’t try anything, and even if she would, she is well aware of how risky it would be to try anything here.”*

I acknowledged their concerns, but I allowed it anyway. Even if she were to go on a rampage, I would have no qualms meeting my end here. But that was something I couldn’t boldly voice. In the end, those who objected ended up backing down due to the fact I was the one who had personally taken down

Faravgi.

But just in case, my personal guard accompanied us on the parade ground, in full combat gear. In particular, Virossa stood in Swordmaster mode, hand on the hilt of his sword as if begging for the opportunity to clear his name. Layla had all but shriveled up under their scrutiny.

“U-Um...”

“Don’t mind them, Layla. Let’s get your wings healed.”

“Y-Yes sir...” With a nod, she began slipping off her dress.

*Whoops, almost forgot to look away.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw—no, I *felt* her now naked form beginning to blur. Both her body and her magic swelled tremendously. In no time, that timid girl had been replaced by a beautiful silver-white dragon, scales shining in the early morning light. A wave of shock washed over the soldiers training across the parade ground.

“You’re pretty strong, huh?” I murmured. Despite being relatively young for a dragon, her magic was about on par with Faravgi’s. That must speak to the potential she had. Even if she was physically a bit small for a dragon, there was no reason to think she wouldn’t keep growing.

Stretching like a cat, Layla began flicking her tail. The wings on her back were twisted and broken, just like Faravgi’s had been.

“Can I get on your back?”

“P-Please do! Though it may be a bit small...!” Layla dropped low to the ground.

*What exactly did she mean by her back being small? Is that kinda how dragons display humility?*

She showed no signs of wanting to flee or lash out. I felt torn between being relieved and wanting to mourn the broken heart that signified. If she really wanted to attack me after all of this, she would easily be the best actor in the entire demonic kingdom.

“Let’s go, Liliana.”

*“Bark!”*

As conflicted as I felt, I nevertheless picked up Liliana and jumped onto Layla’s back. I could see dark magic-like chains wrapped around her wings, rooted deep into her.

“That’s it. Can you manage?”

*“Woof!”* Liliana smacked the base of Layla’s wings with her hand. Or elbow, I suppose. A surge of light magic poured from the high elf, obliterating the curse on Layla’s wings in an instant. Right before my eyes, her wings began to unfold and grow.

“Wow...!” Craning her long neck back to see for herself, Layla’s eyes were glittering. “Incredible!” She began to lightly flap her wings, the energy seeping into her movements conveying her joy. Liliana watched her with a bright smile, sharing in Layla’s joy with a happy whine of her own.

That curse had caused Faravgi suffering for so long, and that was all it took to break it. If we had met under other circumstances, I wondered if he could have found the same relief.

“U-Um...is it...is it okay if I fly...just a little bit?”

“Of course. Go test out those wings,” I answered instantly, slipping off Layla’s back. My reply left her in awe; clearly she hadn’t expected me to give her permission so easily.

“Thank you so much! U-Um...how do I do this again...?” Lifting herself back to her feet, she began shaking her wings, sinking into thought.

“Are you sure? She might run away,” Sophia whispered, watching the whole affair from the sidelines, arms crossed.

“No, she won’t. She can’t,” I said, shrugging as I shifted my gaze up toward the skies above.

After our attack on the castle, the dragons had taken to patrolling the sky using their unbelievable eyesight. Far, far above us, there was a unit of dragons keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings. If anything suspicious happened, they’d be down here firing off breath attacks in a heartbeat. Run away? That

would be absurd. As a dragon herself, Layla would have a good idea just how impossible such a task would be.

“O-Okay! Here I go!” Though it seemed the thought hadn’t even occurred to her, as she was swept away by the exultation of having had her wings restored. She began to run across the ground, flapping her wings.

“Do dragons need a running start to fly?”

“Uh...I don’t think so...” From my recollection, the other dragons I had seen take off from the departure point just kicked off the ground and launched into the air with ease.

“Yah!” With a strong flap, Layla lifted herself up into the air.

*Oh! She’s gliding! So she was just starting off slow!*

“Wait. Huh? What?!”

Except after that, her attempts at lifting off just drove her right back into the dirt. It seemed to me like she had lifted her wings upward when she was supposed to be pushing down to catch the wind. So instead of soaring upward, she spectacularly slid across the parade ground, kicking up quite the dust cloud. That was until the castle wall forced her to an abrupt stop, her head slamming against the stone wall, which resounded with a loud thump. The birds resting on top of the wall all took off as one, startled by the sudden impact.

“Layla! Are you okay?!” After a short pause from the shock, I came back to my senses and ran to her side. *She isn’t moving. No way she’s dead, right?!*

“U-Ugh...” Just as I started to worry, she lifted herself from the ground, sand and flakes of stone raining from her face...along with a stream of blood dripping from her nose.

Her golden eyes filled with tears. As if rewinding herself, she shrank back into human form. Whether it was from pain or shame, her face was bright red as she plopped down onto her backside and began wailing.

“Hey now! None of that!” Garunya dashed to Layla’s side, the dragon’s discarded dress in hand, with a very clear “I told you so” face. In the meantime, I took Layla’s injuries.

*Ow, my nose...*

"I'm... I'm sorry...!"

"You haven't done that in quite a while, right? Don't worry about it. Let's keep practicing."

To which she immediately began wailing again. I turned back to Sophia with a shrug. Beside her was Virossa, his readiness replaced with pity, hand long gone from his sword.

"Looks like we've got a long road ahead of us," Sophia said, lifting her hands in defeat with a small sigh.

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"Rejoice, Zilbagias. You have been granted the rank of viscount," Prati said as she floated into the room, the look of joy on her face unlike anything I'd seen from her before.

"Viscount?!"

Until now, I had been the rank of esquire within the demonic kingdom's hierarchy. The order from there went knight, baronet, baron, viscount, then count. Jumping that many ranks at once wasn't supposed to be really possible.

"Indeed! You are the youngest to ever achieve the rank!"

*I would hope so! Who ever heard of a five-year-old viscount?!*

Only one reason came to mind to explain the sudden promotion.

"For killing Faravgi, was it?"

Layla wasn't present at the moment as she was likely being shown the ropes of living in the servants' quarters by Garunya.

"Most likely. Your little exercise was supposed to be discreet and kept off the record, but given how things played out, I made it official. Your first battle has been recorded as slaying Faravgi, leader of the rebellious white dragons."

*...I see.*

"Even among us demons, there exist very few who can boast of slaying a dragon of such caliber single-handedly. In truth, it is a feat deserving of the rank

of count,” Prati said, dropping onto the sofa with a somewhat displeased look, “but given your age, viscount was the highest they were willing to give you.”

*Not really surprised. I completely agree with their decision.*

“You seem...awfully detached about this news. If it were me, my frustration would keep me up for days.” Prati looked at me, quite taken aback by my calmness. To be quite honest, I couldn’t care less about the ranks of the demonic kingdom. “At any rate, in one swift move you managed to achieve the rank of viscount. There are scores of demons who spend years on military campaigns and still fall short of ever reaching that height,” Prati laughed, a cruel light dancing in her eyes. “Even if they celebrate your success on the surface, I imagine many even among the Rage family are quite bitter deep down when it comes to your rapid ascension. If you were going to earn the jealousy of others regardless, I concluded you may as well jump straight to the rank of count.”

*That does make some sense in a way.*

“But now that you have become a viscount, you may face some...abrasiveness from those of your rank or higher. Until now, your rank of esquire acted as a form of protection for you.”

“Protection?” I asked.

“Holding a serious grudge against a mere esquire would bring anyone great ridicule. But now that you are a viscount...those with real power have no reason to fear public backlash if they seek to become your direct opposition.”

With proof of the strength I had displayed, my title now gave anyone more license to fight me. “So they’re going to be coming to put the young new upstart in his place, huh?”

“Precisely. Quite the problem, no?”

Prati’s reasoning for wanting me to jump right to count was starting to make sense.

“How should I respond? Should I pay them a visit before they start looking for a fight?”

“I wanted to suggest just that.” Prati all but glowed at my throwaway

suggestion. “Crush anyone who opposes you. Deliver them a pain so great they won’t soon forget. Prove to them you possess the power of a count. If you manage to keep them uneasy in your presence, their weaknesses will manifest when in conflict with you. They will be unable to resist your will.”

As long as they were of a magic-wielding race, their own magic would become a curse that held them back. On the other hand, there were probably others that were planning on coming to implant that idea in my head too.

“If they remain obstinate and challenge you repeatedly, that is worth noting. Such could be the basis for a good friendship in the future.”

*Demons really are savages.*

“Remember, Zilbagias. Rank in the demonic kingdom does not signify importance, it signifies strength. These days, there are plenty who have failed to understand the difference.”

“In other words, I need to demonstrate power appropriate for my position.”

“Precisely. Or in your case, you need to show that your power far exceeds your station.”

Though none of them were aware I had beaten Faravgi using **Naming** with the name Alexander and wielding all of my holy magic. I had basically thrown all my trump cards at him. Without them, viscount was probably an appropriate rank for me. Either way, if anyone came around to try and stir up trouble, I would be more than happy to put them in their place.

“Also remember, there are many who will object to your rank given that you have yet to participate in the war effort.”

I paused.

“In a sense, they have a point. You have not undergone the baptism by fire that is battle on the front lines. From my perspective, you have no need to undergo such formalities. But others will remain ignorant of your capabilities without coming to know you quite well.” Prati looked out the window, a weary expression on her face. “Though you unexpectedly came to finish your first battle, experiencing a deployment against the Alliance may be a good idea.”

*What? Already? It's too soon for that. Way too soon.*

"Anyway, we can worry about that later. In other news...I see you have acquired another strange pet," she said with an amused look, propping her head up with one hand on the sofa's armrest.

"I wasn't exactly expecting it either," I replied.

"How do you plan on using her?"

"Something like a personal guard is probably the closest idea. I intend on having Sophia teach her. Also, since she has spent so much time as a human, her abilities as a dragon are significantly lacking, so I plan on slowly getting her trained in that respect as well. Once she regains the ability to fly, I thought I would use her personally."

"You plan to ride her yourself?" Prati frowned. "I am against it. The Demon King never rides a dragon as a safeguard against potential rebellion. And this child...Layla, was it? You are personally responsible for killing her father. There's no telling when ideas might start swirling around her head. If you must travel, you should use a dragon with no ties to yourself."

"I feel exactly the same way, mother. But..." I clasped my hands on my lap, thoughts racing. I really wanted a way to travel that didn't involve the dragons. "Taking that into consideration, I still think it would be best to build a relationship with Layla to the point that she wouldn't mind me riding her."

"Oh? And why is that?"

*Okay, don't have a clue how convincing I'll be, but all I can do is try.*

"I believe the dragons only pretend to be subservient." Prati responded with a small, silent nod, confirming the demons were already aware of that. "If I were in their position, I would feign obedience, biding my time until something like the next succession war to attempt anything."

"True. That is quite a likely possibility," Prati commented, refolding her legs.

"That's where Layla comes in. She has long been abused by the dark dragons. She was a hostage held against the white dragons, and used as an example for those who supported them."



According to what I had heard, the white and dark dragons had been the two factions at the top of the draconic hierarchy. They were fighting over something until the Demon King swooped in and subdued them both. But once they were brought under the rule of the demonic kingdom, negotiations fell to the dark dragons, thus leading the white dragons to gradually lose strength. The rebellion of the white dragons was the last straw in securing the dark dragon's supremacy here. However, that didn't mean all the white dragon supporters had vanished. Though they swore allegiance to the dark dragons now, they were still treated with contempt.

"Though this is far off in the future, I want to set Layla up as a figurehead for the members of the white dragons' faction," I said, slowly and carefully. My main priority was establishing an excuse to treat Layla so well.

"I see..." It seemed Prati had a decent idea regarding my reasoning. "An offer of salvation and redemption to those who supported the white dragons. In addition, you seek to divide the dragons against themselves, reigniting the conflict between the white and dark dragons."

"I believe it will chip away at their growing rebellious impulses. They should be fully aware of the risk they bear in defying the demonic kingdom."

It didn't matter how rebellious they were in spirit, there had to be some who prized the stability the kingdom offered. If they could be looped into the white dragons' faction under Layla, and by extension her servitude to a certain demon prince, the rebels' power would be greatly diminished. And in order to show them how much they could benefit from cooperation with us, I needed to treat Layla with the greatest favor.

That was my logic. Of course, that wasn't my true intention. If I carried this plan out until the last moment and then pulled the ladder out from under them, I could enrage the dragons and all but guarantee a bloody rebellion.

"While I understand your reasoning, and I agree keeping this Layla close at hand is not a bad idea"—Prati gave a solemn nod—"that is no excuse for you to ride her. No matter how well you treat her, you are still an object of revenge for her."

"I know. No matter how well I treat her..." It took a great deal of effort to

stop my face from twisting in pain. "...there's nothing I can do to make up for the fact I took her father from her. There's no giving back to her what she's lost. That hatred will continue to smolder in her heart forever..." I looked Prati in the eye. "But with a noble enough goal, I can inspire in her the rationality to keep that anger under control."

"And what goal would that be?" Prati asked.

"I'll educate her on how to not allow her emotions to control her, but instead how to use her brain. I will talk with her in order to come to an understanding regarding a possible future for demons and dragons together. I'll teach her that collaborating with me will create a brighter future for her people, something that can't be achieved by killing me."

I would create a truly cooperative relationship. The scary part was that I meant every word of what I was saying. The discussion on the future of the demons and dragons would come someday.

"And then...well, this will only be as a last resort, but if she accepts, I can use my magic to forbid her from lying. That should be sufficient to verify if she has any desire to kill me. Although, if at any point I'm unable to guarantee my own safety, I'll abandon this course." I raised my hands in playful surrender. "After all, I don't want to go down in history as the guy who was naive enough to trust a dragon so easily, only to be thrown from the sky to his death."

"Well...if you have thought it through that much, I will leave this matter to you. It does not sound like you intend for this to come up in the near future anyway." Prati relaxed, leaning back into the sofa. It seemed she had accepted the fact I wasn't trusting Layla on blind faith. "Where did you learn all this?" she asked. "Has Sophia been teaching you to think like that?"

"It couldn't have been anyone else," I replied.

"I suppose that was a silly question." She smiled wryly, putting a hand to her cheek. With a gentle expression, she narrowed her eyes at me. "I couldn't be more proud of you, my son," she said, her voice all but triumphant.

For a moment—the briefest of seconds—I thought I saw something in her face, almost like that of my real mother. A thought I crushed quickly and violently.

It was pretty weird considering I could barely remember my mother's face at this point.

*You think I'm just gonna allow my memories to be overwritten?*

There was no making up for the murder of my parents. There was no giving back what I had lost. *Hatred will continue to burn in my heart forever, Prati.*

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Once our conversation about Layla had come to a close, Prati quickly decided we should do some sparring since it had been so long.

*Damn musclebrain!*

We took a carriage to an area within the forest only a short distance from the castle. Normally we would conduct our training on the parade ground, but this time we wanted a bit more privacy since I would be using my new swordspear. Prati had given me permission to try it out, but she wasn't entirely convinced it was a better option than an ordinary spear. As such, she wanted to make sure we practiced somewhere away from prying eyes. In short, this was like a test. Which meant I couldn't afford to suck at this.

*Let's do this, Adamas! We'll show her just how strong we are!* As I spoke to the sword in my heart, it started to shudder in its sheath. *Hold up! It's not time yet! We're not going that far! Don't wake up yet!*

And so I found myself desperately trying to calm down the sword.

"So, you are Virossa?" Prati called out to the night elf, who had joined us as part of our escort. As always, he looked the part of a night elf hunter with his black leather armor while wielding a bow. The only thing that set him apart was the thin sword on his belt. "To reach the pinnacle of swordsmanship as a night elf is rather impressive."

"You honor me, my lady. However, I still have a long way to go," Virossa replied with a polite bow. To me though, I could sense his expression was rather guarded. As though he questioned why he had been called all the way out here.

"I have only fought a small number of Swordmasters in my time," Prati said as if it were nothing of note, casually dropping the hint that she had fought—and

defeated—more than one in the past. “I would like to see your skills for myself. Please, spar with me for a bit.”

“Yes, my lady. Uh...my lady?” After a reflexive nod, he repeated himself with an added questioning tone.

“I have been told you believe Zilbagias possesses a natural gift for the sword. But being called a Swordmaster is no guarantee of *your* abilities. I would like to gain a proper judgment of the Swordmaster that recognized my son’s potential. The most straightforward way to do so would be to fight you myself, no?”

*Ah, so that’s why she picked a secretive location this time around.*

“You do not need to worry about injuring me. I am not so narrow-minded as to grow angry simply for losing a sparring match with you,” she said with a daring smile. Recognizing that the archduchess was serious, the rest of the retinue surrounding Virossa stepped away.

Left on his own, the night elf looked to me. It felt as though he was asking for my assistance, but there was nothing I could do once she made up her mind. All I could do was silently shake my head.

“Very well.” With a small scowl, he put a hand on the hilt of his sword, shifting his form to that of a human Swordmaster. The silence with which he drew his sword was unnerving. Letting the sword hang loosely at his side, he took a natural stance.

“Let us begin.” Prati looked quite excited. While I was fully aware of how skilled she was, it was impossible for me to predict which way this fight would swing.

“Then please, excuse my rudeness.” Virossa’s expression turned vacant. He was equally determined once he had set his mind to something. Lifting his sword, he slipped forward, using the characteristic footwork of the night elves meant to mislead and confuse their opponents. His speed was unreal; his techniques put his full power as a Swordmaster on display. The deadly gleam of his weapon arced mercilessly toward Prati.

“Oh?” Stepping back to dampen the momentum of Virossa’s charge, Prati swung her spear to deflect the incoming blade. But instead, the blade seemed

to warp, curving around her weapon and reaching for her arm.

Prati gave a short laugh as she let go of her spear, slapping away the incoming sword to the side, throwing it off its path. Using her other hand, she punched forward with her spear, throwing her full weight into tackling him with its shaft.

Virosa scowled as he was thrown off-balance, but turned his new backward movement into a slash so fast my eyes were unable to keep up. A silver light flashed through the night forest—striking hard against Prati’s spear. The high-pitched scream of metal on metal filled the air with a shower of sparks. Both combatants jumped backward as if thrown away by the impact, carefully watching each other’s movements.

“Looks like my loss.” But Prati soon dropped her shoulders, relaxing out of her combat stance. “You held back there, didn’t you?” She held her spear up, inspecting it under the moonlight. “That was a solid slash. You should have cut right through the spear and killed me.”

“However, I would have failed to take your life with one attack.” Virossa dropped his own guard with a bitter look. “At that angle, I would not have been able to take your head. Any blow to your abdomen would not be immediately fatal, thus leaving myself vulnerable to your **Transposition**.”

The weakness of a Swordmaster was their lack of resistance against magic. Without powerful charms or blessings cast by an accomplished mage, they were absolutely defenseless against curses.

“Which means if I didn’t have **Transposition**, you would have won.” Prati shrugged. “I admit it. You are certainly among the best Swordmasters I have ever seen. I am elated to have you as an ally.”

“You flatter me, my lady.” Virossa bowed, returning his sword to its sheath. Though their exchange had been brief, it had been a display of their insane strength. *If I wanna keep up with them, I’m gonna have to pick up the pace.*

“Zilbagias,” Prati turned to face me, “it should go without saying that facing a Swordmaster without magic is suicide. I cannot put a number to the people who foolishly challenged one on the battlefield with spearmanship alone only to be cut down in turn. If you ever encounter a Swordmaster, do not hesitate to unleash every curse at your disposal before approaching. Keep in mind, they

will usually be accompanied by heroes and priests, so it will not be an easy task.”

“Understood.”

“Honestly, besides their holy magic, human heroes are not much to worry about. But you must never underestimate Swordmasters.”

*Ooh boy. Even if it's just Prati talking, no way can I let that one slide!*

“While I would like to provide you with beneficial experience against holy magic, unfortunately that’s a luxury we have been unlucky in acquiring as of yet,” she sighed before shrugging again. “Now then, it’s your turn. Let us see the fusion of sword and spear that has earned Virossa’s approval.”

*Bring it on! I'll show you what we're made of! Let's go, Adamas! Our pride as a hero is on the line here! Wait, no, stop, don't wake up yet! Not yet!*

Once again desperately suppressing the sword’s power, I melded the bones around my belt into the swordspears.

“Then here I come, mother.” Stomping down on the irritation in my heart, I reclaimed my composure. Drawing out as much magic as I could, I stepped in to attack.

“My name is Zilbagias,” I **Named** myself, keeping my eyes locked on her, “the demon of true valor!”

For the most part, we didn’t use magic during our training, the few exceptions being my **Naming** and the defensive wards we both used. These things would be a given on any battlefield.

All at once I felt myself expand. The world around me was warping to my will. The laws of nature bent and broke before me. I felt like I had become a giant mass of steel, like a sword swung by a giant. Not even a dragon could stand against this charge!

Prati gave an elated laugh, eyes wide. “I hardly recognize you, Zilbagias!” Drawing out her own magic, she responded with a full strength thrust of her own spear, her boulder-like magical presence all focused on the tip of her spearhead. The power would be more than enough to kill me, yet came with no

hint of hesitation or mercy behind it.

But...I could read the attack clearly. Her spear rode the length of my sword. In one swift, circular motion, I wrapped her weapon with my blade and threw it aside. It was a technique used to defend against spears with a sword, delivered at a spear's range. Of course, spears were also capable of accomplishing this, but it was much more dangerous to allow your opponent's weapon to ride down the haft of a spear compared to gliding down your weapon's blade.

"My!" Prati exclaimed, delighted.

*Don't celebrate so soon or you'll be saying goodbye to your fingers!*

At first, she tried to overwhelm me with pure strength, but she soon recognized the trap I had lain and so quickly retreated. Even having thrown the tip of my swordspears upward, I was still in the perfect position to deliver a swift slash. If I had been using a spear, it would have merely been a slam, a simple blunt strike allowing the enemy an opportunity to grab my weapon and restrict my movements. But how would that work if they were grabbing at a blade? Surefire way to create quite a mess of their hand.

Carrying the momentum of my charge forward, I thrust for Prati's torso. Would she give up, or sacrifice a limb to save herself?

*Time to choose, mom!*

The combination of my physical and magical strength forced that choice on her, my sleeping holy sword descending on her like a whirlwind. Prati laughed again, whirling her spear around to deflect the attack, but that wasn't going to work this time. Prati was quite powerful when it came to magic, but with **Naming**, I wasn't that far behind. And if she wanted a contest of physical strength, we were quite even.

I roared as the magical steel of her spear shed sparks, my blade raking down it toward her hand. At this rate she would be losing fingers, a fact she clearly realized as she twisted herself backward, delivering an acrobatic kick with her knee to knock my weapon aside.

Exactly as I had expected. The spearmanship practiced by demons had many elements of unarmed martial arts mixed into it. It was similar to how she had

slapped Virossa's blade aside with her bare hand. Having foreseen her movement, I twisted my wrist as she bent backward, bringing my blade toward her from the side. She was attempting to kick my spearspear away with her knee. Now she'd be kicking right into the edge of the blade. *Defensive wards? Ha.*

"Punch through!" I shouted, pouring all of my strength into the blade for an instant. It was a technique I had learned during my days as a hero, when magic was a precious resource that required efficient management. If I was lacking in magic overall, I would shift to focusing it into a single spot. The holy sword shivered, filling with power even in its dormant state—and slicing through her wards like they were no more than paper. Delivered with an animal ferocity, the blade let out a sharp ting as it found its mark.

As expected, having her kneecap sliced in two brought an expression of some pain to Prati's face, but it wasn't enough to stop her. Whirling her spear around, she attempted to drive its butt into my gut. This time it was my turn to use my left hand to knock the incoming attack away, as if deflecting it with a shield.

For a brief moment, I let go of the spear in my right hand, choking up on the grip to hold it like a sword. We were close enough that I could make out the rainbows swirling in her eyes.

*Exactly the perfect range for a sword!*

With a grunt I swung sideways, my blade arcing for Prati's neck. Eyes wide, she threw up her left arm to protect herself, attempting to sacrifice the limb to avoid a fatal wound. But once again, I twisted my wrist to point the edge of the blade away, the flat of the blade slamming into her defending arm. Unable to resist the impact as her arm was swatted away, the sword continued without impediment, landing a direct hit on her horns. A dull sound filled the air as metal struck the horn, leaving Prati to collapse to her knees with her eyes barren.

A demon's horns were directly connected to their skull. A strong impact there would be a dizzying blow. No matter the helmet, a demon's horns were always exposed, making them one of the very few weak points of the demons. You had to ignore the fact that getting close enough to deliver a blow to their horns was



a death-defying feat in its own right, though.

Without a word, I moved to deliver the finishing blow...stopping just short, and jumping back.

“Incredible...” Garunya murmured from behind me. It was clear to everyone that if I hadn’t held back, Prati’s head would have been mine. This was the first time I had ever driven Prati to her knees.

Although I had used the technique of focusing my magic into a single point quite often as a hero, that was the first time I had done so as a demon. The tip of my spear was too far away from my hands, so it never felt quite right. But with a sword, a single straight line directly extended from my hands, and with the tip of my spear being my own holy sword, I had been able to make it work.

Prati began a low chuckle as she regained her senses, still huddled low to the ground. “Amazing! That was incredible, Zilbagias!” Jumping back to her feet, her eyes were positively sparkling. “Natural talent? That doesn’t even begin to describe it! Virossa was right about you!”

Virossa, watching the match with arms crossed from behind her, nodded along to Prati’s exultation. It had taken quite some time, but sparring with Virossa had proved to be more than worth it to make this technique work. After all, it was no simple feat to merge the spearmanship of the demons and the swordsmanship I had cultivated as a hero. Relearning how to focus my magic like that had proved to be a huge boon as well.

“I am beyond surprised. Never would I have imagined that you’d make easy work of my wards,” she said, caressing the bleeding wound on her knee.

“Oh, right. Let me heal you.” I took Prati’s injuries. *Oh damn, my knee! And my head?!* The dull pain reached right to the core of my horns and down into my head. The sudden agony brought me to my knees, prompting Liliana to come running. *Sorry, as always...*

“Absolutely stunning. That was phenomenal, Zilbagias. I am glad to have witnessed your potential for myself.” Prati was positively glowing as Liliana began licking at my wounds. “And as you suggested, that weapon has its quirks that grant it some cleverness beyond the spearmanship we practice. While there are some rougher areas that need to be refined, I am certain you and

Virossa will polish those. I am sure you will go down in history for the invention of this weapon.”

“I will do everything I can.” *Not that I’m ever teaching this to anyone else.*

“Ah, I can’t wait. For you to already be this strong, how much greater will you be when you start fighting with magic?” As she started getting giddy, Prati put a hand to her mouth in thought. “True. You are a viscount now, and clearly have become quite strong. Perhaps now I will allow magic and other underhanded tactics in our training.”

“I’m sorry, what?” *Already?! I barely managed to get a single hit in!*

“Good. Your injuries have already recovered, no? Let us begin again.” Unable to contain herself, Prati lifted her spear once more with a delighted smile. “As your mother, it would be a disgrace to end in defeat. Allow me to reveal to you my own secrets.” Ignoring my dejected reply, she drew two more portable spears from her belt. “*Come forth, Cataclysis,*” she intoned, a transparent arm emerging from her back.

“Uh...”

*What?*

“This is the arm of Cataclysis, the devil of my own pact. Not unlike how you have your own pet devil living in you.” After she tossed one of her spears into the air, the devil’s arm took hold of it and held it in a ready stance. Altogether she now held three spears at the ready.

*Triple wielding?!*

“Now, let us begin,” she said, approaching with a bright grin.

*Now this is just rude! Why can’t you let me have this one win?!*

“*You can do it, Alexander! Show her the power of a hero!*” Ante was laughing up a storm inside me.

*You know what? Fine!*

With a healthy measure of desperation, I moved to meet the charging, triple-wielding Prati.

Prati had formed a true pact with the Devil of Sadism, Cataclysis. He was what's known as an asura type of devil. A warlike variant that possessed multiple arms. Seemingly, he had given one of them to her at the creation of their contract.

*"Asura display their growth in strength by growing more arms. Apparently, growing too many arms can cause a myriad of problems for them. So, any opportunity to relinquish one of their arms is a lucky break for them."*

*Is that how it works?*

I never knew that...but at any rate, I had encountered my fair share of asura on the battlefield in my previous life. They usually had six or eight arms, which gave them enough weapons to be a hassle to deal with. Regardless, I'd taken out plenty of them during my time as a hero!

"Two arms? Three arms? Doesn't matter. I'm not gonna lose!" So I declared, but...

"Oh my, you seem awfully confident!" With a bright smile, Prati flooded her weapons with magical energy and they began to whirl. The sound they made as they cut through the air was almost like a storm of spears. The constant pressure of attacks coming in waves, mixed with a healthy dose of precision strikes in between them, was enough to keep me from launching a solid counterattack.

*I would kill for a shield right about now!* Back when I was a hero, I always had a shield in my left hand.

"Where did all that energy go, Zilbagias? You won't win if you fight like that!" Prati mocked me as she pressed her attack. While I had been quick to rush her initially, I was forced to act defensively.

*"Wielding multiple spears is forbidden!"* If magic was allowed now, there was nothing stopping me from putting a restraint on her, but a leathery snap signaled my curse being effortlessly brushed off.

*That third arm really gives her a boost, huh?* But even with that, it seemed as though she hesitated for just a moment when she was struck by the curse.

Maybe my best bet was to aim for that opening.

As that thought crossed my mind, a quick strike from Prati's third spear grazed my cheek, prompting a glow in Prati's eyes.

*"Sadismos!"*

Suffer in excess!

The scratch on my cheek ignited. It was like hundreds of red-hot needles had been jammed into my face, and then I had plunged my face into a bowl of salt.

*"Gaaah?!"*

*"Agh?!"*

For what should've been a mere scratch, the pain was immense. It seemed Ante felt considerable pain as well, indicated by her bizarre scream from within me. The shock of the pain brought me to a stop, giving Prati another opening to strike. She continued to deliver shallow strikes to my shoulders and knees. While none of them were fatal by any means, all of them were equally, viciously painful.

Unable to even scream in pain anymore—and with Ante writhing in agony inside me—I collapsed to the ground in convulsions. Prati nodded with a satisfied look, looking down at me with her spears still spinning.

*"This is the authority of the Devil of Sadism. It magnifies every ounce of pain you feel, driving it into the depths of your soul."*

As the wounds she inflicted delivered pain directly to your soul, it was no wonder Ante felt such incredible pain. Liliana pranced over and began licking at my injuries, both healing the shallow cuts and destroying Prati's curse, freeing me from the pain.

*"How...dare...you! How dare you fill my repose with this sewage!"*

*"That's not your 'repose,' it's my soul! Don't treat a person's soul like it's your personal room!"*

"That was, quite thoroughly, agonizing..." I managed through heaving breaths.

“I made the injury about a hundred times worse, so I can only imagine. The lowest I can do is about twice as painful. Makes me wonder how much greater I could make the pain. Probably somewhere around three thousand times.”

*Three thousand times the pain?!*

“She’s just showing off at this point,” Ante commented. “That much pain would drive you mad and kill you instantly.”

It probably would. No normal person could endure three thousand times the amount of pain.

“Isn’t that, kind of, cruel?”

“Of course it is. This is the magic of a devil. The same goes for your magic, even if I am able to resist it.”

Apparently her title of archduchess wasn’t just for show. And Prati was one of the demonic kingdom’s healers. That combination meant it was pretty convenient for her to gain power through her devil’s authority. *Wait, healing...?*

“Mother, do you mix that curse with **Transposition**...?”

“Of course.”

*You’ve got to be joking!*

“Even after declaring that magic was permitted, you left yourself entirely defenseless against my curse. That was why the curse of pain was so effective against you. You have no idea what kind of attacks your opponents will bring to bear against you. You must never lower your guard; always be ready to defend yourself from any magic.”

“Yes, mother...”

*Dammit...this is exactly why I hate demons!*

“Now, if you’ve prepared yourself, shall we try another round? I can fend off your magic, so you should be more than capable of defending yourself from mine.”

*All right, let’s do this! Let’s show her what we’re made of, Ante!*

As I started to get riled up, Ante slipped out of me to stand at my side.

“I shall watch your deeds of valor from here!” she declared, dropping to lie down on the ground.

*Damn you, Ante!*

As I stared at her while struggling to keep myself from exploding, Prati began to roar with laughter. “Ah, I am glad to see you two are on such good terms,” she said, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

“Ante, act as my shield!”

“Absolutely not!”

“You can at least buy me some time!”

“I’m quite lacking when it comes to physical activities like this. I couldn’t even buy you one second.”

“Wipe that smug look off your face!”

*“Using multiple arms is forbidden. There, I’ll cheer you on like that from time to time, so be happy with that.”*

*Dammit. That probably being way more effective kinda pisses me off.*

“Are you done talking? Then let us start, Zilbagias,” Prati spoke gently. “Fight like your life depends on it.”

Lifting her spears, she slid forward.

I discovered later that Prati’s parents had both come from prestigious families, giving her access to a Bloodline Magic besides **Transposition** as well as plenty of other curses.

“I’m quite looking forward to our future training sessions. I cannot wait to see your development...” Prati said as she stroked my hair while I was stretched out on the ground like a tattered rag doll.

*Dammit...this is why I hate demons!*

I made a note to myself to make sure I wore my Faravgi-scale armor next time. Having armor made with such powerful magic and curse resistance had been an incredible bit of foresight on my part. Though, using it for training

wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind.

Completely exhausted, I passed out on the spot.

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I woke up abruptly, finding myself on my bed back in my room. Looking to the window, I could see bright sunlight streaming in through closed curtains. I had woken up far earlier than a demon normally would. "I guess this isn't the first time..."

The previous instance would have been when I fought those human soldiers. I had been exhausted, so I'd turned in pretty early. That resulted in me waking up around a similar hour. In the corner of my room, five human skulls sat like trophies on a shelf. I had taken them to ensure they wouldn't be turned into undead and forced to serve the demonic kingdom. It seemed as though they had decided to watch over me from the afterlife. Another portion of their remains, fashioned into my spear, sat propped up against my bed, so I offered them another prayer.

*I'm sorry...and again, thank you.*

Liliana was sound asleep beside me. Even Ante, in her human form, was snoring loudly, entirely uncovered. I could only guess she had been curious to see what it was like to sleep as a lesser race. It sounded like something she'd do. She really was enjoying having a human body as much as she could.

Careful not to wake them, I quietly slipped out of bed. Apparently noticing the lack of my warmth, Liliana began to squirm, but calmed down once she cuddled up to Ante. The devil in turn let out a surprised cry before returning the cuddle, holding Liliana like a pillow without ever opening her eyes. I was glad to see them on such good terms.

The fact that Liliana could sleep with such peace and defenselessness felt like it might offer some forgiveness for me. Even if that relief was a lie created by sealing away her memories and turning her into a pet, I couldn't help but pray that the peace she had found here would continue at least a little longer.

"I see you're awake," Sophia called out to me as I stepped out of my room, looking up from her book.

“Yeah. Any chance I could get something light to eat and drink? Even a sandwich would be fine.”

“Understood.” Clapping her book shut, Sophia stood to find some servants to pass on the instructions.

“Oh, actually, could you ask them to bring the food in a basket? I’d like to eat somewhere else.”

“In the middle of the day? Very well,” Sophia asked, confused by the request but nevertheless complying.

*Don’t worry Sophia, I don’t expect you to understand my soul’s love for the sun.*

After a short wait, Sophia returned with a maid-uniform wearing Layla in tow.

“Ah...heh heh...here is your s-sandwich and drink...” Layla said, while holding out the basket with her usual fake smile.

“Are you okay being awake this late?” I asked, a bit surprised as I took the basket from her. *Why would she be doing maid work at this time of day?*

“Ah, it’s...fine. It’s good for my body, I guess... I am more in tune with the light...” she replied with a gloomy smile, gaze dropping.

“It seems she’s got a slight case of insomnia, so we put her on the daytime rotation. As for being a maid, that was her request. Apparently she’s unable to relax without having something to do,” Sophia explained with a small shrug.

“Is that so... You know, if you wanted, you could study instead of working all the time.”

“Ah! Um...I’m...also working hard at my studies...s-so while I’m grateful, I feel...just studying all the time...feels wrong. Not that I’m complaining!” Layla began shaking her head, almost panicking. *Ah. No matter how important studying is, studying around the clock would certainly be overkill. I completely understand where she is coming from.*

Sophia and I shared a wry smile, remembering back when I was a kid who absolutely hated studying...though I guess I was still only five years old.

Layla had begun to shrink back, seemingly afraid I’d be angry with her.



“You can do whatever you like. The most important thing is that you’re enjoying yourself and not suffering. It’s not like I’m in a hurry or anything. It’s not my intention to make it seem like I’m rushing you,” I tried to say as lightheartedly as possible. “You are...at least a little bit more free than you used to be.” At the end of the day, she was still my servant. So there wasn’t much more I could say. “Now then, where should I eat?”

“Please allow me to accompany you.”

“Ah, then...I-I’ll go too...!”

Though it was ordinary enough for Sophia to escort me around, apparently Layla had decided to tag along as well. With a holy sword, a rolled up array of bones on my belt, and a basket of food in my hand, I probably looked like quite the character as I strolled through the castle.

*There’s really only one place that works for a picnic, huh?*

“Wow...so many flowers...”

The inner gardens of the castle. The disordered garden looked exactly like what you would expect from a bunch of savages, numerous autumn flowers blooming under the bright sunlight. Layla’s eyes sparkled at the array of orange, purple, and yellow flowers. A clear indication it was her first time here.

“Those are poisonous, by the way. Be careful.”

Unfortunately, the flowers she had knelt down to sniff were used to make a paralyzing agent. At my warning, she jumped back like a scared cat. The nimbleness with which she moved made it hard not to think of her father, who had been pretty nimble himself.

“Uh, huh?! There’s someone here?!” Layla looked down at her feet in surprise. All of a sudden, a wave of powerful magic filled the air, like someone’s concealing magic had just been peeled away. Stepping over to see for myself...I found someone fast asleep under a blanket of flowers.

The sixth demon princess, Topazia the Sleeping Beauty. *What the heck is she doing all by herself sleeping out here?!*

With a soft groan, Topazia’s eyes cracked open. Before my awe could even

register at seeing her wake up for once, she rolled over and, with another wave of powerful magic, vanished into thin air. Or more accurately, she probably just recast her concealing magic.

For a brief moment, I was quite sleepy. *So this is the sleeping curse that made easy work of Aiogias, huh?*

“Ah, it’s just my sister. She’s harmless, so just leave her be.”

“I-I see...” Layla said; the way she rubbed her eyes showed she was also fighting off the mara’s sleeping powers.

“This is one of the few quiet places in the castle. Since we’re here, Sophia, why don’t you teach her about the plants?”

“Very well. Layla, this is called purple sage grass. Boiling sage grass makes a drink that helps calm you down, and the variety with these purple flowers is especially strong. This over here is red feather grass, which has applications in hair removal...”

As Sophia began to spill her encyclopedic knowledge, Layla snapped out of her drowsiness and knelt down in the grass, looking over the plants with keen interest as Sophia pointed them out one by one.

As I watched them, I stepped over to a nearby bench and took a seat, pulling out and digging into a sandwich. The sun’s warmth and the sight of two beautiful girls playing in the garden (even if they were a devil and a dragon) was a bit much for my eyes as a demon, but it was nonetheless a relaxing scene to behold. Picking up an airtight dwarven goblet, I took a sip of tea.

*Yeah. This is peace.*

That thought was fleeting as soon everything went dark.

“Guess who!” I heard a voice as someone covered my eyes with their hands from behind me.

“Seriously, who are you?!” I was so startled I had almost dropped the goblet. Sure, I was pretty relaxed, but I hadn’t felt even the slightest presence in the vicinity. I couldn’t help but chastise myself for letting my guard down so easily.

Shaking off the hands, I turned to see a woman grinning at me. She wore a

heavy robe over a showy pink dress, and her large hood shielded a pale white face and bright red lips. She was certainly beautiful, but more in the way of a doll than a person.

“Get away from him! Who are you?!” Quickly realizing something was off, Sophia immediately jumped to my side. The mysterious woman feigned exaggerated shock, taking a few steps back. Layla ran up next to us, letting out a low groan as she saw the woman. At the same time, the woman looked her over with a cold smile.

“So a high elf and a white dragon, huh? Quite the band of friends you have.”

“Who are you?”

“What? You don’t remember me? And here I could barely get you out of my mind...!” she answered my frank question, feigning tears. Those glassy eyes, that frivolous way of talking...and above all, that muddy magical presence was familiar.

“Oh. Enma.” The leader of the undead, the lich Enma. So she was a woman after all.

“Ah! You do remember me! That’s pleasing to hear. It would break my heart if you had forgotten me so quickly.” Meandering her way around the plants, Enma plopped herself down on the bench at my side. Having figured out the intruder’s identity, Sophia nodded to herself, stepping back.

Layla still had a stiff expression on her face. As a dragon of light, on an instinctual level, she couldn’t easily brush off an undead. That was only amplified considering this was the leader of the undead that kept the dragon’s hatchery under surveillance.

“You have some business with me?” I asked.

“What? Don’t you have business with me? Why else would you come to the garden in the middle of the day like this?” Enma stared intently into my face. I couldn’t tell if she was pulling my leg or something. Dealing with people like this was a pain in the neck.

“Nah, this is just a coincidence.”

“Oh you’re no fun. Well, I have no real business, but I’m glad to see you anyway, Zil.”

“...‘Zil’?”

“Zilbagias is such a long name, don’t you think? You don’t like the nickname?”

*It’s not about whether I like it or not, we aren’t close enough to be giving each other nicknames...*

“Um, just so you know, you are technically speaking with a demon prince.” Sophia spoke up, apparently also not fond of Enma’s overly friendly behavior.

*Wait, what do you mean “technically”?*

“He may be a demon prince, but he is still only a viscount, right? Too bad, I’m just a bit higher, seeing as I’m a count myself!” Enma turned her head unnaturally to face me, lips curling upward. “That’s right! You only recently became a viscount, right? Congratulations!”

“Y-Yeah, thanks...”

*Stop it! Don’t bring that up while the reason for my promotion’s daughter is right here!*

“I should get you a present to celebrate the occasion. Ah, and just like we promised, once you surpass me I’ll happily lick your feet.”

“I never asked for that!”

*Seriously, stop! Don’t say things like that in front of Layla! Look at the way she’s looking at me now! Do you realize how hard it has been to earn her trust?! Don’t make me exorcise you, dammit!*

“Aha ha ha, I’m only joking, no need to fret. Anyway, I noticed earlier, you use dark property magic, don’t you Zil?”

“Y-Yeah...”

I nodded, her excessive friendliness keeping me off-balance. It was as if she had complete control over the conversation, overwhelming me. *What is she after?*

“Then, let me offer you a gift in honor of your recent promotion,” Enma said

with a wide grin. “Why don’t I teach you some magic myself?” She leaned in and whispered into my ear. “Some of my **Necromancy**, that is.”



## Chapter 3: That Childhood Friend

Hi, it's me, Zilbagias. Currently being invited to learn **Necromancy** by a lich.

It should be obvious, but **Necromancy** was strictly forbidden in the Alliance. Since the Holy Church frequently fought undead, they conducted secret research on them as well. Typically, humans born with an affinity for dark magic were scorned by society, so the Church took them in and looked out for them in exchange for assistance with their research...or something along those lines.

As a fighter on the front lines, I had been pretty far removed from that kind of thing. But now I was a denizen of the dark. I supposed I had that option available to me now.

"So, what do you think? I'm sure you could become a wonderful necromancer."

"What makes you think that?" I replied.

"I mean, look at how strong your magic is."

*So all it takes is strong magic to be a good necromancer? Makes sense, but I was kinda hoping for something a bit more...*

"On top of that, you don't have a hybrid affinity, just pure dark. It's perfect for a mage. Having other properties of magic mixed in reduces the precision of your spells considerably. And among all the heirs, you're the only one with a pure dark attribute," Enma added. As she said, all of my siblings had hybrid affinities, or non-dark affinities. Even the Demon King had a hybrid of fire and dark.

"Aren't necromancers usually pretty secretive? Is this really something you can just casually teach me as a promotion gift?"

As I asked that, I could suddenly feel Sophia's eyes starting to sparkle. *Oh man. She's dying to learn it, isn't she?*

"Of course. As long as it's you." Enma's eyes sparkled with an equal intensity, glassy as they were.

“It just sounds too good to be true. What’s the catch?”

“Aha. Too good to be true? The fact you would say that means I was right about you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I replied, tilting my head in confusion and earning an amused chuckle from Enma.

“If I had made this offer to any other demon, they would have said something like ‘I won’t sacrifice my pride as a warrior for that!’ or ‘I wouldn’t learn such filthy magic even if you paid me!’ Or maybe something like ‘go die properly somewhere!’ or ‘get away from me, I don’t want to smell like a corpse!’ Most wouldn’t even give me the time of day.” Enma peered into my face, smiling ear to ear. “But you said it sounded ‘too good to be true.’ In other words, you see the value in my **Necromancy**. Above all, that makes me the happiest, and is the greatest honor for me.”

“Putting aside whether I like the idea of **Necromancy** or not,” I said, choosing my words carefully, “regardless of what magic it is, any line of magic cultivated so carefully over such a lengthy period of time is worthy of respect due to the sheer amount of effort it requires and the accumulated knowledge that it offers. That’s what I meant by ‘too good to be true.’”

“And my answer to that would be that it’s an awfully good arrangement for me as well.” Enma’s smile deepened as she spoke, before she suddenly dropped it. “I must admit, I didn’t foresee you seeing such value in **Necromancy**. If you believe it would be such a good deal for you, your suspicion is completely justified. So allow me to speak frankly. Think of this as the opinion of all the undead in the kingdom...at least, those who are conscious.”

As Enma suddenly turned serious, I instinctively straightened up. I was starting to get the feeling this was about something much more than a mere promotion gift.

“As undead, we are free from persecution or extermination here within the demonic kingdom. But we are certainly not citizens. In reality, the demons view us as weapons to be wielded against the Alliance.”

I blinked in surprise at how self-aware Enma was.



“To be honest, that is more than sufficient if it means shelter from the fire and harassment of the Holy Church. I’m well aware I sound greedy saying this,” Enma gave an exaggerated sigh. Even more exaggerated considering undead didn’t breathe. “But you know, we have no desire to fight. We’re really pacifists at heart.”

I did a double take at that. *You, someone labeled a high profile criminal by the Holy Church over a hundred years ago, is going to claim to be a pacifist?*

“See? That’s the exact look everyone has when I say that,” Enma said with a frown. “It’s the perfect symbol of the fear we undead feel. We really are pacifists. Remember what I told you before, about my dream?”

“You wanted to make a paradise of only undead, right?”

“Correct. I said I wanted to make all of humanity into undead, but my real goal is to make that paradise. A place where everyone can live in peace.”

*That’s all fine and dandy, if you accept that “everyone” doesn’t include the living.*

“The first step to achieve that paradise is to display our worth. That was the one reason His Majesty accepted the undead. However, this ‘value’ is not so straightforward.” Enma shrugged. “Us and our ‘value.’ As we continue to show off our capabilities as weapons, the more people will fear us. The harder we work, the more our value is perceived only in the context of being weapons. That kind of defeats the purpose, don’t you think? The harder we try, the further away our goal becomes, the harder it becomes to achieve our goal of a peaceful paradise.”

Enma turned to face me. “Those of us who maintain consciousness are terribly afraid of this vicious cycle. As long as we maintain our capability of being effective weapons, things are fine. But that’s only the present; what about the future? The Alliance won’t last much longer until they are destroyed. And what then? What place will we undead have in the demonic kingdom?” Her artificial-looking eyes seemed to be measuring me. “If we become unnecessary, will we simply be discarded, like the goblins and the ogres?”

Silence fell over the garden. The fears of her and the other conscious undead had really hit the bull’s-eye.

“Undead also assist in other areas such as transportation. Take for example those skeleton horses,” I said. “Even if the war ends, I can’t imagine the undead would be expelled from the kingdom entirely.”

“Yes, I imagine some lower-level undead like skeletons will have some use. But what about those like me, who are self-aware? Maybe on an individual level I would be fine due to my rank of count. But what about those who are conscious but do not possess this level of power? That is the core of the issue,” Enma said. “All it would take is an order from the Demon King and we’d be unable to resist.”

“But you have regular meetings with him, don’t you? You and all the leaders. You already have a direct pipeline to him.”

“True, we have opportunities to talk. But he is a ruler, not a friend. He is not at all an ally.”

I was starting to get the picture. “So you want to befriend me in hopes of securing a better place for the undead within the kingdom?” *Among the demon heirs, I’m the only one with a pure dark affinity. Makes sense why she brought that up.*

“At this point, I can’t hope for so much. I am neither so shameless nor so optimistic. However, nothing would make me happier than to have you become that friend, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen,” Enma said, watching me with a weak smile. “Lack of understanding breeds discord and conflict. You don’t understand it, so you fear it. You fear it, so you hate it. You hate it...so you destroy it. I want to avoid that miserable future. At this rate, it is all but unavoidable.”

Enma reached out, putting her hand on mine. “So I want you to learn as much about us as possible. Certainly, the undead possess an instinct to attack the living. However, that is something we conscious undead can very much suppress with reason. Unlike those ferocious fiends, we have a firm grasp on language. We can converse, negotiate. We can be good neighbors to you.” I could feel the slightest trembling in her cold hand on mine. “If we can someday come to that understanding and walk hand in hand...there could be no greater joy for us. That is why I want you to learn **Necromancy**.” The sincerity in her

words felt almost inconceivable.

Even so, I greatly understood her position. Misunderstanding bred conflict. Coming across a demon prince that didn't immediately reject the undead probably felt like the perfect opportunity to make him understand them and eventually become an ally. Her line of thinking was probably on the mark.

Unfortunately, she had picked the absolute worst person to ask for help. Me, of all people. But...that would be fine.

"Okay." I squeezed Enma's hand. The hand of one of the greatest criminals, one of the greatest enemies of humanity. "No promises, but in search of those answers...please teach me **Necromancy**."

*I'll be your ally, for now. Even if I know exactly what answer I'll arrive at!*

"I would be glad to! Thank you, Zil!" Enma's face immediately lit up as she wrapped me in a hug. She wore a strong and fresh citrus-smelling perfume, likely to mask her lingering scent of death.

Glancing to my side, I saw Sophia's face alight with joy—no doubt looking forward to learning whatever she could about **Necromancy** from me—while Layla looked considerably more conflicted. I could almost hear her internal monologue going on about how surprised she was to learn that the undead had their own difficulties to overcome. *She really is startlingly innocent. Kinda makes you wonder, how did she even end up like that when she grew up surrounded by such cruel people?*

"So, when can you teach me?"

"Whenever you like," Enma said, waving off the question. "I can teach you right now, or tomorrow, or the next day. Your time may be limited, but my future is endless."

"All right then. I'll try to make an opening in my schedule soon. But **Necromancy**, huh? I never expected to learn something like that." I gave a wry smile, while trying to suppress my honest bitter feelings underneath. Of all people, *I* was going to learn **Necromancy**? "That's like saying, 'Return from the afterlife and serve me!' right?" I joked, trying to shake off the dark atmosphere.

"Ah, so you believe there's an afterlife where people rest in peace, do you?" A

chilling smile rose to Enma's face. "No such thing exists."

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Beneath the Demon King's castle, walking down a dingy, dimly lit staircase that felt like it might be reaching for the depths of Hell itself, was a single figure humming a cheerful tune. Of course, it was none other than the lich Enma.

"His face really is a work of art..."

After finishing her heart-pounding conversation with the prince, her mood couldn't be brighter. She couldn't stop thinking about how adorable he had looked when she told him there was no afterlife.

Every race had their own concept of an afterlife where the souls of their ancestors rested. A respite for the spirits of the dead. Depending on the race or the religion, that place was kept in the care of the gods of light or the gods of darkness. Sinners were punished, and those who were culturally determined to be "good" were permitted to enter paradise. Although some details differed, it was generally agreed upon that there was a place where the dead went after passing on.

"*What makes you say that?*" he had asked, voice quiet.

Enma couldn't help but sigh recalling the sharp look in his eye. That was one of the things she really liked about him. Any ordinary demon would have retaliated against Enma's claim, claiming it to be blasphemous and slinging an insult or two. And to someone who was an expert when it came to death, no less! But Zilbagias, just as he claimed, held great respect for those who had mastered or inherited paths other than his own.

"*Of course, I looked into it myself,*" Enma had responded proudly. "*Let's call the world we live in the 'physical world.' If you peel back the first layer of that physical world, you'll find what we can call the 'spiritual world.' Once one dies, their soul sinks into this spiritual world...so I plunged into its depths myself once,*" Enma had said with a shrug, as if it had been an insignificant act. "*No matter how far I went, there was nothing like a land of the dead. All there was were disembodied souls, crushed by the pressure of the world and turned to no more than raw energy.*"

It seemed Zilbagias had struggled to accept that fact. Well, that was to be expected.

*“I imagine it can be quite difficult to believe something you heard out of the blue. Once you’ve learned some **Necromancy**, you should see it for yourself.”*

Though he didn’t seem entirely satisfied by that explanation, after a brief explanation about what learning **Necromancy** would entail, Enma took her leave.

“I can’t wait to see what kind of necromancer he becomes.”

At long last, Enma reached the bottom of the staircase, finding the entrance to the undead territory. There were two armored skeletons standing at attention before the magically sealed door, perfectly motionless.

“Yo. You guys having fun?” she called out casually to the skeletons, who responded with a rattling of jawbones. They honestly loved their job to bits. They didn’t possess the intelligence to enjoy anything else.

“I’m glad to hear you guys are enjoying yourselves.” Enma watched them with a bright smile as they opened the door to permit her entry...like a grandmother watching her beloved grandchildren.

Ignorance truly was bliss. She believed that from the bottom of her heart. In order to spare these skeletons from any suffering, she had gone to great lengths to strip them of the faculties required for negative emotion. The struggles and worries of the living were completely foreign to them. So even if their fate was to watch a closed door for eternity in this dark, dank pit, they could enjoy it to the fullest.

“There is nothing good about being alive.”

With no living folk around, she could share her true feelings without hesitation. Enma had been born into this world close to two hundred years ago. She had been born to a family of plaster workers in a rural village of some small human country.

She had possessed an affinity for dark magic, an exceptionally rare talent for a human. At the time, with the war against the demonic kingdom growing in intensity, humans like her were suffering under violent persecution. Even

though the nation hadn't had a policy in place against them, most people would not put up with humans with an affinity for dark magic. Most people would never allow someone akin to the denizens of the dark to live beside them. Her parents had been people of true virtue, doing everything they could to protect her, but when the day of her coming of age ceremony arrived and her talent had been revealed, she'd faced deadly persecution.

Yes, deadly. In the throes of death, she had discovered living was naught but suffering. Together with her parents she had suffered brutal torture, quickly meeting a violent and miserable end as she cursed the world.

Although death freed her from her suffering, her grudge had never wavered. Even as a disembodied spirit in the spiritual world, she had continued to curse humanity. And as she sank into the darkness...her master had found her—a man who practiced **Necromancy**.

*"My, what a pitiful soul. Your core remains beautifully intact. Here, let me give you a body."*

That was the beginning of the lich Enma.

*"The soul is the source of emotion. Reason is built on the foundation those emotions lay down. These two together, the foundation of emotion and the construct of reason that rests on it, are what we call the 'self.'"*

As her master taught her **Necromancy**, she came to understand this fact.

*"Undead are fashioned by taking that original foundation and constructing reason on top of it using magic."*

That was the true nature of the distortion in the mind that came from learning **Necromancy**.

*"This foundation is what separates the low-level undead from the high-level undead; in short, the quality of the soul. The only thing a shoddy foundation would be good for is a flimsy shack. In contrast, a solid foundation can hold up the greatest of fortresses. Like the two of us,"* her master had explained with a smile no more than literal skin and bones.

Enma's grudge against the world was remarkable. That's what had caused the core of her soul to survive, what allowed a reason greater than she had even

possessed in life to be constructed on top of it. She became able to wield incredible magic.

Her life as one of the dead was incredible. She was freed from the shackles of mortal flesh, spending every day absorbing knowledge of **Necromancy**. As she did, she came to pity the living. There were upsides to being alive. That was undeniable. But in the end, people spawned conflict, suffering, and unhappiness on a massive scale. There were vanishingly few whose happiness came to outweigh their misfortune. Weren't most people fated to meet a miserable end just like she had?

That's what she thought at first. While her hatred for the living remained, she no longer thought they deserved to be eradicated.

*"I'm going to go take a look at the depths."*

Up until her master failed to return, at least.

In search of a land of the dead in the depths of the spiritual world, her master plunged into the darkness, never to return. Now left on her own, Enma continued her life in hiding, devoting herself to continued study. And after quite some time, after taking all the necessary precautions and making all the necessary preparations, she went after him.

And she saw the truth.

"Sorry, Zil," Enma sighed quietly as she watched the large door before her slowly grind open. "But there's one thing I didn't tell you."

It was true she had made it to the bottom of the spiritual world. It was true that there was no land of the dead there. But there was one detail she hadn't shared.

*"The world cycles."*

There was no "bottom" to the spiritual world. More precisely, if you continued to descend, you eventually came back to where you started. At first, she had thought it was some kind of barrier to hide the bottom from onlookers, but that wasn't true. The bottom of the spiritual world looped back up to the surface. The resonating waves of her magic, the small fragment of her consciousness she tore off and sent into the spiritual world sank to the

bottom...only to rise back to the surface. The souls of the dead sank into the spiritual world, their conscious selves stripped away and the forms of their souls crushed by the pressure until they were reduced to pure energy. And once they did, they returned to the surface.

What happened to that energy when it surfaced? After scattering her magical energy throughout the spiritual world to investigate, the answer surprised her. The magic she sent out returned to the material world, taking up residence in the new life that was born there. Sometimes in small animals, sometimes in insects, sometimes in fish. But no matter what, the result was always the same—the soul was broken down into pieces, then returned to the world as a plethora of new life. She learned that this endless cycle of rebirth was the law of the world.

That truth, achieved through calm and levelheaded reasoning, shocked, enraged, and saddened Enma.

*“What’s the point of it all?!”*

The afterlife everyone believed in, a quiet place of rest for the deceased, was merely a fantasy. They simply died, lost all sense of self, then returned as new life. Only to die again, lose all sense of self, and start over. It made everything meaningless! You were born, trapped in a prison of flesh, drew out a little joy from your existence, and suffered for it many times over. In the end, a person’s fate was to keep living forever, to keep suffering for eternity!

The most hopeless part of it all was the infinite aspect. As long as there was life, the cycle would continue forever. Unless the whole world was destroyed, it would never end.

At that point, Enma came to a realization.

*“Ahh. All I have to do is destroy it then.”*

She would destroy all life. If that happened, there’d be no more rebirth. The cycle of rebirth would grind to a halt. The pointless repetition, the endless mortal suffering, would end. A paradise with no suffering, the true land of the dead, would be born.

The grandness of her dream, the infinite-seeming distance of her goal, drew



another weary sigh out of her. Realistically speaking, what she was aiming for was extremely difficult to accomplish. From a methodological perspective, certainly, but also...

“Above all, I doubt the living will take to such a radically revolutionary idea. No matter what argument I present, it’ll never be accepted by those bound by hearts that still pump blood.”

No matter how often she attempted to spread the truth, she was rejected and called a liar. After all, the only way to understand that truth was to die yourself.

“So all I can do is lead them...”

With her own hands, she would cut off the cycle of rebirth and put an end to the pointless suffering of life. She would begin with humanity. With the incredibly numerous humans as her allies, she could then move on to destroying the other races. It would be best if all came to be undead. They would no doubt resist, of course.

The door finally stood open, revealing the realm of the undead beneath the castle. A seemingly endless column of skeletons stood at the ready, the ranks of humans that had been felled by the demonic kingdom. Where had all the humans of those conquered kingdoms gone? The answer was right here. They were *right here*.

“In the end, we will be victorious.”

Without holy or light magic, the denizens of the dark had a difficult time destroying undead. But of course, this was still a topic for the distant future. First, they would need a perfect resistance to sunlight and fire. Above all, they needed to secure their position in the demonic kingdom.

“Ah, Zil...will you help us?” Enma murmured, a distant look on her face. He was a serious prince, so he would likely reject her reasoning for annihilating all life. At least, while he was still alive.

“Turning demons into undead is strictly forbidden in the demonic kingdom, but...” That was only because they believed their dead would be taken in by the gods of darkness, welcomed into paradise where they would be rewarded for

their feats of valor in life.

“However, if by some chance something were to happen to you...” She couldn’t help but be enthralled by him. “No matter what it takes...I’ll bring you back, okay?”

A sinister smile rose to her face, hands coming to rest on her cheeks.

“Ah, I can’t wait...” She looked forward to that fateful day’s arrival.

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Of course, I had to let Prati know about my intention to learn **Necromancy**.

“If your determination is that great, I won’t try to stop you. But to be clear...are you sure?” It was obvious she wasn’t fond of the idea.

“I have Ante inside me, and Sophia will be keeping a close eye too. If anything seems even slightly off, I’ll put an end to it immediately.”

With that, though still quite reluctantly, Prati finally approved. She was giving me an awful lot of freedom considering what Enma had said about **Necromancy** being pretty unpopular among demons. It helped quite a bit.

The very next day, I went to begin my lessons.

“Hey, Zil. It’s nice seeing you again.”

Once again, we met up in the sunlit garden. Though Enma’s face was the same as before, there was something different about her hair. Yesterday it had been tied up behind her head, but today it was braided and hanging in front of her shoulders. I also had a nagging feeling that she had even changed her necklace. It had been gold the day before, but today it was silver set with a rose-colored gem. It made me wonder if she considered her body nothing more than a doll to dress up.

Topazia wasn’t around so it was just us two alone in the garden. It was the middle of the night for demons, so it would be pretty strange if there were people around.

“Is this really a good time and place for us to be doing this?” I asked. I was probably the only person in the world who had meetings with a lich in the middle of the day. Heck, I had never expected to learn **Necromancy** in a place

filled to the brim with sunlight.

“I would love to invite you to my laboratory”—Enma’s lips twisted in irritation —“but it has been so long since I’ve had a living guest. At this point, the air there may very well be poisonous. Cleaning it out will take quite a while.”

“Ah, I see...”

“But we should be able to go there soon. I’ll have all sorts of tea and snacks ready for you!”

“S-Sure. I’ll look forward to it.”

Honestly, the mere thought of heading into the base of the undead left me somewhat uneasy. Then again, this was Enma the Dollmaker, a lich who had evaded the Holy Church’s extermination attempts for hundreds of years. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that she was swapping between bodies, but her true body was likely within the depths underneath the castle. That info might be the key to taking her down when the time arrived. In that respect, I did want to check out the undead territory.

“Okay then, let’s get started.”

And so, seated beside the lich, I began learning elementary **Necromancy**. We started off with a fair number of spells. One to awaken a sleeping spirit. One to search for the spirit you were looking for. One to open a hole leading from the physical world into the spiritual world.

“Perfect, exactly like that! You demons really are excellent with magic. It’s almost like it’s an extension of your own body.”

As I repeated the incantation she taught me, focusing my magic into a spiral in front of me and imagining it drilling a hole into the world, Enma started to clap.

“Honestly, the fundamentals can be the trickiest part of **Necromancy**. Depending on the school of **Necromancy**, it’s sometimes called ‘opening the gates to the spirit world.’ Although the technique is quite basic, it’s still the ultimate secret art of **Necromancy**. If you can handle this, the rest is just a matter of strength in magic and mind.”

Yeah, if I had been human, this process would have been quite the challenge.

But thanks to my horns, magic perception was second nature to me. After watching Enma's demonstration, copying what she did was no challenge at all. Honestly, the hardest part was repeating the incantation without stumbling over my words. For a human, it would be like trying to learn from a craftsman while blindfolded. Never mind the craftsman, you couldn't even see your own hands. Of course it would be difficult.

"Is dark affinity required to use this magic?" Sophia asked, kneading through her own magic.

Generally speaking, devils didn't have magical affinities. Devils of arson or drowning acquired their elemental attributes once they passed into our world, but while most other devils were closest to the dark attribute, they weren't really the same thing. This all meant that, surprisingly enough, devils weren't really capable of using magic aside from things that didn't have elemental associations, like defensive and soundproof barriers. Sophia wasn't capable of using this spell to "open the gates," as it were.

"A dark affinity is certainly the best. The only other option is really the light attribute."

"Wait, light?" *For **Necromancy**?* Sophia and I shared a look.

"For this particular spell," Enma answered. "I've never seen it myself, but apparently light magic is capable of doing the same thing. Consider the physical world to be the front side of the coin, and the spiritual world to be the back side. Light magic dominates that front, while dark magic dominates the back. Since the spell interacts with the world itself, at least theoretically you could use either. Of course, light magic has the worst possible affinity for **Necromancy**, so it's hard to imagine that skill has any actual usefulness." Manipulating souls drawn out of the spiritual world was the specialty of the dark attribute.

"Okay, you've learned the spells and your magic is moving great. How about a real test?"

"Already, huh?"

*Ante, all of this is doing a number on my conscience. How's my power doing?*

*"It is growing steadily. I imagine your first actual usage of **Necromancy** will result in quite the jump,"* Ante answered, her voice obviously entertained. It was really starting to sink in how much I had fallen as a hero.

"So here you go, my prince."

As I got lost in thought, Enma pulled out and handed me a small paper box. I could hear something rustling inside. Carefully cracking it open, I saw a centipede-like creature inside, obviously poisonous.

"What is this for?"

"You're going to kill it and then bring it back."

"Figures. Wait, you can turn bugs into undead?"

"Of course. Granted, pathetic creatures such as these barely have any soul, so even when resurrected they are pretty brittle spiritually. On that note, they can't really take any kind of orders."

It was honestly a relief knowing bugs couldn't be effective undead. The idea of wasps with deadly poison would be a little too much for little old me.

"Killing it yourself will strengthen your connection to it, thus making it easier to find its soul. And if you do it right after it dies, even a garbage soul like this won't be decomposed yet. Open the gate, call out the soul, drag it out into the physical world, and grab it with your magic, then put it into the corpse. That's the lowest level technique for creating undead."

"So you can't bring them back if their soul is destroyed?"

"You can't bring *them* back. But if they have strong regrets, or some magical influence on them from here in the physical world, you can call some vestige of their past self. That's typically how techniques that call on ancestral spirits work. It's like summoning the dregs left behind by the dead."

Though Enma snorted derisively, her words made me stop and think. *If this is all true...then someone's feelings still remain even after they die?*

"Okay, please go ahead."

Anyway, I had enough work on my plate for today. Using a needle Enma handed me, I killed the bug. *Sorry.*

*“Aorat Teihos Po Horizi Ton Cozmo Anixiti...”* I used dark magic to open the gate. *“...Inirie Soe Wos Fapana.”* Then reached a hand of magic into the pitch blackness of the other side...and drew out the transparent little bug. I then slipped it into the dead body.

“Oh, well done,” Enma said as if it hadn’t been much of an accomplishment.

“Thanks, I guess,” I said, rather conflicted. Inside the paper box I was holding...the dead bug was scurrying around once again.

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*“And look, you’ve already made your first undead! Your memory and sense for magic are way beyond my expectations! Well done!”* Enma had seemed quite pleased with my progress.

For a first lesson, it appeared my results had been rather good. So with a comment about being excited for our next meeting, she called an end to the lesson and took her leave.

*“Bark, bark!”* As I made it back to my room, the idly waiting Liliana jumped up to greet me.

“Nice to see you too.” Though I patted her head like always, I felt somehow absent. My attention was drawn not by Liliana’s pleasure, but to the corner of my room. To the shelf, on which sat the skulls of a certain few soldiers. For a demon, it was still the middle of the night, so I probably should have been sleeping...but I had one last thing to do.

*“You’re going to call on them?”*

*Yeah.*

*“Just bringing back that bug earned you quite a bit of power. Far more than I expected,”* Ante said, lounging away inside me. *“Probably because it brought a much more serious taboo into sight. The taboo of awakening the resting souls of your own people.”*

Exactly. These were soldiers that I had killed.

Enma had said, *“There are a number of ways to call out a soul.”* One could visit where they died, call out their name, or use their physical remains or things

they had owned in life. Among those objects, the skull was strongly attached to the soul of its original owner.

*“Generally speaking, the older a soul is, the more its reason crumbles, making it more emotional. Those emotions leave behind a strong impression when they die. Mostly those are negative emotions. Very few souls are capable of communication in such a state...so we use magic to supplement their faculties.”*

Apparently there was a way to use the summoned soul as a base, and then build an artificial reason on top of that. However, there was no guarantee that the one you called would follow any of your orders. In the case of the soldiers, I fully expected they would resist even in death and completely refuse to cooperate given their allegiance to the Alliance. Under those circumstances, there was a better approach. You restrained their emotions, forced your way into their thoughts, and discarded any memories you didn't like.

*“Don't worry Zil, I'll teach you all of it,”* Enma had said with a wide grin. She was quite eager to show me the deepest, most heretical mysteries of **Necromancy**. And I had to learn all those techniques for myself.

*“Compared to all that, calling them out just for a conversation...”* I gave myself a self-deprecating smile as I made a soundproof barrier. *“...is kinda like playing make-believe.”*

I lined the five skulls up on my bed, then knelt down on the floor. Gathering my dark magic, I opened the gate, using the skulls to search for their souls. And it didn't take long. Right away, I saw them. The very souls of those dead soldiers rushing toward the open gate.

A deep rumbling filled the air as dark black magic pulled their souls through the gate, immediately letting loose screams of rage and hatred as they rained fists down on me. Countless punches came my way...all deflected by my defensive barrier. *Sorry, but I gotta defend my soul here.*

Liliana quickly began to growl at the sight, a purifying light starting to shine around her.

*“Wait! Wait wait wait! These aren't bad guys!”* If anyone was a villain here, it was me. These guys...their faces, bodies, even their minds were now vague at best. But without a doubt, they remembered who had taken their lives from

them.

*How dare you kill us!*

*Damned demon!*

*Die!*

Though they couldn't form their thoughts into words, though their roars had no actual sound to them, their feelings were clear as day.

"I'm sorry..." All I could do was bow my head. In reality, I should've lowered the barrier and allowed them to beat the crap out of me. But strengthened by my magic, even the shells of their souls would be able to leave a mark on me if I didn't defend myself. I couldn't allow that, as that would interfere with my goals. But even so...at the very least, I wanted to apologize. But considering I was the one who had killed them then drawn them back, maybe it wasn't my place to do so.

Even so, I wanted to make them a promise. I would definitely get revenge on the Demon King and save the Alliance. I had initially wanted to hand out these apologies after I died and met up with them in the afterlife, but Enma said no such thing existed. She said that souls in the spiritual world were eventually ground down into pure energy. If that was the case, this was my only chance. If I wanted to apologize, if I wanted to make them that promise, this was my only chance.

As I continued to bow my head, the barrage of fists eventually slowed...and then stopped. Lifting my head in confusion, I saw one of the men who was relatively more intact holding the other four back.

It seemed he was more intact both mentally and physically than the others.

When he spoke, it was with a cracked, hoarse voice. *"This whole time...it feels like I've been watching a strange dream...about a demon...someone I should hate, I should kill...but looked every bit like a human hero."*

I felt his gaze on me.

*"That...bizarre dream...tell me. Who...are...you? I remember. At the end...you said..."*



Death to the dark. Even though I was a denizen of the dark myself.

*"I was...so confused. So confused. I just couldn't sleep."*

Well, if I had been in that old soldier's shoes, I probably would have felt exactly the same. *Sorry, I didn't mean to keep you up.*

*"I am...a hero. I used to be human."*

Slowly but surely, I began to explain my role in the assault on the castle. About how I was killed. About how the next thing I knew, I had been born as a demon prince. And finally about how I planned to use my new position to bring the demonic kingdom to its knees from within. I told them about the pact I had made with the Devil God of Taboo to acquire more strength. Even confessed to abandoning anyone who got in my way toward my goal. The old soldier listened quietly as the other four became quite riled up. With how their minds had decayed, it was hard to tell if they could grasp what I was saying.

*Go to hell.*

*Who would believe that story?*

*You're clearly a demon, through and through.*

Or maybe it was just making them even more angry. It wasn't like I could blame them, since I had killed them and then used forbidden magic to drag their souls out of the spiritual world.

*Ah, there's one way to prove I was a hero.* If the gods of light had any mercy left for me.

*"Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo."*

May your holy light shine in my hands.

A small silver light sparked to life on the tip of my finger...and the furious souls cowered away in fear.

*He's a hero.*

*That's holy light.*

*Too bright...*

This was the powerful light that had protected them in life. But now that they were dead...

Even so, one of them hesitantly approached, as if to confirm what he was seeing was real. Staring deep into the white flower I had drawn in the air...he started to reach for it.

I hurriedly pulled my hand back, afraid of burning the soul before me, but he had been just a tiny bit faster. The silver light took to his hand like fire to tinder. A sizzling sound filled the air. That holy light should have annihilated and purified an undead...but instead, it simply cast off the dark black energy of my magic.

*"Ahh..."*

His spiritual body, hazy and indistinct because of the dark magic, regained its proper form. Before me was now a young soldier, his face clear and recognizable, and the light of intelligence bright in his eyes as he looked at me.

*"You bastard,"* he said, putting a fist to my forehead. His hand passed straight through my defensive barrier...because it hadn't been an attack. *"Back home...my friend was waiting for me. We were going to get married..."* His eyes narrowed, as if looking at something in the far distance. *"She was... What was her name? Wait, what was mine...?"* Though he had regained most of his personality, a great deal of his soul had already been shaved away.

*"Anyway. I've got...a thousand things to say to you..."* He closed his eyes. *"Please...the Alliance...humanity...her...please protect them."* And then his soul dissipated into the air in a cloud of sparkling light.

The next spirit moved forward, reaching for me. The darkness surrounding him was cast off, revealing a soldier with a serious expression.

*"My wife...my daughter...still alive. Their names..."* His face contorted as if in pain. *"...Isabella. Nina. My name...Kite."* Like he was wringing each memory from his heart one by one. *"They are probably...struggling. If you can..."*

*"Got it. I'll definitely help them. No matter what!"*

*“Thank...you...”*

And with a flash, he was gone.

*“I had...”* The third soldier touched the silver light, retaking his form. *“I had a brother...about your age,”* he said, lightly patting my face, an expression of mourning on his face. *“Good luck. We...”* We’ll be waiting for you, he said as he disappeared in a cloud of light.

*“Honestly...I still...hate you.”* The fourth glared at me, a young man who looked not quite old enough to really be a soldier. *“But if you...asked me to trade places...then...hell no.”* He held tight to my hand, still burning with that holy light. *“You have...to kill the Demon King. If you don’t...I won’t forgive you...”*

*“Yeah. I will!”*

*“Good...then until then...I’ll stop punching you...”* Like a candle that had run down its wick, he disappeared in a glittering flash.

All that remained was the oldest of the soldiers, observing everything with his arms crossed. His form was still clear and distinct.

*“Kids these days...”* he said with a shrug. *“Lacking some backbone. Trusting you so easily...going off to rest,”* he said with an exaggerated sigh. *“I’ll stay...sleeping here...a little longer. Always need...one person standing watch...right?”* He laughed. And then he was sucked into his own skull lying on the bed below him.

*No point in having us around as decoration. Go ahead and use these bones.* He left me those blunt instructions, his final words.

*“Thank you...”* I couldn’t bring myself to say anything more. Wiping my eyes, I renewed my vow. I would kill the Demon King.

I would save humanity.

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After my first conversation with the dead, I slept long and well. Plus, I woke up quite refreshed. You really couldn’t underestimate the importance of sleep. My motivation felt reenergized and that meant keeping my plan to defeat the Demon King moving. Like they say, no time like the present.

*“Easier said than done. Do you have an actual plan?”* Ante asked.

Right now, I was wondering what exactly was going on with the hobgoblins. Especially since they were currently caught up in the plan to remove goblins and ogres from the demonic kingdom. That in turn would relieve them of official duties. Granted, with the trouble their incompetence had caused me fairly recently, I could see why the devils and night elves claimed they were difficult to work with. But having the political structure of the demonic kingdom at peak efficiency would cause problems for me as a hero.

*So, I’m going to go have some words with the king.*

“You are going out?” Veene said, blinking in surprise at my sudden change of plans.

“Yeah. After seeing my father at work, I have something I’d like to discuss with him.” I gave an exaggerated shrug. “About those hobgoblins. Even though I told Sidar I would refrain from intervening, I’ve got my own personal feelings on the matter that I’d like my father to hear.” Not a single lie in there.

“Is that so?” Veene said with a grin. She seemed to be under the assumption that after the trouble they had caused me that I would use some sway to remove them from their positions in government.

I guess if anyone else were in my position, that’s what they’d do. It probably wouldn’t cross anyone’s mind that I might side with them. And so, as I walked toward the palace with Sophia and Veene in tow, I couldn’t help but smile.

*“You really are sick in the head, aren’t you?”* Ante commented.

*You love this kind of irony too, don’t you?*

*“It’s my favorite.”*

Though I couldn’t see it, I could still tell exactly what kind of sadistic smile adorned her face.

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The Demon King’s palace was just as magnificent as it had been on my last visit.

“A pleasure to see you, Lord Zilbagias. How may I be of service to you today?”

I was greeted by a goat-headed devil butler who gave me a formal bow and greeting as I approached.

“I would like to observe my father at work. Of course, if now is a bad time, I can do so another time.”

“Today should be business as usual. Please, allow me to guide you inside.”

For the record, this butler was one of the few archdevils within the castle. Keeping him here would be quite the hefty cost, magically speaking. I wondered if he was contracted directly to the king.

*Ante, do you know this guy?*

*“Not at all. Seems to me that his power was quite middling in the Abyss, but grew considerably after coming here.”*

Which meant he wasn't one of the old guard. Quite a relief since I didn't want a repeat of the Sophia situation. Though now that I thought about it, Sophia probably knew what kind of devil this guy was. Seeing as there was a good chance I might have to fight him someday, knowing his abilities would be a good idea.

Passing through the luxuriously decorated corridors, through the audience chamber, and into the more plainly decorated office spaces, I saw the typical endless queue built up in front of the Demon King's office. With a backward glance at the petitioners in wait, I casually walked past them as I was guided into the office.

“Hm? What's wrong, Zilbagias?” The king broke out of his mechanical, dead-eyed routine of stamping papers at the sight of me, quickly straightening in his chair and forcing a more serious expression.

“I felt like coming and observing your work again.”

“Huh. What a peculiar child. By all means.”

In short order, a small chair was brought into the office for me as I watched him handle his work. Though he seemed quite reinvigorated by my visit, it was clear he was exhausted. It made me wonder when exactly he took breaks. If I aimed to launch a surprise attack, it would be ideal to do so when he was as

worn out as possible.

*“Being ambushed by your own son after being exhausted from work would be quite the feeling I imagine,”* Ante mused.

I had no idea, but I did know that being on the other side of that exchange would feel great.

“A report from the front lines, Your Majesty.”

And we were already getting into the good stuff. Sitting up straight, I focused on the report.

As per usual, the demons were winning.

The demonic kingdom was currently waging war on three fronts: the northern front (against the dwarves in the mountains), the eastern front (against the forest elves and humans in the plains and forests), and the southern front (against the beastfolk kingdoms that defied the Demon King or were allied with the humans).

The Demon King’s armies kept their advance slow, ensuring they could consolidate control over the territory they captured before moving on, keeping their advance on all three fronts in step. Giving both sides so much time before each battle meant the fighting was brutally intense when they finally clashed, but that didn’t stop the demonic kingdom from continuing to be victorious.

“Our information network has discovered the Holy Church is making moves to support the northern lines...”

Thanks to the tireless work of the night elves, the demonic kingdom was always several steps ahead of whatever the Holy Church planned. *Someday I’ll bring this kingdom down...!*

“Hm. Thank you.” After signing a number of papers, the king let out a sigh and leaned back in his chair. “Perhaps I’ll take a short break.”

“I shall fetch some tea.” The butler gave a swift bow and stepped out of the room. Leaving just me and the king.

“So,” he said, turning to face me. “What is it you’d like to talk about,

Zilbagias?” He raised an eyebrow, his stolid demeanor cracking somewhat.

“Not much I can hide from you, huh?” I gave a bitter smile, like a child whose antics had been discovered. It was probably obvious, seeing as how I had come to visit him on a day outside our usual meals together.

“Hah. Your father isn’t quite that dull,” he said with a smug look, unfortunately missing the most important thing in front of him. *Too bad you have no idea who or what I am!* After a short laugh, I retook a serious expression and created a soundproof barrier around us.

“I want to discuss the situation with the hobgoblins.”

“Oh?” There was a clear shift in the Demon King’s posture upon hearing that, going from a father speaking with his son to a king speaking with his subject. On top of that, he didn’t seem pleased that I had brought up this topic.

“Just to be clear, I have no intentions of siding with any particular race. But looking at the way the kingdom is moving, I have some thoughts about the future.”

“Is that so?” The king resettled himself, interest piqued by my wording.

“Though the demonic kingdom was built for us demons...in truth, it is a rather multicultural place, isn’t it?”

“True enough.”

“The kingdom is made up of many races. I fear that singling out a particular race for exclusion could cause a number of issues in the future that would affect our ability to rule.”

The king nodded silently, urging me to continue.

“The other day, I was able to acquaint myself with the lich Enma.”

“I’m impressed you managed to meet with someone who keeps themselves tucked away underground so much.”

“I actually met her in the gardens around the middle of the day. Apparently she was doing experiments on building up resistance to sunlight.”

“What a strange fellow. Much like you,” the king gave a short laugh. There

likely weren't many demons spending time in the sun, or even many undead who did for that matter. So his reaction made sense.

"In any case, we were able to develop something of a friendship. She seems to be quite fond of me."

"I see."

"We talked about a number of things, but one of the things that came up was her fear of the fate of the undead if they continue to be treated as no more than weapons. She was concerned that once the war is over, they would be discarded much like the goblins and the ogres."

The king's mouth drew tight as he glanced up at the ceiling, all but saying, "Give me a break" out loud. It seemed like he had no such plans for the undead. At this point, at least.

For a hero like me, destroying undead wasn't particularly challenging thanks to my holy magic. Even with exceptions like Enma around, with enough force they were an enemy that could be vanquished with absolute certainty. For the denizens of the dark though, things were much more difficult.

With their strong resistance to curses and dark magic, the only real means the demons possessed to harm undead was through fire. Not all demons could use fire magic either...though the Demon King having a hybrid affinity for darkness and fire was a considerable deterrent to the undead. Even so, if the undead were to rise in rebellion, it would cause major problems for the demonic kingdom.

"So what you're trying to say is, expelling one race for any reason is seen as a threat to all the others?" the king asked, massaging his brow.

"Yes. It is my belief we would be better served by treating individuals based on their abilities and competence, rather than the races in their entirety."

Get rid of any useless hobgoblins, and let the skilled ones stick around. The night elves and devils would no doubt continue to clamor for more representation, but they had longer lifespans than hobgoblins. Even without forcefully expelling the hobgoblins, they would eventually age out of their positions, opening space for the truly competent to naturally fill in the ranks.



“The process may take several decades, but it would prevent the other races from feeling threatened. We can improve the state of our governmental affairs without alienating an entire race. This also allows room for the actually competent hobgoblins to remain,” I continued slowly, watching for the king’s response. “I can only imagine your vision for the future of the demonic kingdom, but if it is something that extends for the next hundred or two hundred years, I believe this may be the best option toward achieving that. Of course, any who attempt to rebel should be crushed by the authority of the king. After all, that is the way the demonic kingdom should be.”

“I understand your idea,” the king said after a long sigh, leaning back into his chair again. “I’ll give it some thought. Also, I appreciate your input, especially regarding Enma.”

“Thank you.” I gave a small bow. There, I’d said what I could. I couldn’t care less how things played out. If the king took my advice to heart, maybe the hobgoblins could stick around for another twenty or thirty years at least.

*“Are you sure that is a good idea, though? Shifting the king’s attention to maintaining the harmony of the races will only serve to bolster the kingdom’s strength, will it not?”*

*Not at all, Ante.*

No matter what changes were made, the demons would always be lounging at the top, convinced of their superiority. The dragons were still lurking, waiting for their chance to strike, and no one had a clue what the undead were up to. The night elves and the beastfolk had no intentions of rebellion in the first place, and the devils had a symbiotic relationship with the demons. Basically, no matter how much attention the king paid to keeping relations harmonious between the races, the status quo would remain. The only result would be whether the hobgoblins won or lost.

“Your Majesty, your tea has been prepared. Oh my, my apologies. Am I intruding?” the goat-headed butler said as he returned, coming to a stop as he noticed the soundproof barrier.

“No, come in. We just finished,” the king answered, moving to destroy the barrier, but stopping himself at the last second. “That is enough, Zilbagias.”

“Yes sir.” I released the barrier. To destroy someone else’s barrier was to trample on their freedom. The king was trying to save face. Mine, in this case. The one and only Demon King, going so far for a five-year-old, even if it was his own son.

“On that note, late as it is, congratulations on your promotion to viscount,” he continued, dropping some sugar into his tea.

By the way, the only person who had the right to confer ranks in the kingdom was the king himself. That was one facet of his authority. That meant he had been the one to personally sign off on my promotion.

“Thank you. Hard to say if I was lucky or unlucky...”

“No doubt.” He gave a wry smile, apparently having heard of the issue with the paperwork that precipitated it all. “How are things recently? Although I had heard about your dealings with the king of the dark dragons, the fact you are meeting with Enma is news to me,” he said, enjoying a sip of what must now have been a rather sweet milk tea.

“Yes, well...” I gave a noncommittal nod, a new thought suddenly occurring to me. *I wonder...how exactly would he react to his own son taking up **Necromancy**?* It wasn’t like I had planned to keep it secret. I had already told Prati, and Enma was one of the leaders of the kingdom. So he would probably find out sooner or later anyway.

*I guess I might as well tell him.*

“Recently, Enma has begun teaching me **Necromancy**.”

The Demon King immediately began to splutter, milk tea spurting out of his nose. *So even the almighty Demon King can choke on milk tea, huh? Maybe my best bet would be to wait for him to take a long sip, then hit him with a bombshell?*

After a sort of coughing fit, he seemed to recover. “What on earth for?” Taking a handkerchief from the butler, he began wiping his face.

“Why? Curiosity, I suppose.”

The king looked at me like he might at a cat doing a handstand. *The demons*

*really don't like **Necromancy**, huh?*

“Since my magical affinity is pure dark, it seems I am quite suited to it. While I have no desire to have the dead serve me, I am curious about the techniques of it.”

“You really are quite the strange boy. Are you sure that is okay?” he scowled, taking a sip of a new cup of tea. “Those who play with death are not invited into paradise in the afterlife by the dark gods, you know.”

*What? The Demon King of all people still believes in the dark gods?* I was under the assumption that one of the devils in his service would have told him about them ascending to conception by now.

*Ante, is that an idea that's widespread in the Abyss?*

*“The younger ones may be unaware of it. Most believe the ultimate end of a devil is becoming a devil god. Whether they know about it and whether they would go out of their way to tell their contractor as much are different questions, though. There is little to be gained by shattering the faith of their partner.”*

*If that is the case, given the Demon King's seemingly real faith in the dark gods, I need to answer carefully.*

“There is no need to be concerned. While I am interested in learning how it works mechanically, I have no desire to put it into actual practice.” It took all I had not to burst out laughing at my own pretentiousness. “If I had to say...just between the two of us, my real goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the undead themselves.”

The Demon King's brows rose. “I see. Truthfully, it would be a great risk to make use of them without a single person on our side with the knowledge of how they work.”

*Nice. Looks like he took it well.*

“Exactly. Just like how I am learning how to fight with a sword to aid in fighting Swordmasters.”

“Right. Wait. Are you learning swordsmanship too?”

*Ooh, you picked up on that quick, didn't you?*

For the record, I didn't have my sword on me at the moment. Adamas was tucked away safely in my room. Why? Because I had no confidence I could keep its power in check in front of the Demon King himself, of course! I could practically hear it screaming for revenge and unleashing its full power again already.

"One of my subordinates is a night elf spy. He spent a great deal of time undercover in the Alliance, where he learned swordsmanship. With his teachings, I've managed to learn quite a bit."

"You really love to learn, don't you? Just be careful. It wouldn't be for the best to have it negatively influence your spearmanship."

"I suppose not..." I'd leave the story about the swordspear for another time. "I also managed to win my first match against my mother in a contest of spearmanship, with no magic involved."

"What?!" This time the king's wide-eyed response was a purer surprise. "Even if she wasn't using magic, you beat Prati?"

"Yes. So now we are practicing using magic..."

"I cannot imagine Prati would go easy on you, even if you are her son. It's hard to believe how much you've grown. So, have you seen Prati's trump card, then?"

I sure had. Those triple-wielding spears were quite the headache. "Now I know why mother carries around so many extra spears with her..."

"Sounds like you have. I look forward to seeing your growth," the Demon King nodded, apparently quite impressed. "But even so, Zilbagias, you are already quite the formidable warrior. So do yourself a favor and don't tell anyone else about your dabbling in **Necromancy**."

"I appreciate the warning, father. You are the first person I have told outside of my own family. I would also appreciate it if you kept quiet about the matter."

It was quite interesting to me how much he disliked the idea of **Necromancy**. Considering how progressive he seemed for a demon, I could only imagine how

other demons would react to that revelation. If I kept my training a secret, even if it got found out, I doubt there would be many willing to take those skills into account when planning. Which was good for me since there was no way I could bear being asked to lead an army of the undead against humanity.

*“But think of the power you would gain,”* Ante quipped.

*That’s not the problem!*

“To return to our previous topic, I cannot even imagine what feats you will accomplish on the battlefield,” the king said, eyes narrowing at me. “Though actually, maybe I will see them sooner rather than later. We’re talking about you and Prati here.” He began to chuckle. *Honestly, I would be ecstatic if we could put it off as long as possible.* “How nostalgic. I long for the days when I ran around the battlefield.” Drowning in a sea of paper, the king stretched in his chair. “Maybe I should take leave for a bit and pay a visit to the front lines...” he said listlessly, glancing at the obsidian lance to his side.

I felt my blood run cold. The Demon King himself appearing on the battlefield would be like war against a natural disaster. He’d bring down an army or two on his own.

“Your Majesty, I am afraid taking to the battlefield would greatly upset those under you seeking glory for themselves,” the butler joked.

“Of course. It was just a joke,” the king replied with a tired sigh.

*Thank goodness.* I tried to relax before anyone noticed the tension in my shoulders.

“By the way, Your Majesty...I believe it is about time,” the butler said softly, pouring the last of the tea from his pot.

“Hm. Very well.” After adding another healthy dose of milk and sugar, he downed the last cup in one go. Saying goodbye to the empty cup with a regretful glance, he then turned to me. “Hey, Zilbagias. Would you perhaps like to help—”

“Ah, looks like it’s about time for my studies. I will have to excuse myself for today. Thank you for letting me come today!” Jumping out of my seat, I quickly made my way out of the office. Glancing behind me as I left, I saw a dispirited

king reluctantly pressing a stamp to another piece of paper.

*Ha. Like I'd ever help you. Drown in your paperwork and die, Demon King!*

+++

"How did it go?" Veene asked, clear excitement in her voice as she, along with Sophia, greeted me as I made my way out of the palace.

"He said he'll give it some thought."

"Excellent," she replied with a wide smile. No doubt her mind was churning about the potential honor and glory the night elves could soon acquire. Too bad I had just thrown a wrench in those gears.

"By the way, I have a question, Sophia." I turned to the devil as we descended the long staircase on our way back to the common area of the castle. "Do you know anything about that goat-headed devil that works for my father?"

"Ah, that would be Stegnos, the Devil of Thirst. He has been in your father's company for quite some time, even before his ascension to the throne." There was no hesitation in her answer. The knowledge she possessed to even recognize a Devil God like Ante at a glance was certainly handy.

"The Devil of Thirst, huh? What's his authority, to make your throat really dry?"

"No, the 'thirst' in his name refers to all sorts of cravings. The greater your desires that remain unfulfilled, the more power he obtains."

*I get the feeling he may be a better match for a certain green bastard than the Demon King...*

"His Majesty is rather, how should I put it...stoic? Due to his tight control over his desires, they suit each other pretty well."

*When she puts it like that, it kinda makes sense.* While Stegnos seemed quite well put together, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd go berserk if he allowed his desires to go rampant.

As we were talking, we reached the bottom of the stairs. The stairs exited into a rather spacious entrance hall, filled with ordinary demons.

“Why do you ask, Lord Zilbagias?”

“Oh, no reason. I was just curious—”

“Zilbagias, huh?”

As we walked casually through the crowd, a hoarse voice called out to us from the side. Turning my attention to the source, I saw a group of thugs—with a youth barely of age—sauntering up to us.

*There’s no way, right...?*

“Silver hair, red eyes, looks like a punk. Yep, no doubt. You’re the prince from the Rage family, aren’t ya?” The head of the pack, a rather burly looking demon with blond hair, sized me up from horn to toe.

*Wow, talk about a serious culture shock. In a human kingdom, no way would you see anyone confront someone they knew was a prince. There’s also the possibility he’s just foulmouthed and his actual objective is to curry favor with me—*

“Heard ya never even tasted a real battle. Mama just handed you a nice title on a silver platter, didn’t she, you arrogant piece of shit?”

Wow...! I couldn’t help but share a look with Sophia. Not in my wildest dreams had I thought morons like this actually existed in the real world. Even though Prati had warned me about this kind of thing, I was still a *prince*. There couldn’t be *that* many people who would be willing to pick a fight with me, right?

*“I imagine there are likely at least a few,”* Sophia had said. *“If they could cow you into submission, despite the great animosity they would earn from the Rage family, they could reap profound benefits for the rest of their lives. I guess you’d call it a high risk, high reward gamble.”*

But a prince that bowed to someone as worthless as this would hardly earn much standing for himself either. Was there even any reward to be earned here?

*“Well, anyone who would even consider such a thing has nothing to begin with. For someone like that, even the slightest bump upward seems significant.”*

Ah, the “invincible” ones...

*“Besides, the number of people who seek to utilize their higher standing to turn these pathetic individuals against you is endless. They spread rumors about you, regardless of their veracity, in hopes that others will underestimate you enough to believe they can defeat you in a fight...”*

In particular, I was pretty young in comparison to adults who more so looked the part. From that angle, it was no wonder they looked down on me. I probably looked like easy pickings to anyone with comparable magic ability.

*“There are also those families without any particular affiliation with any faction who are simply being used. Due to lacking influence for generations, they don’t have a sufficient network to acquire accurate information. This leaves them vulnerable to be manipulated, all while being completely unaware of the situation...”*

It was truly a blessing I hadn’t been born into any of those families. Defeating the Demon King would have been far too ambitious, even in my dreams. Even so, it was shocking to see someone act like that toward a prince.

*“It’s not violence for the sake of it. It’s a battle of pride. Bending for those at the bottom of society means you don’t possess what it takes to stand on top. If a fight is all it takes, then they win. If not, all they have to worry about is retaliation at the same level. That way of thinking dates back to demon culture long before the founding of the kingdom. When it comes to establishing the pecking order, strength trumps birth and circumstance, apparently.”*

Yeah. Savages.

*“For people like that, they win if you lose power, and if they lose, they don’t suffer much in the way of consequences.”*

Even though I kinda got where they were coming from, was I really that much a threat to warrant that kind of confrontation?

*“Never mind the other princes and princesses, there’s no telling what their followers—or their mothers for that matter—could be thinking.”*

True enough.



“Cat got your tongue, huh? Too scared to talk back?” The youth’s rough voice brought me back out of my reminiscence. Unfortunately, the moron in question was still yapping at me.

Was he making a desperate gamble? Had he been set up by someone else? Or was he really just a hopeless idiot? His comment about my “mama” handing me a title gave me the impression maybe someone egged him on. As I took a casual glance around the room, I noticed some older demons watching us with unveiled amusement. In contrast, the night elf and beastfolk servants were all but openly trembling.

“Oh, you’re still here?” Regardless of his motivation, it wouldn’t change my response. “You need something? If so, keep it short. I’m a busy man.”

The blond-haired youth’s face began to twitch as I crossed my arms. Blond hair was pretty rare among demons, but upon closer inspection...it seemed the roots of his hair were a slightly different color. Had he just dyed it? He wasn’t trying to look like the Demon King...right? If so, did it not cross his mind that I was that Demon King’s son?

“Seems we have a brat here who doesn’t know his manners around his superiors!” Blondie said through gritted teeth.

“You’re one to talk about manners. Didn’t your mom ever teach you to introduce yourself to strangers? Or was such an easy lesson too complicated for your simple brain?”

A vein popped out on Blondie’s forehead as he slowly began to reach for me. Was he planning on grabbing my shirt or something? That would be pretty bad considering the size disparity. Since he was a bit taller and very solidly built, that would put me at a rather significant disadvantage. But if I even attempted to avoid his hand or step back, it would look like I was trying to run away. Honestly, it was a pretty annoying predicament to be in.

“Manners? *Manners?*” As I expected, he grabbed my shirt near the collar. “Why would I have to mind my *manners* around someone like you? You’re a brat with nothing but a fancy name! I’ll never bow to some punk who got handed a title after his mama killed a dragon for him!”

He pressed his face close enough that his spit started flying into my face.

*Guess this guy is under the impression I had someone kill Faravgi just so I could take the credit.*

“I killed that dragon myself. This rank was well-earned.”

“Heh, like hell it was! You expect me to believe a pip-squeak like you could kill a leader of the dragons?!” Blondie began to grin, apparently feeling like he had caught me in a misstep. “If you did it yourself...why don’t you prove it?”

Lifting me up by the collar so my feet were just barely off the ground—he moved to deliver a kick, aiming for my face. Sure, my height was perfectly situated for a kick there, but really? Kicking a five-year-old in the face?

*“It seems that woman was telling the truth about the title of esquire acting as protection,”* Ante mused.

It certainly seemed that way. Though in this environment, maybe the real issue was promoting a five-year-old to viscount in a world like this in the first place.

Twisting myself in the air to soften the impact as much as I could, I nevertheless took the foot right to the face and it sent me flying. Blondie’s laughter followed me as I rolled across the floor.

“Poor kid couldn’t even react. Man, he doesn’t even seem worth gloating over!” he said, turning back to his lackeys.

*Big talk after holding me in place so I couldn’t dodge.*

“I guess I never did get your name, did I?” I said as I casually returned to my feet, snorting some blood out of my nose.

“Huh?”

“With all your boasting, you must be a pretty impressive warrior, right? Tell me your name.”

Blondie returned my faint smile with a suspicious look.

*Did you really think that’s all it would take to send me home crying?*

But he soon recovered, returning to his previous mockery. “Put on a brave face all you want. You couldn’t even dodge my kick; no way you could take on a

dragon. Heck, even a human could take you down a peg.”

*Really now?*

“Oh, my bad. Completely slipped my mind that you’ve never been on a real battlefield before. Those humans are really scary! Better be careful!” He cackled along with his lackeys.

*That’s it. I’m gonna murder this guy.*

“Are you finished?” I did my best to sound calm, despite feeling my eye start to twitch.

“Oh, did I make the little prince angry? Guess I teased you a bit too much. Don’t worry, I’m sure you can run home and get mama to kiss it all better for ya.”

“You really are stupid, aren’t you? Like I said, tell me your name. Or are you so dumb you can’t remember it?” I beckoned him forward. “You know what? Bring it on. I’m sick of looking at your gobliny face. Let me break those horns for you.”

“Who the hell do you think you are, acting so full of yourself?!” the youth raged. “Do you not realize how nicely I’m treating you?!”

“I wish I could say the same, but it seems my consideration is wasted on someone too stupid to recall their own name.”

“Shut it!” he roared, fuming as he rushed toward me. “Viscount Megalos, of the Anoitos family! Remember it!” he finally introduced himself. While I would’ve loved to **Name** myself too, using magic for minor scuffles like this was a bit of a faux pas. Regardless, I didn’t need magic to take care of a guy like this.

Activating the magic held in my body, I dashed forward. Megalos blurted out a surprised grunt as the distance between us suddenly became zero. Then, a grin quickly appeared on his face as he reached for me again.

*So he’s trying to use his size advantage again?* Just like with the earlier kick, he seemed to like fighting dirty. Unfortunately, I could work that to my favor, so I let him grab me once again.

“Ha. Weakling!” Megalos gave a disappointed sneer. As if planning to do the same thing as before, he lifted me up off the ground.

“There, now we’re equal.”

In height. That made things much easier.

I reached out my right hand to deliver a swift chop, using my arm as a sword to swipe at the side of Megalos’s head. Megalos clicked his tongue, clearly irritated as he brought his left arm up to block. And the moment he did, I focused all my magic into my fingertips. If I could focus all my magic on the point of my swordspike, I should be able to do the same with my hand.

My chop struck his arm, biting deep. Even after pulverizing the bone underneath, my strike didn’t slow down. Just as I had planned, my hand delivered a solid chop directly to one of his horns.

A loud crack filled the air.

Megalos groaned, eyes rolling back in his head as he lost his grip on me and dropped to the floor. And clattering to the ground right beside him was his broken horn.

Shocked murmurs rippled through the crowd, including some gasps from his own lackeys.

“Wha...? Ah! Gaaaaaaaah!” After a short wait, Megalos regained his senses. Only momentarily as he soon lost them again after seeing his broken horn on the ground before him. “My...! My...! My horn...!” he managed to squeeze out between screams of pain. It became obvious his magical strength had taken a nosedive. *As I suspected, horns are not just sensory organs.*

“Ha. Quite the handsome look you’ve got there. One step closer to being a goblin!” I gave a broad smile to the wailing Megalos. “But I have to say, I’m quite surprised.” I spread my arms in an appeal to the audience. “I had no idea they would come off with just my bare hands. Guess you have pathetic horns to match your pathetic brain!”

I gave an exaggerated laugh...but it seemed the other demons were still looking on in horror.

*Huh. Maybe I went overboard. Oh well! Gah ha ha ha!*

“What a refreshing experience!” Ante commented, clearly quite pleased. I

couldn't say I disagreed.

+++

In the northwestern wing of the castle, there was a room decorated in a calming blue. Blue tapestries and maps of the kingdom adorned the walls. From the ceiling hung a rather luxurious chandelier made from the bones of a large carnivore and decorated with blue jewels. Well, luxurious by demon standards. The bookshelves held books covering agriculture, animal husbandry, and geopolitics, neatly arranged by their titles.

As if a reflection of the room's owner, every last detail of the interior was organized in a precisely calculated manner, giving the space a very practical and beautifully functional aesthetic. Within it all sat the first demon prince Aiogias, enjoying his teatime.

"Coffee really is great..." he murmured to himself, indulging in the fragrant black tea. And black it was, for Aiogias was very much of the faction that took it straight.

This brief moment of respite occurred after finishing his evening routine, sandwiched between scrubbing the sweat of the day off in the bath and completing his personal studies and other official duties.

As he sipped at the beverage, he glanced out the window. From here he could look over the entire city built around the castle, and had a clear view of the mountains lining the horizon. Located beyond those mountains was the sacred ground of the demons. The foundation of the demonic kingdom lay in the spirits of their ancestors still watching them. For Aiogias, the next Demon King, it was a scenery that inspired tension.

*The kingdom must prosper even further in my generation.*

Aiogias pictured a future with a resplendently wealthy Demon King. The kingdom established by the first, expanded by the second, would see even greater abundance under the third. The first Demon King had led the demons out of their sacred ground in search of more bountiful land. The expansion of the kingdom under the second Demon King included securing the land they had taken and conquering the enemies that lay in wait all around them.

At the same time, there was no point taking all that land without putting it to good use. Whether the current kingdom had managed to accomplish that had yet to be determined. Since the first Demon King had given out territory as rewards, some areas of the kingdom were managed by entirely different families. This meant a lack of cohesion. While some slaved away in barren lands to produce meager crops, others sat on bountiful fields that lay entirely untouched. They were hopeless.

Once he became Demon King, he intended to consolidate control of the land in one area. At present, the demonic kingdom's total population was rather small considering the vast land they inhabited. This meant producing food was not an issue. On the other hand, spreading agricultural principles throughout the kingdom would make matters much more efficient. That would allow them to expand their population—not just of demons, but of night elves and beastfolk too. It would be the start of a millennial kingdom, spanning the entire continent!

“Excuse me, Your Highness. I have some news to report.” As Aiogias dreamed of that future, a knock came from the door, after which it swung open to allow in one of his protégés. “It is about your younger brother, His Highness Lord Zilbagias.”

“Speak.”

“There has been a scuffle between Lord Zilbagias and Viscount Megalos, of the Anoitos family.”

“Anoitos...” Aiogias searched through his memories, but couldn't find even a trace of that name. “Doesn't sound familiar.”

“Not worthy of remembering, Your Highness.”

So they were a worthless family. Aiogias hated wasting his time or energy, and so forgot them without a second thought.

“He receives a new title and immediately gets into a fight? According to Emergias, he was raised quite well. So?” Aiogias urged the man on, bringing his cup up to his mouth.

“Yes sir. Actually...it appears Lord Zilbagias broke off his opponent's horn with

his bare hands.”

Coffee immediately spluttered out of the first prince’s nose.

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“He broke off the guy’s horn?! With his bare hands?!” second princess Rubifya all but roared as she heard the news.

Her room was gorgeously decorated. Understanding her father’s ambitions, she had no inhibitions about indulging in such luxuries. But on top of that, she was a first-class warrior, and had a deep affection for arms and armor. So alongside all her works of art and fine jewels were plenty of brutish looking spears, together with stones that seemed to be burning by some mysterious power. In short, the room possessed a chaotic aesthetic. It gave every impression that it was the private dwelling of a red dragon.

“Explain in detail. What happened?” she pressed her subordinate for more information.

“Yes, ma’am! Lord Zilbagias had visited His Majesty’s private office earlier, though his objectives there are unknown. With no more than an hour since the incident, we have yet to determine what was discussed inside. On his return, in the Dazzling Hall, Viscount Megalos of the Anoitos family began to pick a fight with him.”

“Those Anoitos idiots?” The untamed beauty of Rubifya’s face twisted into a scowl at that name, apparently signifying some history with them.

“Ha ha ha, I suppose they have caused you no small amount of trouble too,” her subordinate joked, causing her scowl to deepen.

“Fearless on the battlefield and quite useful as spears, but pretty unreliable when it comes to where to aim them.” Leaning on her arm with a sigh, she urged the man to continue.

“Yes ma’am! Viscount Megalos claimed that Lord Zilbagias’s title was not an accurate indication of his actual strength and claimed he was conceited, going as far as to accuse his accomplishments of being false. When Lord Zilbagias claimed the reports were accurate, the viscount demanded proof of his strength...before kicking him in the face.”

“Sounds painful.” Rubifya made a show of putting a hand to her cheek in “shock,” but she knew full well just how intense the training young Zilbagias had been subjected to was. She hardly expected him to make a fuss over something like that.

“Lord Zilbagias was quick to launch a counterattack. Viscount Megalos grabbed him, so he just...” The attendant made a chopping motion with his hand. “With one strike, the viscount’s left horn was broken off.”

Rubifya found herself reaching for her own horns. For a demon, losing one’s horns was deeply meaningful. Not only were they a vital sensory organ that could detect magic, but they were also the symbol of character and dignity of demons.

“To be clear, you said he did it bare-handed?”

“According to the reports, yes. None of the witnesses were able to confirm any use of magic, curses, or weapons.”

“Hmm. Anoitos must be in quite the uproar then.”

“Yes, they didn’t waste time approaching the Rage family with protests and demands for healing,” the attendant shrugged, somewhere between sympathy and mockery for the victim.

“And what of my brother?”

“Lord Zilbagias had replied, ‘I didn’t think a little poke like that would break it. If I have any regret, it’s that I was unable to predict just how fragile you are. Healing you is an option, but it might just break again. Maybe it would be best if you retired from battle if you’re this brittle.’”

Rubifya chuckled at the merciless response. “He really left him with nothing, didn’t he? That’s the Rage family for you.”

Healing a broken horn was within the means of **Transposition**. All you had to do was give the injury to someone else who had functional horns. Of course, that meant that person would lose their horns. Unless a person was particularly popular, losing their horns meant being discarded. And that was for those who hadn’t lost their horns as punishment for some crime.



And of course, it had to be the Rage family that was responsible for breaking his horn. Viscount Megalos probably never expected to lose one of his horns in the process, but in the end he had just picked a fight with the wrong guy.

“But really. Bare-handed.” She had heard cases of demons having their horns broken in a kind of lynching for crimes they had committed, or in the interfamily warfare in the demonic kingdom, but a horn being broken in a small scuffle was unheard of. And now the first case belonged to *him*... “If memory serves, he’s still five years old, right?”

“If memory serves, yes,” her attendant agreed, rubbing at his beard.

For starters, horns were pretty durable. Considering they were the source of magic for demons, their strength was formidable. Even as an archduchess, if asked to break another demon’s horns with her bare hands without the use of any magic, Rubifya would find the task quite difficult.

“There are records of warriors having their horns smashed when struck by Fistmasters.”

She thought back to what her brother looked like. Did he really possess such strength? She had heard he had grown somewhat after his fight with Faravgi, but it was hard for her to imagine he had grown to the point of throwing punches on par with that of Fistmasters.

“It’s possible that Megalos’s horns were actually that brittle.”

“To be honest, I agree,” her attendant replied, sharing a grin with her. The Anoitos family was probably in a frenzy at the moment. Until the end of time, they would be remembered as the family with the brittle horns. She didn’t know who had instigated them to attack the prince, but those who played with fire tended to get burned.

“I wonder who was behind it.”

“At the very least, I cannot imagine it was someone from our faction,” the attendant offered.

“Of course not. I’d string up anyone who did something like that outside of my own orders,” Rubifya snorted. Their approach to Zilbagias was one of careful observation. But even if Rubifya could be confident in her own subordinates,

she couldn't extend that confidence to Daiagias, Topazia, or their subordinates. Not that she could see much advantage to them trying to snuff out Zilbagias at this stage either.

"At any rate, I look forward to seeing his growth." No matter how pathetic his opponent had been, snapping off someone's horn with his bare hands at the age of five was beyond belief. "It would be great to have him on our side..."

But that brought up the memories of her first meeting with him. The ice in his eyes made it hard to believe they shared any blood at all.

"I can't wait."

Rubifya licked her lips, like a bloodthirsty predator.

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"Waaaaaaah!" Her face beet red, Ante flopped down on her side. "Pet me toooooo!" She then proceeded to begin rubbing her face on my stomach while I was lying on the sofa.

Yep, it was the same old arrogant Devil God of Taboo, puffing out her cheeks like a petulant child.

"Fine, fine..."

I hadn't been able to study at all, so I put the book down and started stroking Ante's hair. She was in her human form, and quite hot. Just having her on me like this made me feel like I was about to break out into a sweat.

"Aha ha ha ha ha, the letters are all blurring!"

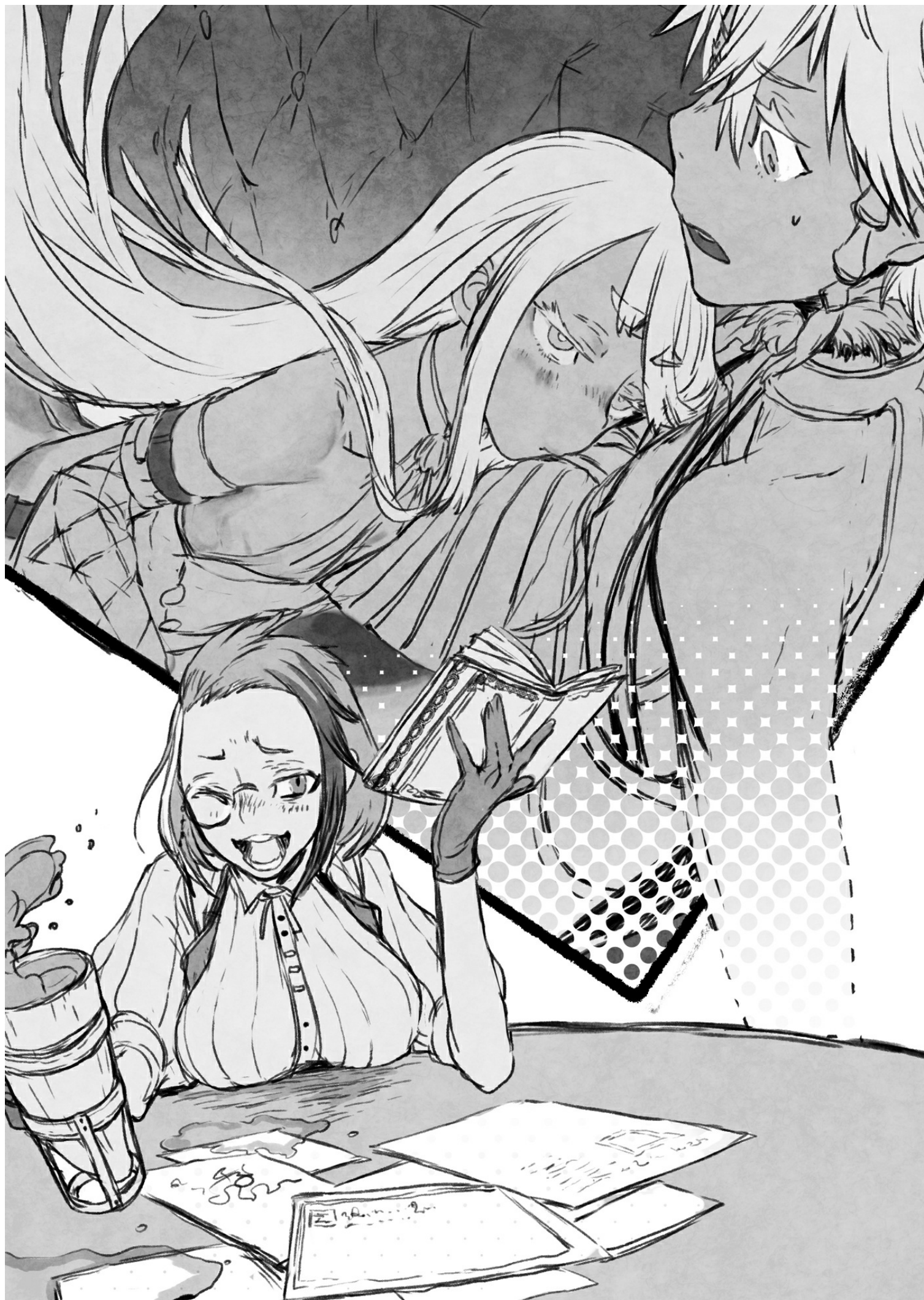
On the other hand, a similarly red-faced Sophia was roaring with laughter at the book in her hands, an empty bottle of alcohol at her side. Of course, she was in human form too. Drunk out of her mind.

"Ah! I had already read this page anyway!" she managed to squeeze out between various fits of giggling. Thanks to her constant laughter, reading or writing was out of the question. Yes, even that ever-curious devil of knowledge hadn't made it past the first page!

Across the table from her was Layla, struggling to write herself with all the antics going on around her. The two of us shared a look. The look on her face

clearly was begging me to do something about the two drunkards...but all I could do was lift my hands in surrender.

“Hey! Look! At! Me!”



Ante's feverish hand reached up and grabbed my face.

"Keep! Petting me!" she continued, acting like a spoiled brat. Naturally, she was drunk out of her mind as well.

"I'm looking at you..."

*Only because you're always helping me, I justified indulging her to myself, keeping up with stroking her hair. How the heck did things end up like this?*

It had all started a few hours ago, shortly after I broke that Anoitos idiot's horn off. After **Transposing** my injured nose onto him, I said my goodbyes, but the issue persisted.

Apparently, someone's horn breaking off during a small fight like that was unprecedented. Not to mention it had been done by a five-year-old, with his bare hands. Though it seemed picking a fight with a five-year-old was also rather unprecedented. It kind of made me wonder if precedent even meant anything anymore.

The horns were a symbol of character and dignity for demons. In the demonic kingdom, the next step down from the death penalty was "Horn Breaking." By human standards, this would be akin to punishing someone by gouging out their eyes or cutting off their balls. With so many witnesses to the scuffle, the news spread like wildfire. But quite surprisingly, there were rather few voices criticizing me or sympathizing with Megalos.

*"Even if they were the same rank, it serves him right for picking on a child that had just been promoted. He'll be a laughingstock for the rest of his life,"* Prati had laughed when I reported what happened. *"You picked a rather striking way of making your debut in high society, didn't you Zilbagias?"*

*High society?! This seems like a far cry from the high society I was expecting!*

*"Of course, I am also surprised you were capable of breaking his horn with your bare hands. But that should serve to deter any but the stupidest or most fearless from bothering you in the future."*

Prati had nothing but praise for what I'd done. We fully expected a formal

protest from the Anoitos family, so we started preparing how we'd respond.

*"I just smacked it a little and it popped right off! If I healed it, it wouldn't take long for it to break off again anyway.' How does that sound?"*

*"That sounds great! A perfect plan!"* Prati laughed once again, turning my idea into our official stance on the matter. Aside from the horn, his left arm had been crushed and his nose got messed up. Even if the Anoitos family weren't going to do anything about his horn, he'd probably be dropped to the very bottom of the waiting list for the Rage family's healing curse. Poor guy.

*"I am so glad you are such a strong child, Zilbagias. As for today, you may relax."* Once she was done praising me, she took her leave in an excellent mood. Apparently it was cultural practice among the demons to kick back and relax after a battle. It was kinda funny to think about. After all the hellacious training I endured, it seemed like an odd time for mercy.

*"Then let us relax to the fullest!"* Ante then immediately declared, jumping out of my body.

*"When are you not relaxing?"*

*"No, this time is special! It's about meal time, no?"* Ante grinned, shifting into her human form. *"Let us celebrate your debut in high society with a toast! Bring on the drink!"*

And so, despite it being so early in the evening, Ante had joined us for lunch and got right into the booze.

*"Hmm, this wine is quite...sweet. Very good indeed. That being said, is it better than the liquor or the beer? Ah, I can't decide!"* At first, she kept a pretty good grasp on her wits, sampling all sorts of different drinks.

*"Hm. I am growing quite warm. So this is what it means to feel hot..."* Ante was always wearing next to nothing anyway, but even so, she started fanning herself using what barely covered up her chest. By then, her face had gone a deep red.

*"Ahh...my head feels so fuzzy..."* Apparently she was a lightweight when it came to alcohol. By her third glass of wine, she was already well and truly drunk. In hindsight, I probably should have cut her off there. But I had been so

caught up in my reading...

What, me? I was five. So no, I wasn't drinking. Besides, I hadn't been much of a drinker in my previous life either.

But as I tried to immerse myself in my book, Ante leaped onto the sofa.

*"Hey..."* she gave a strangely pitiful whine, curling up like a cat.

*"What's wrong with you?"*

*"...me too."*

*"'You too' what?"*

*"Pet me too!"*

Everyone in the room shared a stunned look.

*"Why?!"*

*"You always treat me like a bad dog, or a bad cat! It's not fair!"* She started throwing a tantrum while lying on my chest. *Who was it that said "not in five million years" when I joked about stroking your hair?!*

*"Okay, okay, fine,"* I conceded, content with amusing myself with how I'd make fun of her for this later.

*"Even Lady Ante changed so much..."* Intrigued by Ante's behavior, Sophia joined the war effort. While watching over Layla's studies, she started to conduct an experiment on the effects alcohol would have on her body.

*"Even the vapor of the alcohol getting in your lungs messes with your breathing, huh?"* she commented through a bit of coughing.

*"Oh, and the flavor..."*

*"Hm? I feel like my vision is starting to waver... Is this intoxication?"*

Full of wonder, she continued going, glass after glass.

*"Heh heh...this is getting kind of fun."*

*"Ha! I'm drunk! I'm druuuunk! Aha ha ha!"*

*"Ooh, good idea! Let's try reading a book! Huh? Why won't my books come out? Oh, right! I'm a human right now! Aha ha ha ha ha ha!"*

Yeah...that was *definitely* when I should have cut her off. But I was having a blast watching her. Unfortunately, things continued to escalate.

And that brought us to the present. Ante was sitting on my chest, making strange noises and drooling as I massaged her cheeks, occasionally twisting her head to bite at my arms and neck.

“Aha ha ha ha wait, wait! Did the guy in this picture always look so stupid?!” And, without warning, Sophia started slapping the table, spurred on to uproarious laughter by the most normal of pictures.

Watching Ante sitting on me, Liliana gave a bit of a confused whine. She probably felt a little lost after seeing that someone else had taken her usual spot.

“Liliana...can you do something about these guys’ drunkenness?”

Liliana tilted her head in confusion. Perhaps if they were reeling from a hangover it would have been different, but I guess this kind of drunken stupor was hard for her to perceive as something that needed treatment.

“Isn’t it about time you two go back to your normal forms already?” I figured once they were devils again, they would go back to normal. I was getting kind of tired of their drunken states. Plus, Ante’s biting was rather painful, not to mention unsettling.

“No way! I wanna stay like this!”

“What? Why? Well...maybe that’s a good idea! Yah! Wait, how do I go back again?”

While Ante just whined, it seemed Sophia had forgotten how to use magic. *She forgot! The devil of knowledge forgot how to use magic!*

“Ha ha ha! I don’t know anymore!” she descended into another fit of laughter, but that was the moment I started getting scared. I had unwittingly discovered that **Anthromorphy** could overwrite even a devil’s authority.

Meanwhile, Ante was practically meowing at me. “Look at me! Only me! You belong...to me...” She continued to wrap herself around me, biting at my ear as



she whispered, “Forever, forever.”

Liliana continued to whine herself; normally more than happy to beg for the same treatment, she’d somehow intuited that it wasn’t safe for her to get any closer.

“Hey, ha ha, hey! Layla! How’s it going? Learning lots?”

“Ah! Y-Yes! It’s going well!”

*Okay, that was definitely a lie!*

Layla clearly started to panic as Sophia draped herself over the dragon’s shoulders, prompting her to look to me for help.

“Mine...mine...mine...”

*Sorry, Layla, but my hands are full with this one!*

In the end, it was two hours before the alcohol knocked the pair out.

For now, we threw the two of them onto my bed. Sophia was snoring quite loudly, and now that she was unconscious, Ante seemed happy enough to wrap herself around the devil instead of me.

As I made my way back to the sofa, Liliana started to stretch and growl, retaking her old spot as if begging for the treatment that Ante had denied her. So I obliged, earning a remarkably satisfied smile from her.

“Man, what a day,” I grumbled.

“Y-Yes, it has been...” Layla timidly nodded. It was kinda like she was afraid the two devils would be upset if she agreed with me. What that said about her previous life was almost enough to make me cry.

“Don’t worry, it’ll take more than that to bend any of us out of shape,” I said, motioning to the snoring pair of devils (one being a devil god) on the bed. Layla replied with a forced smile of her own.

She said nothing more, as if that was expected of her. Which meant I’d be the only one talking here. After a bit, she turned back to the paper in front of her and went back to practicing writing. Assuming she wouldn’t be able to relax if I

kept staring at her, I picked my book back up as I continued petting Liliana. Keeping watch on Layla out of the corner of my eye, I resumed flipping through my book...though you could hardly call what I was doing reading.

“How are things lately?” I decided to ask once it seemed like she was taking a break from her writing.

“Uh. Um...well...”

*Okay, talking to her like an old man who hadn't spoken to his daughter in ages won't work. Time for plan B.*

“Are you getting used to your new environment?”

“Ah, yes. Everyone is very...kind to me.” For once, her smile wasn't forced or fake, but rather a little bashful. It seemed her previous treatment had been so cruel that she struggled to properly express her happiness.

“I'm glad to hear it. If there's anything you need, please feel free to ask.”

“N-Not at all! Really! Nothing!” Layla furiously shook her head. “Everyone is so kind to me...the food is good, my bed is soft, and I've even been given clothes. I feel like it's all too good for someone like me...” she said, as if it was all much more than she deserved.

Of course, she couldn't be more wrong. For better or worse, Layla was special. Just the fact that she could release her transformation and become a dragon put her far above the other servants. No one could blame me for giving her special treatment. That was how much strength was valued within the demonic kingdom. Thinking about it rationally, among my subordinates, the only one who could maybe beat her was Virossa. Even without a breath attack or being able to fly, an angry dragon was a lot to handle.

“I see. If you're satisfied, then that's good. But really, any small request is fine. For example, if you want something sweet for dessert after your meal...or if you want to try alcohol,” I finished off with a joke, earning a wry smile from her.

“Alcohol is quite scary, isn't it?” she said, eyeing the bottles on the table in front of her like she would a deadly poison. Apparently the devils' antics had left a strong impression on her. “As for sweet things...I have those too. Garunya often shares them with me. Like cookies, or dried fruit...” she continued, almost

apologetically.

*Garunya! Thank you!*

It was getting quite hard to stop the tears now. I had to make sure I thanked her properly later on top of increasing her snack quota. That would probably be the easiest way to get Layla to eat more without feeling bad about it.

“Actually, now that I think about it, if you eat while in human form and then change back into a dragon, do you suddenly get really hungry?” The question had suddenly occurred to me. There was a huge gulf between the amount of food a human and a dragon would need.

“Ah. That is... Not really. Most dragons nowadays eat while in human form.”

Apparently, according to Layla, it was quite rare for dragons to feed while in their dragon form. Being in human form meant they could eat a lot less and allowed them to eat cooked food. Which was not only safer but also tasted a lot better.

“Long ago...back when they didn’t know how to cook properly, they tried to eat meat raw while in human form. It didn’t taste good and just hurt their stomachs. Around that time, they started to believe eating as a dragon was best and that eating while in human form was for the poor.”

That was a sentiment that changed once the dragons were inducted into the demonic kingdom. I guess if it was safer and food tasted better, eating in human form was a lot more efficient.

“That really makes **Anthromorphy** feel like it’s cheating, doesn’t it?”

“I...guess so...”

Like Ante had said, devils usually needed a considerable amount of magic to sustain themselves while in the material realm. But in human form, all they needed was normal food. From the conserving energy angle, it was basically a miracle. Of course, the greatest drawback was that your abilities were reduced to those of a human.

Just for fun, I turned into a human as well. The world suddenly grew dull and washed out as I lost my ability to detect magic.

Liliana hummed in confusion, sniffing at me a couple of times before licking my face. In turn, I pressed my face close to hers. Now that I had no horns, we could actually rub cheeks like this. I then lay down on the sofa, turning onto my side and using the armrest as a pillow.

“With this magic, I can finally sleep on my side. I honestly can’t thank you enough.”

“Demon horns are quite rigid, aren’t they?” Layla said, putting a hand to her own head. She had her own pair of horns just like any other dragon. But like all the other dragons’, they swept down and back, so they rarely if ever got in the way.

By the way, it took a bit of practice, but I’d figured out how to keep my horns while in human form. While it didn’t stop my magic from weakening, it *did* stop me from sleeping on my side. Plus, it made it impossible to disguise myself, making it pretty much pointless.

“I always want to sleep in human form, but my mother and Sophia keep nagging me about how dangerous it would be,” I moped, getting a small giggle out of Layla. Seeing that innocent smile on her face made my chest grow tight.

Even though I was the one who killed her father. That thought continuously lingered in my head. If I were in her shoes...I doubted I could ever laugh like she was.

Of course, our personalities and circumstances were totally different. But in Layla’s case, hers were the result of the dark dragons doing everything they could to shatter her spirit. So she couldn’t show resentment for or anger at the one who had killed her father. All she could do was pretend like she didn’t know and try to curry favor with the powerful.

Thinking of the broken, bleeding heart underneath that smile, I couldn’t help but be sad.

And so, I always found myself thinking about Faravgi. Should I try calling his spirit back? Maybe it was selfish or even greedy on my part, but I wanted Layla and Faravgi to see each other again. I wanted to apologize to Faravgi for our bad fortune, and assure him that I would make sure Layla grew up into a proud dragon.

But there was no doubt he still hated me even in death. If I tried bringing him back, no doubt he would attack me without a second thought. The only thing I could do to quell his wrath would be to tell him the truth. And that would be a huge problem.

Faravgi was too famous. A lich of exceptional ability like Enma could call out Faravgi's soul with ease. If I told Faravgi the truth and then sent him back to the spiritual world and Enma called him on a whim, there was a very real chance my secret could be in jeopardy of getting out. I had to avoid that at all costs.

So what could I do? Maybe make Faravgi into my personal servant? Destroy him utterly with holy magic? No matter which option I took, they all seemed...too cruel. And no matter what option I chose, I needed Layla to have complete trust in me. She would inevitably learn the truth about me from Faravgi. Would she forgive me? If she asked why I didn't save him if I was a hero, I'd have no answer for her. The more I tried to find one for her, the further away it seemed.

This is normally when a certain devil god would pipe up with "it's a bit late for that now."

*Huh. Kinda hard to rile myself up without her around.* As that thought crossed my mind, I turned to look back at the bed...where I saw Ante's face turning blue. Still snoring away while Ante clung to her, Sophia had responded with a headlock.

"Except that could actually kill her!"

She was too frail in her human form to deal with that!

*How's your sleeping posture that bad, Sophia?!*

I hurriedly rushed over to rescue the devil god from her fate.

+++

She always thought the grown-ups looked so cool. The way their big, strong wings effortlessly carried them through the sky filled her with admiration. It took her a while, but she soon discovered she had wings herself. Apparently, she hadn't come to that discovery until she was about six months old. Of course, she didn't remember the event herself. It was her parents who had told

her the story.

Trying to mimic the adults around her, she tried flapping her wings with all her might. But as she leaped from a small cliff, she was unable to properly glide and slammed to the ground. Of course, even baby dragons were tough enough that such a fall wouldn't even register as painful.

*"Look! She's already trying to fly!"* Her mother came over, licking at Layla's face. It tickled, but it was a pleasant sensation.

*"Ha ha ha, She's just as rambunctious as you were,"* her father said.

*"That's not fair. In fact, she reminds me of another certain little rascal."*

The two adults shared a look and a laugh.

*"Here, Layla. Do it like this,"* her father said, spreading his huge wings and slowly flapping. *"Now you try."*

She did her best to mimic his movements.

*"Oh! Yes, that's it!"*

*"Very good, Layla!"*

Her parents seemed so happy that she couldn't help but smile herself. In her excitement, she felt something welling up within her—and a puff of smoke erupted from her mouth.

*"Wow! And her breath too!"*

*"That's incredible! Ooh, look how hot it is!"*

Her parents were ecstatic, so she proudly spat out a few more clouds of smoke.

*"This girl is going to be a wonderful dragon!"*

*"No doubt! She'll be a great leader for our people."*

The conversation between her parents suddenly grew quite serious. Layla tilted her head in confusion.

*"It's nothing, Layla. Don't worry your little head about it."*

*"Exactly. Just leave it all to daddy!"* Standing up on his hind legs, he mightily

flapped his wings, creating a blast of wind that sent the young Layla flying backward, tumbling to the ground. Of course, even to a young dragon, such a fall wouldn't even register as painful.

*"Hey, be careful!"*

*"Ha ha ha, sorry, sorry!"*

Her two parents, splendid white dragons, snuggled close and licked at her scales.

*"You're so cute, Layla."*

*"Make sure you grow up into a big, healthy dragon."*

Layla didn't really understand what they meant, but she did know one thing: she was really happy.

A shadow fell over Layla's face, followed by a smack.

*"Ow—"*

At some point, she had turned into her human form. She was shrouded in the darkness of a cave. A group of men in pitch-black robes stood crowding around her.

*"You disgusting white dragon!"*

*"You think we don't notice you kicking up sand with your hind legs like that?!"*

*"Do you enjoy being a pain in our asses?!"* they roared in anger.

*"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"*

All Layla could do was apologize while bowing as low to the ground as possible. No matter how much she apologized, the shouting was soon followed by the snapping of something akin to a whip. One of the men had returned to his dragon form, and the effortless whip of his tail was enough to send her flying, knocking the wind out of her.

*"Hey, careful. She'll die if you do that."*

*"Why should I care? That'll just give us a meal."*

*“As skinny as she is, I bet her flesh is real tender.”*

Layla trembled under the sinister, metallic laughter. *“I’m sorry... I’m sorry!”* she wailed, stumbling and running...deeper into the depths of the cave’s darkness.

*“She’s running!”*

*“I knew she was a filthy traitor!”*

*“Kill her!”*

Terrifying tremors shot through the earth as the men pursued her. There was no need for her to turn around and look at her pursuers to know she was now being hunted by a group of dragons.

*“Help me...father...anyone!”* As a human, she was quickly exhausted by running. Her feet tangled up beneath her, sending her stumbling to the ground again with a yelp.

*Help me...! Someone!*

Then, she heard a voice. That of a young man.

*“Are you okay?”* Looking up, she saw the end of the cave. Standing at the exit, shining with sunlight, was a horned boy, extending a hand toward her. *“This way! Hurry!”*

Still on her hands and knees, she grabbed the boy’s hand and allowed him to pull her out of the darkness—

*“Look at this,”* the boy said with a sinister sneer. *“It’s your father.”*

In the bright room, sitting on a table, was her father Faravgi’s head. For a moment, she was frozen. Then, she screamed once again.

*“Nooooooooo!”*

She nearly jumped out of her bed as she sat in a dimly lit room. Shoulders heaving, she shifted her attention to the setting sun outside her window. For a while, she stared silently at the red sky. The warm sun was sinking. Soon, it



would be the time of the denizens of the dark. It took her a moment to remember where she was. The dark dragons had relinquished her and had given her to the demon prince Zilbagias as a gift. She had long since lost count of how many times she had needed to remind herself of that fact.

“What an awful dream...” she muttered to herself in a defeated voice, a tired smile on her face.

+++

It had been quite some time since Layla had begun living with Zilbagias. Unbelievably, she was able to maintain a state of generally good health. At first, she had assumed it was a scheme by the dark dragons to continue her torment, but...

“Morning, Layla. Ya sleep well?”

But if hearing her senior Garunya’s hometown accent leaking out was any indication, that didn’t seem to be the case. Others aside, this beastfolk didn’t seem capable of being quite that crafty.

“Yes, I did. Thank you.” Layla smiled. It was actually true too. Although her dreams were plagued by nightmares, her current living arrangement with her own private room was exceedingly better than having to sleep in a cave with other dragons. No longer did she have to worry about people passing by and shouting in her ear to wake her.

Within the walls of the Demon King’s castle, it was quite the luxury to be granted a room with an outside-facing window. The vastness of the castle meant it had many inhabitants. Meaning most servants found themselves stuck in cramped, dimly lit and damp rooms. The room Layla was currently in was one Archduchess Pratifya had set aside for unexpected guests. It was an exceptionally warm reception for the daughter of a criminal.

“Ah, right. This is for you.” As she finished her waking meal, Garunya handed her a small pouch filled with nut cookies coated in a sweet syrup.

“What? So many? I’m sorry...” Garunya often gave Layla treats, which already made her feel pretty bad. However, today Garunya had offered her more treats than usual. There was no way she could accept this many—

“Don’t worry about it! Master gave them to me as a bonus for all my hard work!” Garunya’s grin quickly turned into a wry smile. “They are pretty tasty, but I get super itchy if I eat too many. Miss Sophia said it’s just like that for some people.”

“Ah, really?”

“Since I gotta limit how many I can eat, I figured it’d be best if I gave them to you instead of throwing them away.”

Was she telling the truth, or was she just trying to make Layla feel better? Layla still wasn’t used to acts of kindness from others. Especially not the kind of pure, straightforward kindness Garunya showed her. While it left her bewildered, it also gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling inside.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure to enjoy them.”

“Good! All right, time to get to work!” the maid said, jumping to her feet with her tray in hand. The dark dragons were relentless in calling beastfolk pathetic, weak, lowly creatures. But from Layla’s perspective, Garunya was much more pure and noble than those maliciously snickering dragons.

“Oh, right! Careful eating those on the job. If Veene catches ya, you’ll get an earful,” Garunya added, as if it had just crossed her mind...

“Um...err...”

“Who’s going to be giving who an earful?”

...completely unaware that Veene was standing directly behind her while holding a tray.

“Uh. Good morning!” Using her beastfolk agility, Garunya dashed out of the room.

“That girl...” Veene sighed, before turning to Layla while wearing a somewhat troubled look.

Layla had unconsciously stiffened. Given the high status dragons relished within the demonic kingdom, they often had night elf servants. When Layla had been living in the cave, while the night elves never proactively harassed her in any way, they also never lifted a finger to help her. During every interaction she

had with them, it was like they wore steel masks with eyes like frigid ice.

“I don’t mind as long as you don’t scarf them down in front of my lady or His Highness.” But entirely unaware of Layla’s inner thoughts, Veene simply shrugged and sat down diagonally opposite her. “Anyway, keep in mind that girl’s a beastfolk. So she gets hungry faster than we do. Just make sure you enjoy them in moderation. Even though our master is quite lax, we must maintain appearances. If we fail to do so, the arrival of guests may catch us by surprise. Not only would we look bad, but it would also bring shame to our master.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

Veene went on and on as she worked her way through the evening’s scrambled eggs. All Layla could do was nod along.

“So really, you can eat as much as you like. As long as no one sees you, that is. You just have to keep reminding Garunya over and over, otherwise she’ll forget right away.”

“Ah, I see...”

“On top of that, while working, there’s a trick that can help prevent you from getting hungry.” Veene pulled a similar pouch to Layla’s out from her uniform’s pocket. “Eat all of them alongside your waking meal.” Veene winked, popping some dried fruits into her mouth. Back when she had been living in the caves, Layla had thought of the night elves as heartless, soulless killing machines. After all, she had never seen a smile under those steel masks.

Even now, the other servants—particularly Virossa, who had mastered the ways of the sword despite being a night elf—were exceptionally terrifying to her...but she was at least starting to feel comfortable around Veene.

By the way, though Veene had been thoroughly roasted by Faravgi, she had been basically unconscious for the entire encounter. By the time she came to, everything had already been resolved—leaving Veene disgruntled. If she could manage her frustration while taking care of a high elf, she could handle being friendly with just about anyone.

Veene turned her attention to her meal as their conversation came to a close,

prompting Layla to look at the pouch on the table beside her. She took out a cookie and gave it a bite. Slightly sweet, the gentle aroma of nuts...it was really good.

As Layla continued happily munching away on cookies, Veene watched her out of the corner of her eye with a faint smile.

After finishing eating, it was time for work. That said, Layla was only really capable of ironing. Back in the caves, she had been tasked with ironing the robes of the other dragons. Even the slightest wrinkle would result in her getting viciously berated, so she had worked hard to become a true master of the ironing board.

Honestly, the work only brought back terrible memories for her. But when she started getting praised by the older beastfolk servants for how diligently she worked, she felt as though the experience hadn't been for nothing. Back in the caves, no matter how perfect she had been, she would never be offered even a single word of acknowledgment.

Besides that, her days typically consisted of spending time with her master, Zilbagias, or studying under the tutelage of the devil of knowledge Sophia.

"Urrghhh!" Zilbagias cried in pain during the brutal combat that Archduchess Pratifya for some reason referred to as "training." Even with his spearspear, it was a desperate effort to fend off the three-armed storm that was his mother's advance. "Gaaaaah!"

Although he was under a terrible curse that intensified any pain he felt manifold, he gritted his teeth and kept fighting. Across from him, the archduchess wore a terrifying expression, her face drenched in sweat.

How the dark dragons felt about demons was pretty straightforward. "Arrogant rulers, constantly kicking at the other races around them. The first Demon King built a place for them, and they just lounge effortlessly atop his work, lowly worms with no understanding of their true place." But as she watched the demon prince Zilbagias locked in training during which his life was literally on the line, she couldn't help but find that description to be inaccurate.

"Good! Let's stop there for today." Seeing Zilbagias drop to his knees in

exhaustion, Prati brought an end to the training. “You’re getting better at resisting curses. I expected nothing less. Keep improving just like that.”

“Yes...mother...!” Zilbagias managed through ragged breaths, all while taking even the lightest of scratches from his mother with **Transposition**. As he collapsed to the ground, the saint Liliana dashed to his side, barking.

“Thank you, again...” Zilbagias smiled, patting Liliana’s head. The dragons called demons treacherous, diabolic creatures...but those attributes were absent in the affection Layla saw in his face at times like this.

“Oh right, Layla.” Zilbagias suddenly turned to her. “Would you like to do a little training?”

“Uh...oh! Understood!” Layla nodded, undoing the ribbon that kept her maid uniform tied to her. She wasn’t quite used to her position yet, and lacked emotional restraint at times.

But even so...she wanted to find something she could do. If Zilbagias was trying that hard, she wanted to match that in her own way. Someday she would be able to spread her wings and freely soar through the skies. There was no telling what she would soon face on the path toward that. But as long as she could focus on what she could do in the present, there was no reason for her to hesitate.

Slipping out of her uniform, she released her transformation. As she retook her dragon form, she looked up at the night sky.

*Right, father? Mother?* she murmured in her heart. The soft, silver glow of the moon hanging in the sky brought back memories of her parents’ scales.

+++

I found myself pulling weeds in an orchard under the blazing sun. I had been dragged along in someone else’s prank, gotten caught red-handed, and this was my punishment. As I wiped the sweat from my forehead with a heavy sigh, the grass beside me started to rustle.

*“Hey! Alex!”*

The source of all my misery popped her head out from the underbrush. This

was the one who had dragged me into her pranks. Even though she had once been my childhood friend, I could no longer remember her name or face anymore.

*“What? I’m busy here,”* the young me replied, starting to get fed up with her antics. *“Besides, what about your punishment?”*

*“Ha! I ran away!”* she replied with a smug grin even though it wasn’t the kind of thing to be proud of. She’d be slammed with a punishment two or three times as tough in no time.

*“Hey! Did you hear?”*

*“Hear what?”*

*“\_\_\_ and \_\_\_ are getting married!”*

The sounds of the names kind of blurred together, making it impossible to properly hear them. But as if that didn’t matter, my eyes still went wide with shock. *“I had no idea. Wait, you’re not...”*

*“Don’t you think they deserve a big surprise celebration?!”*

*“Give me a break!”* I begged to the heavens. *“If I mess around again, I’ll have enough lumps to grow a second head!”* I said, pointing to the healthy lump my father had given me already, still aching.

*“Besides, if you ruin their wedding, you won’t get just a slap on the wrist!”*

*“Don’t worry about that! My plan is foolproof! We won’t get caught!”*

*“But we’re the only ones who do pranks like that!”*

*“It’s fine! At least hear me out!”*

And so I ended up listening to her plan. Once again, it seemed like I was getting wrapped up in her mess. Usually, I’d come up with some excuse, like keeping her in check by staying close so she didn’t go completely wild. But if my memories could still be relied on, I don’t think that wedding ever happened. Because before it could...our village...

*“Lord Zilbagias? Um, it’s evening...please wake up...”*

At the behest of some gentle shaking, I opened my eyes. Layla, wearing her maid uniform, leaped away from me like she had been stung the moment she saw I was awake.

“G-Good...evening...”

“Yeah. Good evening.” Rubbing my eyes as I sat up, I saw the sun had already mostly set, leaving the world in darkness. It had been a while since I had a dream like that. I had them frequently when I first reincarnated, but nowadays they were pretty rare. The more I became accustomed to my new life, the more it felt like the memories of my past life were fading away. Honestly, it was terrifying.

But, even so, I would never let the rage burning in my heart die!

“Looks like I slept in.”

“You seemed, um, quite tired yesterday, so...” Layla responded to my mumbling with a forced smile. Recently, she was starting to speak up even when I didn’t call on her. It was like I was finally getting through to her. Well, that’s at least what I wanted to believe.

It had been a while since the drunken frenzy of the two devils. As always, I was living my days as a demon to the fullest. Between training, more training, meeting with the Demon King for family dinners, more training, learning **Necromancy**, more training, more training...okay, so it was mostly just training. Maybe instead of “fulfilling” I should say it was “filled with blood.”

“Gaaaaaaaaaah!” Ante’s way of waking into sobriety had been a sight to behold. “Urrrrghh...! Guuuuuh!” Still lying on the bed, she clutched her head as her feet began to flail. For someone who liked to play the part of the ancient, aloof devil god while acting like a spoiled brat, I guess that was the clear result.

“I... I can’t...remember a thing...!” However, the impact it had on Sophia almost seemed fatal. “The memories...it’s like they’ve been erased!” she cried. A devil of knowledge never forgot any of their experiences. And yet, all memories after her declaration of drunkenness just stopped, leaving her completely in the dark.

“H-How...how...?!” Not just her identity, the root of her self and authority had

been thrown into question.

*“Ah! That’s right, me too! I got so drunk I don’t remember a thing!”* Ante snapped to a sitting position as Sophia trembled at her side. *“Feels like I did something disgraceful, but oh my! This alcohol possesses great magic! I can’t remember anything at all!”* With the way her eyes shifted as she spoke, she wasn’t particularly convincing.

*“Pet me too,”* I murmured, earning a strangled choke from the devil god. *“You belong to me.”*

*“Guh—”* Her eyes rolled back in her head as she flopped onto the bed, all but passing out.

*“Never...never again... I’m never touching that stuff again!”* Meanwhile, Sophia was shrieking right beside her. *“Only way I’ll ever touch it is if I want to forget something!”*

So she *would* be trying it again? It was as though I had witnessed the exact moment two devils fell from grace.

**Anthromorphy** was really terrifying stuff. It changed not only your race, but also your fundamental nature. Since I had been a human in my past life, I didn’t really feel out of place in that body. But for the other races, the impact seemed quite significant. I couldn’t even begin to imagine if a dwarf used it...but that got me thinking. If other races could use it, what would happen if an undead used it?

*“Finally! I can finally invite you in!”* Before me was a lich prancing down the stairs.

A few days later, I was invited to visit the base of the undead.

*“This is an awful lot of stairs.”* Even though I was a physically fit demon, it was kinda off-putting. In fact, knowing I would have to climb them to leave was already weighing on my mind. Sophia was at my side, floating through the air.

*Damn you and your ability to ignore the laws of nature!*

*“Don’t worry, we’re almost there.”*



“Are you sure?” Although we had already passed a door, it had been an emergency exit for the dragon cave.

“Man, it took a lot of work to get this place ready for you.” Enma gave an exaggerated sigh. “All the cleaning, circulating fresh air in. We really had no clue if it would be okay for a living person to come down here. After all, none of us have to breathe to even check.”

I couldn't help but chuckle at Enma's undead joke.

“Really, this is no laughing matter. If the air was hazardous down here and you died, I'd be in a load of trouble, right?”

“Yeah, I have no idea what my mother or father would do.”

“Exactly. That's why it took so long to get everything in order. Even after that, it took a while to ensure it was safe. Did you know they use small birds to check if the air is poisonous in deep mines? So I went and caught a bunch of small birds and left them down there with some light. After a few days, I went to check if they were still alive. That's when I finally figured out everything had worked and that it was safe enough to bring living people down here.”

*Sure seems like a lot of work just to get me down here...*

“So don't think that this place was all trashy before I cleaned it up!” she declared, pointing at me. Apparently that was the main thing she was worried about. But as we were talking, we finally reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Thank you for your patience! Here we are!” It was an enormous, heavy metal door. On either side of it stood an armored skeleton. “The demon prince has arrived!” At Enma's theatrical declaration, the two skeletons lifted their swords in a snappy salute.

*Armored skeletons, huh?* The thick plates they wore had no gaps in them. There was likely even more stuff crammed inside to give the bones further protection. Not only would they be pretty resilient to fire and light magic but probably holy magic as well.

As the hero in me evaluated the potential threat these skeletons posed, they respectfully turned and opened the door for us. A blast of air washed over us as air from up the staircase rushed in ahead of us.

“Welcome, Your Highness, to our headquarters. You’re the first living person to be granted entry here!” Enma gave a deep bow. Following her lead, I casually stomped my way inside like the arrogant prince I was supposed to be.

Though the Demon King’s castle had been carved from marble, the depths of this place were such that the walls were made of a different type of stone. I assumed it was granite. The way it had been cut and polished was quite smooth. And it was quite spacious too. There were enormous pillars, and the ceiling was built in a large arch, but it still made me feel uneasy to have such a huge space underground. *Wait, if those pillars got knocked down, would the whole castle collapse?*

*“Perhaps that is one strategy you could employ,”* Ante mused.

Except, if I did that, I would not have an escape route. Letting the undead take up residence under the castle had been a huge mistake by the Demon King. *Was this Enma’s intention? To show off what she could do on a mere whim?*

“We keep all sorts of supplies over there. That passageway over there is also a morgue. Living people would probably find the smell unpleasant, so we’ve sealed it off tight. That room over there...”

As I looked at Enma with suspicion, she continued to proudly explain every nook and cranny of her lair as her glassy eyes shined. The energy she displayed was like that of a kid showing off all their toys. *Does she...not have a clue?* All that did was bring another thought to mind. Maybe she just considered this place to be a hard-won home. A home that was actually extremely precious to her.

Granted, this was Enma. I have no idea what was actually running through her head. No matter what, I should always expect the worst. At any rate, reporting this to the Demon King would immediately make him wary of the undead. On the other hand, informing Enma if she actually wasn’t aware could lead to the whole castle falling like a house of cards. This little trip had already turned a profit. Only thing left to do was to shrug off the knowledge that my own home was in so much danger!

“This is my reference room where I keep all my books related to magic. Of course you’re free to check it out whenever you like, Zil. And you too, Miss

Devil.”

“What?! Really?!” Meanwhile, the knowledge devil who should have noticed the same thing right away had been thoroughly distracted.

*Come on, Sophia!*

“Okay, how about we have a nice chat? Would you like some tea?” Enma asked, inviting me into the room opposite.

“But...but...but...” Sophia seemed quite torn, but in the end elected to follow me, no matter the obvious heartbreak on her face.

“We’re just starting with some tea, right? If you want, you can check out the reference room.”

“Hooray! Thank you Lord Zilbagias! Woo-hoo!” Sophia immediately flew off.

*Guess she really is oblivious to it...*

*“She’s a devil of knowledge, not a devil of intelligence,” Ante said, snickering. “Put a question in front of her and she’ll solve it immediately. Ask her to find the question and it’s a different matter altogether. That’s just her nature.”*

*Huh. I guess that tracks. Seems like a significant weakness though.*

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked as Sophia disappeared, realizing it was way too late. Enma gave a big nod.

“Absolutely not. Besides, this way I get to be alone with you...” she said while giggling.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing! Come on in.”

*I mean, I heard her...but I guess I’ll just keep quiet that Ante is here too.*

*“That kind of makes me want to jump out and say, ‘There’s always two of us!’”*

*Don’t! The last thing I want is to make this situation even more complicated!*

This was just supposed to be a simple visit; why was I finding it so exhausting? It was hard to imagine it was just because of the stairs. Stifling a sigh, I followed

Enma into the room.

The room was quite cutely decorated, making it seem pretty out of place this far underground. It didn't really match my taste, so I didn't have much of an opinion. If anything, it felt kinda like it had been decorated by a little girl? Nothing about it spoke to any sort of practicality, as it had a light, fluffy feeling to it. And though built on a white base, everything was—

*"P-Pink...!"* Ante murmured, terror in her voice.

"One thing we lacked was a dedicated room for receiving guests," Enma giggled, turning to me with a shy smile, "so I had this one made." She had even put on blush today, so despite being dead she had quite the vivid, feminine presence. "Wh-What do you think? I asked my subordinates for their opinions, but...does this look too weak for demon sensibilities?"

Fidgeting nervously with her fingers, she looked up at me through her eyelashes.

*What do you expect me to say?*

Some sick part of me wanted to shout out, "It's the weakest thing I've ever seen!" just to see her reaction, but there wasn't really anything to be gained from damaging my relationship with her at this point.

"I, uh...guess it's fine. It's certainly...novel." So I answered honestly, letting my bewilderment show through. "Even though demons usually think decorations like these are a sign of weakness, my father believes that attitude is problematic. He's of the mindset that the demonic kingdom should expand itself culturally."

"Oh, really?" Enma replied, her timid expression replaced with open curiosity.

"In my opinion, I don't think we can live as savages forever. I'm certainly not against decorations like these. So a room like this is...fine, I guess. It's kind of cute."

"Thank goodness. Seems like the kingdom has a bright future after all." Enma smiled with another giggle.

*Hmm. Something seems kinda off with her today.*

“Now then, my prince, please have a seat.” Leading me to a chair in the center of the room, she pulled out a small bell. “*Please bring us some tea,*” her voice echoed, thick with magic, along with the ringing of the bell. If my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me, I was pretty sure she had opened a gate to the spiritual world too.

“What was that?”

“Ah, your eyes are as sharp as ever!” she replied, taking a seat herself—not across from me at the table, but pulling up a chair beside me. “We undead use this as a way to communicate. While time and distance are somewhat concrete in the physical world, they are rather vague in the spiritual world. It would take a bit of work for a living person to make use of something like this, though.”

“Is that so? I was just surprised you could open the gate without an incantation.”

“Well, once you’re a necromancer of my caliber, something like that is pretty easy.” Enma puffed up proudly.

*She’s quite strong, huh?* I had no idea prior to learning for myself, but compared to other schools of magic, **Necromancy** was *slow*. It wasn’t like you could just conjure up an undead army out of thin air in the midst of battle. You had to open the gate, call forth a spirit, either negotiate with it or overpower it to put it under your control, send it into a corpse, and then implant it with instructions. In other words, it was quite the process. Yet it seemed Enma could do so with just a thought. If she could open the gate without an incantation, I couldn’t imagine she would need one for any of the other steps.

“What’s wrong? If you keep staring at me like that, you’ll make me blush.” Enma put her hands to her face, feigning bashfulness.

“Oh, sorry.” She had noticed my suspicious look, so I averted my gaze.

“It’s fine. I’d rather you stared at me more!” Enma spread her hands wide.

*Make up your mind!*

On that note, she had braided her hair in a super complex way this time...

“Oh, did you fall in love with my profile today?” Enma gave another proud

chuckle.

“No, I was just wondering if you did your own hair.”

“Ah. Well, um...” her eyes started to wander. “A-Actually, one of my subordinates is into that kind of stuff. So I had her help me...”

“Really? It looks like it must have taken ages.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess. But it looks good, right?”

“Yeah, it really suits you. It has a sense of calm nobility to it. Very appropriate.” Whether it suited her personality or not was another matter entirely...

“Looks like it was worth the extra trouble today,” she said with a giggle.

“Hm? You don’t usually spend a lot of time on it? Ever since our first lesson you’ve had your hair done up.”

“You noticed?” Enma’s eyes went wide.

*Obviously. I’ve been watching you pretty closely.*

“Of course. That first time you had your hair braided and resting on your shoulders, right? It was a really relaxed, practical look.”

“R-Really, you’ve been paying that much attention? I thought you wouldn’t care at all...” She started to fidget restlessly with her pendant. *Very suspicious.*

“You’ve also been changing really small stuff, like the accessories you wear and your nails, right?”

“Wh-What?! You noticed that too?!”

“I mean, yes?” *Why’s she getting all panicky?*

“Really? Then, what accessory was I wearing for our first lesson?”

“A silver necklace with a pink quartz in it, right?” I’d been curious if it was magical so I had double-checked it.

“Wow...you really have been paying attention...” She dropped her gaze, murmuring something about being no match for me. *Was that some kind of test of my observation abilities or something? I really can’t let my guard down*

*around her, huh?* It was perfectly natural for a hero to keep track of what a lich wore. Finding cursed tools or magic items they used regularly made it easier to be prepared for them.

*“Come on...”*

*Hm? What is it, Ante?*

*“...Nothing.”*

*What’s with you?*

Meanwhile, Enma had started restlessly fidgeting with her hair and smoothing out the wrinkles in her clothes.

After a while, there was a knock at the door. “I’ve brought the tea!” someone called through the closed door.

“Ah! The tea! The tea is here!” Enma jumped to her feet, almost toppling her chair. “Actually, this body can handle drinks! I’ve modified it to do so!” *Sounds complicated. I can’t begin to imagine how long it took her. On that note, learning **Anthromorphy** requires drinking the blood of a living dragon. In that case, maybe even undead could...*

“Professor! My hands are full, please open the door for me!”

“Ah, right! Coming!” Hurrying to the door, she turned the knob.

“Wow, what a looker!” When the door opened, a girl with a tray carrying a teapot and cups poked her head into the room.

Everything went white.

An image in my memories, faded and worn by the passage of time, suddenly snapped back into vivid color.

“So this is your sweetheart, huh?”

“Quiet! You might give people the wrong idea!” Enma shouted indignantly, taking the tea set from the girl. Walking briskly back to the table, she put the tray down with a sigh. Reaffixing a smile on her face, she called out to me again.

“Sorry, Zil. This is one of my youngest students. She hasn’t even been an undead for thirty years yet. Sometimes she can be a bit rude, but please forgive her.”

“Ah! You’re so mean, professor! You shouldn’t talk about a girl’s age in front of a man like that!” The girl put her hands to her face, feigning embarrassment.

*It is...just too...*

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You really are hopeless. Let me introduce you, Zil.”

Before Enma could say anything else, the girl all but jumped forward.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Demon Prince!” After all these years, her endlessly bright smile hadn’t changed a bit. “I am a lich apprentice—” Just a little bit older, but not entirely different.

“My name’s Claire!”

My childhood friend was now standing right in front of me.





## Chapter 4: The Proud Dragons

Recently, Zilbagias had been acting strangely. So strangely in fact that Layla couldn't imagine she had been the only one to have taken notice.

Sitting by the window with a book on surveying resting in his lap, the prince's mind was elsewhere. A distant look had overtaken his face. As if the weight of his circumstances had backed him into a corner.

It wasn't like Layla could say she had known Zilbagias for a long time, but even she could feel something felt a bit odd. Sure, it wasn't exactly rare for him to sink into thought as he wrestled with some problem, but he usually snapped out of it within a few minutes. But to be lost in thought for such an extended period of time? Now that was quite rare. At least, that's what Sophia and Veene said. They'd know as two servants who had raised him since he was a child—well, a younger child. He was still very much a child.

Zilbagias's strange behavior had started after visiting the home base of the undead.

*"It's hard to imagine this being the case, but is it possible this is an influence from his **Necromancy** studies? Or even worse, did the undead do something to him?"*

Archduchess Pratifya's concerns were understandable, but Ante and Sophia quickly rebutted the idea.

*"My presence alone is enough to ward off any attacks on his soul. I can guarantee there have been no influences on his mind."*

*"I also have been at his side almost the whole time. There's no indication any curses have been placed on him."*

Although Sophia had been briefly distracted by the lich's repository of knowledge, Ante had remained within him the entire time. Clearly nothing had been done to him.

*"If you're inside his soul, can't you tell what he's thinking?"* Pratifya pressed

the devil for information, but Ante simply shrugged off her demands, stating she prioritized the wishes of her contractor. That had left them with only a single option: to simply ask the prince himself. So Pratifya did just that, asking her bright and intelligent son for an explanation.

*“Sorry, but there are some things I’d rather keep to myself.”* And quite shockingly, he refused. *“Once I get my head in order, I’ll tell you.”*

There was a hint of desperation in his voice. Pratifya had relented out of respect for her son’s wishes. Yet even after a week, nothing had changed. Or rather, they had changed for the worse.

Strangely enough, though this distraction had hindered his ability to study, it had also increased his intensity during training. Normally there was an already bizarre level of stoicism and dedication for his age when it came to the bloody practice that was his training. However, recently he had taken to it with a new fervor, a ghastliness to his expression that even overpowered his own mother.

*“How...promising.”*

That in and of itself was a good thing, according to Pratifya. Even at five years old, the vigor and nerve he possessed was enough to pressure not just an archduchess but his own mother. Beyond that, he had managed to overturn her curse of pain with sheer willpower. Undoubtedly he had already been quite skilled, but now his abilities were growing at a breakneck pace, rapidly perfecting him as a demon warrior.

At the same time, it was as though this progress was made at the expense of himself, abandoning his own well-being out of some deep-seated despair. Not the kind of ambition that could be described as “earnest,” and quite heartbreaking to witness. As he strove to drive his spear into his mother, his eyes were wild, as though he were a man possessed.

Pratifya could tell something was definitely wrong, so she erected a soundproof barrier and revisited the topic. But this time the conversation was quite short as Pratifya quickly grew exasperated and took her leave. Even when speaking to those closest to him, he seemed to be in a perpetual state of absentmindedness. Whatever had happened, it was like it had taken to him like an infection.

“So, what was that all about?” Layla asked Garunya as they warmed up the servants’ bath.

“Well...” The beastfolk maid glanced around furtively before responding in a whisper, “This is all secondhand info, so keep that in mind.”

“Okay.”

“I heard Master saw an undead and immediately fell in love.”

Such an answer had come out of nowhere; all Layla could do was gape in shock. “What?”

“According to what I heard...”

Enma had introduced him to one of her subordinates. After just laying eyes on her, he looked like he had been struck by lightning. Next thing he knew, all he could think about was her. Since he lacked experience in the ways of the heart, the growing suspicion was that it was love at first sight. Apparently that was what Zilbagias had told his mother.

“So it’s no wonder that he’s confused himself.”

“Wow...”

“Of course, he knows it’s pointless to fall in love with an undead, so he’s trying to sort his feelings out. That’s why he’s been diving headfirst into his training—to try and forget his feelings.”

*That certainly explains Archduchess Pratifya’s reaction,* Layla thought. It also gave a reasonable explanation for Zilbagias’s strange behavior and why he had refused to talk about it. If Garunya had some insight on the matter, that surely meant it had become common knowledge among the servants by this point. Since he had a bit of a reputation as a strange child, many people greeted the news with a shocked “not again.” He was peculiar enough to have taken a liking to Liliana, showcasing a rare trait among demons to not possess a vicious prejudice against other races. For that reason, no one could rule out him falling in love with an undead who had once been a human. The particularly gossipy servants could be heard whispering that he was “the second coming of Daiagias.” Instead of indulging in those emotions like Daiagias, he seemed to be working hard to discard them. Pratifya and his other servants all resigned

themselves to watching from the sidelines as he sorted through the issue himself.

*But...is that really what happened?*

Layla, however, seemed alone in being unable to accept that explanation. There was a hint of some emotion in his distant gaze, something quite different from lovesickness. If the explanation Zilbagias had provided was the truth, it wouldn't be out of the question for his unrequitable love to swiftly turn into heartbreak. And yet, deep down, Layla felt that wasn't the case.

It was something much more severe than simple love. Resignation, grief...like ink spilled into stagnant water, slowly spreading. Rage. Hatred. That was what Layla felt from him.

What made her think that? Likely because she herself was also perpetually tormented by those same feelings. And unlike the others around him, unlike Pratifya toward her intelligent son, unlike Garunya and the night elves dedicated to their master...

Layla didn't blindly trust him.

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The next development happened the day after Layla's flying training. She had reached the point where she could grasp what it meant to fly. Now she could lift herself up without needing a running start. Even though she was able to accelerate while in the air, her wing movements were too unstable to keep her in the air for long. Even so, she felt like if she kept at it, she would soon be able to fly freely.

But then, Zilbagias approached her, asking to speak with her in private. Sending the others away, he created a soundproof barrier around them, looking at her with a quiet gaze from the sofa.

*Oh...*

Layla felt her heart begin to race. Those eyes. That gaze, which everyone else seemed to misunderstand, but she alone—at least, she thought—understood, was now aimed at her.

“This may be an unpleasant topic for you,” he started, leaning forward. “But I really feel like it needs to be addressed. It’s about your father.”

Layla gulped, as this was the first time he had brought up her father with her.

“As you know, I’m learning **Necromancy**.”

Of course, there was no need to remind her. Yet, what did that have to do with her father?

*Wait...no way...*

“Do you...want to see him?” Face twisting as if in pain, he spoke like he was spitting blood. “Right now, I’m good enough to summon him.”

If she wanted, he had offered to call the soul of her father.

+++

On the day I was reunited with Claire, after the initial wave of shock washed over me, I tried to pass it off...

*“Ah! Did this cute little girl steal your heart, Prince? Tee-hee!”*

*“Claire! You’re talking to a viscount here! I’m allowed to speak casually with him because I’m a count!”*

*“Wait, a viscount?! Oh, my sincerest apologies!”*

*“But you knew he was a prince! You were doing that on purpose, weren’t you?! No matter how fearless you are, you must know your limits!”* As Enma scolded her, Claire stuck out her tongue with a playful laugh.

The lively exchange felt nostalgic. In this pink, fancily decorated room, I sat with a tea set and (what looked like) two cute human girls. One was my childhood friend, now grown to adulthood. Claire’s face danced through numerous expressions, dragging Enma around in a comedy of her own making—just like she had once done to me. I felt like my head was ready to explode. As if my own sense of self was slipping.

*“Ahem. Anyway, since I’ve finally been able to invite you to our home—”* But with a single sip of tea, Enma returned to her usual self. *“How about we practice something we can’t do on the surface? Today will be a practical test,*

*Zil.*” She flashed a wicked grin.

Deep underground, in the home of the undead, their abominable heresies were let loose.

*“We’ve prepared a goblin for you.”*

*“Ta-da! Fresh and energetic!”* Claire added, playing assistant to Enma’s professor. Moving to another room, we found a goblin in chains. Bound and gagged, it struggled desperately against its restraints, still trying to escape.

*“Oh, by the way, this is a deserter. So no need to worry, this is all aboveboard.”*

Apparently we’d be trying all sorts of experiments on it.

*“First things first, let’s try pulling a soul out of a living body—”*

*“Oh, professor! Pick me! I wanna do it!”* Claire’s hand shot up as she volunteered.

*“Of course, go ahead. I know how much you love goblins.”*

*“Hey, don’t say that! Some people might get the wrong idea!”* Claire’s face fell into a smirk. Very much like the conspiratorial smile that used to always be on her face...but there was now something much more sinister to it. Something that didn’t quite belong. *“My favorite part is breaking goblins.”*

Claire smoothly recited her incantation, a hand of dark magic reaching from her to tear the goblin’s soul from its body. The transparent soul was plainly visible. Body bound by dark magic, the goblin’s eyes darted around wildly.

*“As you know, **Necromancy** isn’t exactly fast magic. But as you can see, against lesser races with no magic resistance, you can take their life with ease. Well, technically, its body is still alive.”* As Enma lectured, the goblin’s body was still convulsing. *“Okay, try putting it back.”*

*“Yes ma’am!”* Claire violently shoved the goblin’s soul back into its body, and it began heaving for air again.

Trembling in fear, the desperately panting goblin looked up at us.

*“Aha ha! Even a dumb goblin could tell it almost died there!”* Claire looked

down at the goblin with a bright smile. *"How was it? Scary? Painful?"* she said, kneeling down beside it. *"Don't worry. This is only the beginning."* Her glassy eyes were overflowing with joy. *"The professor said I could go all out on you today!"*

And that was exactly what happened. A spell to pull out the soul. A spell to stop the heart. A spell to bind the soul. A spell to inflict pain directly on the soul. A spell to give pleasure directly to the soul. A spell to rob the target of their senses. A spell to destroy their sense of self...

*"Aha ha ha ha! Look at that, Prince! Do you see that face?!"*

Dark magic had further put the goblin's soul in something like a vice, much to Claire's pleasure. Bound hand and foot, the goblin screamed soundlessly and thrashed as violently as it could, trying with all its might to free itself. Its soul was bent and twisted, warped just enough before reaching its breaking point. The pain it must have been experiencing was unimaginable.

*"Kind of tasteless, isn't it? Inflicting senseless pain isn't my kind of thing, but...I guess I can understand Claire's feelings too. And it's important you also know how to do things such as this..."* Enma muttered, watching Claire's antics with a sigh. *"But that's about as far as this one can go. Let him go, Claire."*

*"Yes ma'am,"* Claire said, following up with a despondent incantation. The goblin's soul immediately shattered, scattering into dust. She then opened a gate, sucking in the remnants of the goblin's soul like she was simply cleaning up some trash. *"And we're done! Simple isn't it, Prince?"* There was only innocence in Claire's smile.

Sure, Claire had always been quite the prankster and kind of a punk in that regard. But she hadn't been the type of girl to pull off a bug's legs just to watch it suffer...

Being one of Enma's subordinates, she was an undead with a sense of self. That meant she had to empathize with Enma in some respect.

*"Humans are better off dead."*

She must have experienced something truly terrible to have come to that conclusion. I didn't even want to imagine what her final moments as a living



person had been like.

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After witnessing all that, it had become incredibly difficult to just carry on like everything was normal. I felt like an idiot, unable to accomplish anything. But I couldn't just open up about my feelings. In a desperate bid to come up with an excuse, I told everyone I had fallen in love with an undead. Well, if you were just talking about the impact of initially meeting her, that wasn't a complete lie. Thanks to my reputation of being a weirdo, most people bought the excuse.

I continued to learn **Necromancy**. Maybe I should have pretended nothing had happened and just given up on **Necromancy** altogether. But I couldn't.

*"Since these spells are all pretty similar, getting them straight can be a bit of a pain. But if you line them up like this, you can make something of a rhyming game out of them!"*

*"Huh. I never thought about it like that."*

*"Right? It's super easy to remember, right? Oh...uh...you may be able to remember them easier this way, my prince."*

*"Relax, no need to force yourself to act all formal around me."*

*"Aha, as expected of the prince! Just like the professor said, you really get it!"*

Despite how much she had changed and given how she acted, she was without a doubt the same Claire I had known. It was like I had been transported back to my childhood. In a way, it was...fun. Even if we had exchanged dreaming up pranks to play on the other villagers with studying heresies and playing with souls like toys.

I continued to delve into the taboo. Drawing out people's souls from the spiritual world at random to work on them. Pulling the souls of forest elves that had died, imprisoning them in bones, and then controlling them. I absorbed everything I could about **Necromancy**.

*"You have an incredible talent, Zil. You might even end up surpassing my initial expectations!"*

*"You're amazing! Demons really are a whole different breed, aren't they,*

*Prince?"*

In a way, I felt numb. As though I was incapable of doing anything, stuck at a stalemate. So naturally, I received suitable punishment.

*"I think it's about time we move on to higher level souls."* Enma said out of the blue, massaging my shoulders. *"Speaking of, you killed a dragon leader, didn't you? Faravgi, was it?"*

I felt all the blood drain from my face.

*"Of course you've got all the materials, right? So next time..."* Enma whispered into my ear. *"Let's call Faravgi out and try a few things."* The moment she had set eyes on me, it had already been decided.

Enma's focus shifted to Faravgi.

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I was now lying in bed, talking with Ante. When I was given Layla, I didn't want her to be my pet but rather my ally. So I needed to handle this Faravgi issue.

*"That is understandable,"* Ante gave an irritated sigh. *"Never mind just killing her father; if you were to treat his departed soul as a plaything, earning her trust will be nothing more than a fantasy."*

*No matter the cost, I need her to be a true ally. Her mobility may make it possible to free Liliana and leak info to the Alliance. She's the only dragon that could help accomplish that. No way the others could keep my secret. Layla is the only one who might...!*

*"So, the core of the matter then..."* Ante said quietly, *"...is that really necessary?"*

*What do you mean?*

*"What exactly will freeing the saint accomplish? Or leaking information to the Alliance for that matter? Surely those aren't necessary to bring down the kingdom."*

I had no reply.

*“Your recent growth has been nothing short of incredible.”*

Ante barked a short laugh.

*“It makes me want to show off just how much of your power I’ve been holding back.”*

The “reward” for my taboos.

*“At this rate, in a few years, or perhaps a few decades, you may become strong enough to defeat the Demon King all on your own. So, is all that really necessary?”* The illusion of Ante looked down at me. *“Do you really need that girl’s help?”*

Wasn’t I going to be able to manage on my own?

I had no reply for her. Because...

*“Right. You already understand.”*

I was in a hurry...

*“You still think you have a chance to make it in time, don’t you?”*

*Stop looking at me like I’m pitiful!*

*“Of course I pity you. Look how you suffer. You still have a chance to set up a meeting between her and her father. A proper meeting where he won’t be unlike how he was in life. Unlike your reunion with your childhood friend. That is what you are thinking, right?”*

Again, I had no reply.

*“I understand how you feel. We are one and the same. I understand you painfully well.”* She placed an illusory hand on my cheek. *“But...what is your real objective?”*

To defeat the Demon King. To save humanity.

*“Do not lose sight of that, hero.”*

That’s right. No matter what anyone said...I was a hero...

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With those thoughts plaguing me, I found myself less and less able to focus on

my studies.

So in a bid to forget those thoughts, I threw myself into my training. Throwing every ounce of strength I had against Prati, as if I was simply lashing out. Physical pain was no more than a warning sign. It had nothing on true suffering. I felt a sense of my will transcending my flesh. Pain was nothing to me. For that matter, any magic that attempted to interfere with my physical body could easily be ripped apart with brute force. Even as I clearly crossed the line, as my own fingers started to bleed from overexertion, I didn't feel a thing. Once I had reached that point, the rest became easy.

I had become strong. I was strong now! Before realizing it, I had started to laugh. Seeing Prati recoil from me filled me with joy. It felt like my senseless daily life had all been burned to the ground. The warm sunlight I once loved started to feel blinding, burning. I was a demon prince, so that was normal enough, I presumed.

At this rate, eventually...

Ha.

Aha ha ha.

Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

*"Enough."* One day, as my next lesson in **Necromancy** approached, Ante spoke up. *"It appears your will has grown too strong. Normally your tangled, tattered soul seems on the verge of being torn to pieces...but that was better than the alternative. Such would leave your mind utterly broken. Do as you like."*

The devil god relented.

+++

After regaining my senses a bit, I was able to speak with Ante again and we came to a compromise. In order to try and win over Layla, I would bring up her father. For the time being, I wouldn't reveal my true nature to her. That's what we decided.

I had no idea if I could keep Faravgi from going on a rampage without telling him the truth. It went without saying that calling his spirit was nothing short of dangerous. But if Layla accompanied me and if she called out to him, maybe pacifying Faravgi would be possible. If we could talk with Faravgi, I might be able to protect his soul by sealing it in his remains. That would hinder us from being able to call his soul back during Enma's lesson. After that, we could just brush it off as a result of his soul being so weak it had already disappeared.

"Right now, I'm good enough to summon him. Your father, Faravgi." But, that was that, and this was this. "If you want me to." It all depended on how she responded.

After a long, long silence, she finally spoke. "Why?" Sitting on a chair across from me, eyes looking down into her own lap, she hesitantly lifted her gaze to meet mine, fingers clenching tight. "Why now...?" Though there was a certain shyness in her gaze, yeah, I saw something else in there.

Shining in her eyes, along with the fear, the resignation, was something else she couldn't quite suppress.

"Why...why now of all times?!"

The unmistakable flame of anger and hatred.

+++

She knew it wasn't something she should say.

"Why...why now of all times?!"

But she couldn't stop herself. She said it. She crossed the line.

She felt her blood run cold. How long had it been since she talked back to someone like that? Probably back when she was a child saying something selfish to her parents. Before meeting Zilbagias, she had no idea what kind of punishment she'd receive for talking like that.

But...Zilbagias accepted her words in silence. He didn't get angry. His only response was his lips tightening, as if he was in pain.

*You knew all along, didn't you?* A cold, cynical part of herself spoke up. A part

of her so frighteningly similar to the king of the dark dragons, Oruphen. *You know this prince won't hurt you.*

Because of that, she let all her anger out. She was a coward. That was right. Layla trembled at her own offense. Never before had she considered saying something like that. She was stupid, useless, and the filthy daughter of a traitor. It only made sense that everyone attacked her. All the cruelty she received was justified by that reason, so she had given up. Anger or hatred were far from anything she felt.

But...now she was in a new place. A warm environment. Her cracked, dried-out heart had started to heal. Before, it was like the world was cloaked in a gray haze, and she was always jumping at shadows, eyes locked on her own feet. Now, she could lift her gaze and walk confidently.

Along with the blood flowing through her heart once again came the ugliness of her emotions. Looking at herself, she finally noticed. Together with the gratefulness and affection she had for Zilbagias, who had provided this place for her...

...she was still angry. She still hated him for killing her father.

She had done everything she could to hide that fact from herself. For everything he had given her, she owed him that much. She knew just how generous Zilbagias was. There wasn't another demon in the whole world like him. In a culture where charity and mercy were seen as signs of weakness, he had taken in the daughter of an enemy and treated her with care. He was a miracle.

*I'm awful.*

She couldn't remember how many times she had told herself that as she went to bed. Deep down, she knew she needed to discard those negative feelings before they turned her into a miserable, wretched person. But no matter how much she looked away, those feelings continued to bubble up inside her.

The nightmares that plagued her always ended with Zilbagias sneering over her father's severed head. Even though she had never seen him act like that toward anyone, let alone her, with her own eyes.

“Why...”

So she couldn't help but throw her misery at his feet. Why had he brought up her father *now*? As much as she had tried to forget and to act like she didn't know, this was the culprit himself who had brought it up. So she had to look at it head-on...

“I'm sorry,” Zilbagias lowered his head.

Layla felt somehow detached, curiously wondering why a prince would bow his head to someone like her, as if it was meant for someone else entirely. After such a generous offer to allow her to see her father again, he could have flown into a fit of rage. No one would have batted an eye if he beat her for her attitude.

“No amount of apologizing can bring your father back. I'm well aware of how meaningless it is. You have no reason to accept it.” For a moment, his eyes closed, and Layla could see his expression tighten. “Why am I bringing it up now? Because of my **Necromancy** lessons.”

What did that have to do with her, though? To her, it felt like she was eavesdropping on someone else's life.

“The lich teaching me wants me to practice calling on high-level souls...so she said next time I would be trying to summon Faravgi.”

His next words felt like a punch to the face.

While news that he was learning **Necromancy** was enough to trigger a bit of discomfort from a common sense perspective, she wasn't especially bothered by it. The thought of playing with the souls of the dead was unpleasant, but it wasn't something that concerned her.

But now she understood. They wanted to *use* her father's soul? Even though she had no knowledge of **Necromancy** to know the specifics, it was enough to assume nothing good would come of it. He was already dead. He had already been killed. Did they need to desecrate him further? Couldn't they at least let him rest in peace?!

“But...!” Layla's eyes were wide, her face pale, lips trembling. So before they did that, he wanted to give her a chance to say goodbye to her father?

*What do I do? How should I respond?*

She wanted to save her father's soul and didn't want him to suffer even after death. But what could she do? What could she say? She started to panic.

"Please, calm down. I want to...save your father. I know it sounds ridiculous coming from me, but..." Layla's thoughts froze at the self-reprimanding, melancholic look in his eyes. "It's true that I'm learning **Necromancy**, but my interest is purely academic. I may be touching on all these taboos, but not because I want to make you suffer!" For some reason, it seemed like Zilbagias himself was the one suffering as he said that.

"Enma knows about your father. There's nothing we can do about that now. Maybe I could ask to put off the lesson or order her to leave Faravgi alone, but none of those are guaranteed to work. Calling a soul from the spiritual world is as easy to her as taking a book from a bookshelf." There was no telling when she would call Faravgi on a mere whim. And there was no telling what she would do to him when she did.

"So if we want to protect your father's soul...now is our only chance," he said. If they called her father's soul out and put it into something in the physical world, no one else would be able to summon him. So his intention was not to give her a chance at one final goodbye. He was really bringing all this up for her sake.

"If you say that...I can hardly refuse..." she replied, eyes downcast. Though she should have been thanking him for his consideration, she couldn't bring herself to do so.

*Don't be a baby. What you really want to say is "how dare you ask me for permission when you know I can't refuse," right?* That cold part of her sneered again. Of course, that realization was accompanied by a wave of intense guilt. But still, she could hardly just say, "Thanks for bringing back my father's soul." Those were words she couldn't say, not to the very person who had taken her father's life.

"I'm sorry...!" Zilbagias bowed his head again.

*Please, stop apologizing!* Layla was on the verge of tears. *You didn't do anything wrong. I'm the awful one here...*



Pulling out some white powder, Zilbagias began an incantation. A torrent of dark magic poured from him, shifting the powder to form an encircled pattern on the ground. Apparently the powder was made of bone, and could function as a barrier to trap souls of the dead.

“I’ll summon your father’s spirit now,” he said quietly. “Even though I took some measures to be on the safe side...since I was the one who killed him, he’ll likely try to return the favor.”

Layla’s hands clenched tight over her chest.

“If he’s lost all reason, he may use a breath attack right away. And with that light he would just erase himself.” The prince gave a wry smile. “So...I need you to convince him. No way he’ll listen to me.” He regarded her with crimson, jewellike eyes.

“Okay,” Layla finally responded with a nod. Reuniting with her father while he was in such a berserk state terrified her.

But...she wanted to save him. And this was the only way.

Dark magic billowed out of Zilbagias again.

“*Aorat Teihos Po Horizi...*” The incantation began. With the circle of bone powder, a gate to the spiritual world opened. At that moment, a hand of dark energy reached from the prince into the depths of the endless void. “*Faravgi.*” Zilbagias called his name.

And the dragon answered.

From beyond.

Layla could feel a familiar presence approaching...familiar, yet somehow harsher—

A sudden premonition of danger burst forth from the invisible gate. Pure, unadulterated bloodlust. An earsplitting roar filled the air, signaling the arrival of a familiar yet strange face from the spiritual world, a dragon shrouded in dark black magic. Without any hesitation, it attempted to snap at Zilbagias, but the prince’s barrier halted its onslaught. It seemed he was unable to fit his

entire body through the gate in dragon form, so only his head had materialized as some sort of sick joke—a sight that had Layla covering her mouth in shock.

Zilbagias grunted as he poured magical energy into his barriers, attempting to rebuild them. “Layla! Hurry! I can’t hold him back!”

The prince’s desperate pleading caused Layla to gasp, but this wasn’t the time to be scared!

“Father!” Layla forced herself to call out, but...

*“Graaaaaaaaaaah!!!”* Her father’s determination was unwavering as he continued his assault on the barrier.

*“Kill! You! Definitely! Kill! Kill kill kill!”*

“F-Father! It’s me!”

Faravgi’s roars caused the entire room to tremble. Despite having no physical body, his fury was quite palpable. Never mind the bone powder barrier, even the soundproof barrier might collapse—

*“Give them back! Give me back my wife! Damn you, demons! Dark dragons!”* His wildly flashing eyes lacked even a hint of sanity.

Faravgi opened his mouth wide, making the situation even more precarious.

“He’s trying to breathe!” Zilbagias’s voice was shrill. With his soul reconstructed through dark magic, if Faravgi used his light breath, he would erase himself!

“Father! It’s me! Please, listen!” Layla desperately waved her hands in an attempt to get his attention, but she was merely ignored. Was she not recognizable in human form? Despite her cries, he still didn’t notice his daughter?

The sense of hollowness brought on by the necromantic summoning, the sorrow, the sight of her father in the grips of such madness all hit Layla at once, bringing her to the edge of tears.

*“Gaaaaaah! Give them back! Give me back my Layla! Give me back my daughter!”*

And then, with Layla standing right in front of him, he roared her name.

“F-Father...! I already told you it’s me!”

Her miserable helplessness reached the tipping point...

...and she snapped.

She now remembered this had always been her father’s nature, even in life. He was stubborn and had a habit of losing sight of what was important!

“Your daughter is right here!” she glared at him through her tears. Something was boiling inside her. He was always like this. He was always like this! “You idiot!!!”

Layla screamed, and as she did, there was a burst of light—from her mouth. A stream of light punched through the barrier and struck Faravgi’s spiritual body head-on. A hiss, like water hitting scalding steel, filled the air. Faravgi recoiled back with a cry as Zilbagias turned to Layla with a look of pure shock. Completely bewildered by what had just happened, Layla covered her mouth.

“Dragons can use their breath while in human form?!”

“C-Can they...?” That was the only reply the confused Layla could muster to the wide-eyed prince.

“I mean, you just did...” he muttered as if in a daze. She supposed he was right, even if the attack was feeble as one from a baby. But a breath attack while in human form? That was something Layla had never heard of before. The two shared a look for a while.

“*Lay...la...?*” That moment was cut short by a sound akin to two metals scraping against each other.

“Father?!”

Returning her attention to the circle, Layla saw her father’s head shaking back and forth, as if he had just been violently woken from a deep slumber. Dark magic billowed like smoke from his face, but...

“*That voice...is that...Layla...?*” For the most part, he had returned to his

senses. Layla almost couldn't believe her eyes.

"Yes, it's me! Father...thank goodness..." Layla collapsed to the floor in exhausted relief.

*"Where...am I...?"*

"The Demon King's castle." Zilbagias stepped forward. "I used **Necromancy** to awaken your soul, leader of the white dragons, Faravgi."

*"You bastard...!"* Faravgi bared his fangs and started to growl. Layla was terrified he'd descend back into a rage, but within his hostility was a trace of confusion.

It was possible it was due to how long his slumber in the spiritual world had been. But it seemed like something more. Something somehow...different.

*"Demon Prince Zilbagias, was it?"* the dragon spoke cautiously, as if his madness had been nothing more than a dream.

"That's right," Zilbagias nodded nervously.

*"I don't understand,"* Faravgi rumbled. *"I saw it in my last moments, Zilbagias."*

Layla tilted her head in confusion. What had he seen? And why did the mere thought of it make Zilbagias go completely stiff?

*"You are a demon, are you not? Then how..."* Faravgi's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

*"How did you use holy magic?"*

+++

I was finished. While a cold sweat started to pour down my face, Layla just gave me a confused look. It seemed she hadn't understood her father's words.

*Somehow, somehow, I need an excuse. This is my last chance!*

"What are you talking about?"

*"Don't be a fool,"* Faravgi growled at my attempt to brush off the accusation. *"In my final moments, I saw a silver light coming from your blade. And the*

*burning sensation as it sliced through my neck...!"*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Layla tense up.

*"Without a doubt, that was the very same holy magic used by heroes!"*

*"You sure you weren't imagining things?"*

*"Impossible! I've witnessed such holy magic countless times before! It was exactly the same!"*

He showed no signs of bending. *This guy is so stubborn! He's not wrong, but even if he was, no way would he back down. What a pain in the ass!*

*"Hmm...now I remember something else. You even managed to block my full-powered breath with a shield?!"*

*"Not like I had any other options, now did I?"*

*"And you have a sword lying around!"*

Frustratingly his sharp eyes had picked up on Adamas lying in the corner of the room. And then, like he had been struck by lightning, he snapped his gaze back to me in shock.

*"You... You're a hero turned demon?!"*

I was speechless. Faravgi was too impulsive. He followed his emotions without hesitating, no matter what conclusions he jumped to. Surely that had led him to plenty of twists and turns caused by mistakes and misapprehensions in the past. However, this time, it had taken him straight to the truth.

I needed to come up with something, but I couldn't think of anything. Slamming the gate shut crossed my mind, but given Faravgi's massive body, I figured I couldn't do it. *Dammit. Wait, if I just throw him back in now, I would be basically admitting everything he said was true. And now that he knows, I can't let him go back to the spiritual world! His suspicions could be leaked at any time! What can I even do?!* I wracked my brain for a solution.

"Oh..." A voice like a sigh came from my side. Looking to Layla, I saw her staring back up at me...a new understanding in her eyes. Why had I treated the daughter of a traitor so well? She had probably always found it strange. Why had I taken such a liking to the saint Liliana? Why did I love swords so much?

If I was a hero, then...everything made sense.

*“What is going on here?” Ante groaned. “How could things even end up like this? Well, no point lamenting that now. This is magnitudes better than the truth coming out with Enma present.”*

True enough. If I hadn’t made the decision I had today, this would have happened during one of Enma’s lessons.

*“We have come so far, now is the time to steel yourself, Alexander,” Ante declared solemnly. “Either make them your allies...or silence them for good.”*

Those were my only two choices. Which meant there was really only one choice. I sighed. A long, drawn-out sigh.

*“...That’s right.”* Checking the soundproof barrier again, I nodded in surrender. Dropping the tension from my shoulders, I looked to Faravgi again—not with the eyes of a haughty demon prince, but with those of an old comrade. *“I was a human hero. One who assaulted the Demon King’s castle with you.”*

Faravgi’s and Layla’s eyes went wide.

+++

Layla couldn’t believe her ears. Zilbagias spoke about his past, about his true identity. It now made sense why he had never seemed like a five-year-old before. In actuality, he was older than she was.

*“How did something like this happen...?”* Despite having guessed his true identity, her father was no less shocked at the revelation of Zilbagias’s reincarnation. *“Why?! Back then! Why didn’t you say anything?!”* And naturally grew quite angry. *“Could we not have been allies?!”*

*“You’re the one who used a breath attack right after we met!”* Zilbagias replied through gritted teeth. This also caught Layla by surprise. The prince was usually so calm, so in control. For the first time, she saw him lash out with raw emotion. At the same time, she realized every aspect of his demeanor she had known had all been a facade.

*“And besides...I couldn’t say anything,”* he continued, face twisting into a scowl. *“No way you could’ve known, but there were some demon escorts*

keeping watch a fair distance away. They saw your breath attack and started to panic. On top of that, another demon prince showed up shortly after on a mission to exterminate you,” he all but spat as he spoke of his own brother. “Naturally, I wanted to cooperate with you. But...the only way to do that would have been to kill all of my subordinates and guards. Every single one of them. None could be left alive.”

That was the decision he’d had to make. Glancing over to Layla, his face turned bitter, but nevertheless, he continued to speak clearly.

“I weighed the risks and rewards of both options. And in the end...I decided my current situation, my current position, gave me a better chance! So I killed you! All so...”

All so he could defeat the Demon King.

Faravgi began to growl, his jaw trembling as if he was about to burst into a fit of rage once more. But understanding the complexity of the prince’s situation, and considering they shared the same end goal, he managed to restrain himself, if just barely.

“We were just...as unlucky as we could be,” Zilbagias muttered. “Why didn’t you just leave immediately?”

*“If I had a few more days, I would have gathered enough power to shake off the curse on my wings.”* Faravgi closed his eyes, a bitter look passing over his face. *“Normally, I would have just fled with haste and hid, but...it was really that close. Though, if what you say about another prince arriving shortly after is true, I suppose it wouldn’t have mattered either way...”*

Despite their vastly different races, the two wore extremely similar expressions.

“Father...” Layla finally called out as the conversation grew quiet.

*“Oh, Layla.”* Faravgi gave her a pained smile. *“I am sorry for the great trouble I caused you.”*

“Father...why did you leave the castle?”

Oruphen had always told her that he had taken the white dragons and fled.

She had always been forced to believe that, but now she could hardly believe that her father, even as impulsive as he was, could throw away the future of their people on such a reckless decision.

Faravgi's eyes filled with anger, another growl rising from his throat.  
*"Oruphen, you damned dark dragon...!"*

"F-Father! Please, calm down!"

*"S-Sorry!"* The terrified voice of his daughter quickly brought him back to reality. *"In this state, my emotions easily get the better of me...the cold darkness is like torture..."*

That made sense. And deep down in her heart, Layla understood that as well. Despite being a creature of the light, he was cloaked in such thick dark magic.

*"The dark dragons deceived us,"* he began to explain. The white dragons had been treated unfairly in the distribution of resources and assignment to the frontline battlefields. Faravgi had gathered the leaders of their faction to carry out a formal complaint, but they were ambushed by the dark dragons and inflicted with a curse of madness while they were still in human form.

Faravgi had barely managed to resist it, but the other younger dragons had been unable to cope, reverting to their dragon forms and luckily lashing out at the attacking dark dragons.

*"It was unlike our usual conflicts. This was a true fight to the death."*

The fighting led to a number of young dragons, plus Faravgi's wife Freya, to be slain. Hearing her mother's name caused Layla to bite her lip.

*"As the fighting grew intense, that bastard Oruphen showed up! Holding you hostage! He said the only way the fighting would end was if we left...so we had no choice but to leave you behind and run!"*

Black drops poured from the dragon's eyes as he continued.

*"I'm so sorry...! It's because of my weakness that you endured so much...! Back then, no matter how much we hated them, we still saw them as our brothers. But they clearly saw us as nothing more than enemies."*

And the white dragons had failed to notice. Faravgi took full responsibility for



them letting down their guard.

*“All your suffering is my fault... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...!”* Though blocked by the barrier, Faravgi tried to nuzzle up as close to his daughter as possible.

“Father...! It’s not your fault!” she answered, voice trembling, tears pouring from her eyes.

*“So...to retaliate, we joined with the humans...”* Faravgi’s gaze returned to Zilbagias. *“The rest is as you know. I am sure we caused you even more trouble. Truthfully, I should be glad to see you are still alive...”* He then seemed to realize something. *“But...why is Layla with you?”*

“Please...I’ll explain, so try to stay calm,” Zilbagias spoke slowly. “As an apology for my being attacked by a dragon, Oruphen approached me as representative of all the dragons, and gave her to me as a peace offering.”

Faravgi’s jaw dropped. It took a moment for the shock to settle upon hearing those words.

But when they did, Faravgi’s roar was not far behind.

*“Damn you, Oruphen!!!”* He exploded. His fury was almost enough to smash the barrier into pieces. But as that rage boiled into a breath attack, his own light magic burned him, startling Faravgi enough to regain some semblance of calmness.

He spat clouds of smokelike residue while wearing a pained expression. It was a pitiful sight, hardly befitting the head of the white dragons. He couldn’t even control his own temper in this state.

“I have been doing everything I can to...treat her well.” Zilbagias bowed his head. “And that’s why I have summoned your soul today.”

*“What do you mean?”*

“Recently, I’ve been learning **Necromancy**...” Faravgi listened with shock once again as he learned he was to be material for Zilbagias’s next lesson. Considering the horror Layla had felt upon hearing the news, she couldn’t begin to imagine how her father felt upon hearing it.

*“Th-Then...what will become of me?”*

“Calm down. I have no intention of harming you. Honestly, since you now know my true identity, I can’t allow your soul to roam free anymore anyway.”

Layla and Faravgi both looked at the prince.

“Actually...my plan was to seal your soul into something as a kind of protection. Well, as long as you agree.”

Her father—Faravgi—went silent, looking at his daughter. Layla swallowed nervously.

*“I...see.”* At long last he lifted his gaze. *“I am grateful, hero.”*

Layla sighed in relief at her father’s answer—

*“Nevertheless, I refuse.”*

—but his next words left both her and the prince staring at him in utter shock.

Layla was at a total loss. Why? After everything Zilbagias had done to give her another chance to be with her father, why?

“Faravgi...your pride as a dragon is not lost on me.” Zilbagias recovered first, almost sounding like he was trying to soothe the dragon. “Becoming an undead servant is humiliating, I know. I understand that, but if you can bear that for your daughter’s sake—”

*“That is not all.”* Faravgi cut him off. *“That is not all, hero.”* His face was surprisingly calm. *“You would not understand. This feeling of my self being stripped away, little by little, moment by moment. This feeling of loss will continue for eternity. Perhaps this loss could be compensated for, but all that would remain would not be me.”*

Layla and Zilbagias gulped. The light magic that composed his soul and the dark magic at the core of **Necromancy** were just too different.

*“The more time passes, the more I morph into something else entirely. Just thinking about what would be lost...”* Faravgi closed his eyes. And then light magic started to well up inside him.

“Wait, what are you doing?”

*“Layla.”* Ignoring the panicking Zilbagias, he turned to his daughter. *“When I*

*stared death in the face, my greatest regret was being unable to teach you anything. You were too young to learn the ways of our family's magic. How to use the positioning of the sun and stars to find your way. Even how to swim...I had no chance to teach you any of that."*

As Layla also started to panic, Faravgi laughed gently.

*"Did you know we dragons can even swim in the sea? You probably haven't even seen it before."* His eyes became distant. *"When I was young, I spent many days playing in the water with your mother. We'd sunbathe on the sand, and swim to our hearts' content. We always hoped that we'd go there someday as a family, when you were older..."*

"F-Father?" Layla felt like something terrible was about to happen. Why was her father so calm? It was like... It was like...

*"So, Layla,"* Faravgi spoke with a mighty voice. *"All my magic, all my knowledge, I will have you inherit it all!"*

Light magic ignited. A sizzling sound filled the air as it started to burn away Faravgi's soul.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" Zilbagias cried out. "Using light magic will destroy your own soul!"

"Stop it, Father!" Layla tried to grab her father to stop him, but Zilbagias's barrier prevented her from approaching.

*"Ha ha ha! Leaving every last essence of myself to my own child is my true wish! And surely it will be of service to you too!"* Though the burning only intensified, Faravgi looked down at Zilbagias with a satisfied expression. *"Should my soul perish this way, no **Necromancy** can pry into your secret!"*

Zilbagias's eyes went wide again. "Wait, don't be hasty! What about **Anthromorphy**?! If you can use it as an undead, you might be able to live in human form! Then you don't have to hurt yourself like this—"

*"Fool! I am a proud white dragon! While I appreciate your intentions, hero, I refuse to submit to a 'life' as your undead pet!"* Faravgi laughed proudly.

*“Paradeisos Cosmos!”*

I am the incarnation of light!

A light, so blinding it was hard to believe it was coming from a fading soul, filled the room.

*“Egokenturi Imperifas!”*

Burn this sight into your eyes!

He was as bright as the noon sun.

“Fathe—” The light all flowed toward Layla. Flowed *into* her. All her father’s knowledge, all his skills, all his magic. All his feelings. They all poured directly into her heart, riding that brilliant cascade.

She learned how to read the stars, as her father had learned from older dragons. Within her memory, she sat alongside her young father on the mountainside at night, listening to the elders explain the constellations.

She learned of how her parents met during their youth. Claiming they were going out to hunt, they secretly went to play at the beach instead. She experienced the sea breeze she had never felt, and the pleasant sensation of swimming through salt water.

She remembered competing with friends to see who could fly the highest, to see if they could reach the sun. She remembered the shock of learning that the air at such a high altitude was so thin you could no longer grasp it with your wings. That the cold was so great that it was like each breath filled your throat with ice. They never reached the sun, so with laughter they glided back toward the ground...a world they could now see was round from this height.

Countless memories, vast volumes of knowledge continued to flow into Layla. Together with the magic of their people.

Layla was born. Her cuteness was unbearable. Every trifling effort she made

was a joy to see. She tried to fly and even spit breath, despite being just a baby. Without a doubt she would grow to one day surpass Faravgi himself, a sight that filled his heart with pride. It felt like she'd be able to fly to the very ends of the world.

*"Layla. My adorable Layla..."*

Shining, sparkling, warm memories all took root in her heart. She stepped closer to her father, looking up at him, and he bent down to nuzzle her with his nose. Rubbing at his scales, she wrapped her arms around him.

*"You were able to take everything I had... I am so glad,"* he spoke, his voice like that of a man freed from an evil spirit. *"Before it was all lost. Before I transformed into something else. You got all of it..."*

"Father..." She now knew how precious she was to him. Her father had never abandoned her. He had given her everything, even at the expense of his own soul. The return of that helpless feeling was overwhelming, causing her to cry.

*"It's okay. I understand, Layla. Now, you know everything."*

Face crumpling as she sobbed, Layla clung to her father as tightly as she could...but his powerful, imposing presence was growing weaker and weaker.

"Ah..."

*"This is goodbye, then. Truly."*

He was disappearing. Her father was disappearing.

"No..." As her father began to fade, she fought to cling even harder to him. "No! I don't want this!" she screamed. "Why?! Why?! I finally got to see you again...!"

*So don't go.* He could disappear later. After all, he had already given her all his memories. But, even so, he could just stay longer...

"I wanted to keep talking to you!" Everything she wanted to say floated to the surface, only to vanish without becoming sound. Her cries and whines were all she could muster.

*"And I wanted the same,"* her father said, voice growing more distant. *"But the longer we spend together...the more it will hurt to part. In all my pride as a*

*dragon, that's what I told myself. So I crossed the line."* While wearing a bitter smile, he finished with, *"Sorry for being such a pathetic dad."* Her arms could no longer reach him.

"Father! Don't go! Father!!!"

He was truly distant now.

*"Layla...you..."* The lingering faint essence of her father touched her forehead like one last, gentle kiss. *"Don't worry about revenge...don't worry about pride. Just...be happy..."*

Just live a life of joy.

With that, and one last faint chuckle, Faravgi's presence finally faded away.

"F-Father..." Layla murmured.

But there was no reply. And she understood there would never be one again. Hot tears poured from her eyes anew as she began to wail.

Don't worry about pride. Just live a happy life. Those kind words reached the surface of her mind, remnants of the memories that had been left in her heart.

"Thank you, father...but..." with a snuffle, she forced a smile. "But...I'm a bad girl. So I'm not going to do what you say!" Wiping at her tears, she lifted her gaze. "I will definitely...someday...!"

She would definitely surpass even her own father.

She would definitely become...

"...a proud white dragon!"



+++

I kept to the corner of the room, doing my best not to intrude on their already too short family moment. In barely an instant, Layla had inherited Faravgi's magic. It felt way too brief to serve as a final farewell.

Layla was bawling. It was the first time I had ever seen such raw emotion from her.

As for me...I had nothing but respect for Faravgi, allowing the brilliance that had been his life burn itself into her memory. For his own daughter's sake, he erased his soul without any hesitation.

What an incredible father. Truly he had been a proud white dragon.

*I'll do everything I can to protect Layla for you. So please...!*

Though I knew his soul was now gone forever, I couldn't help but offer one last prayer.

*Please rest easy!*

*"So, about how we proceed..."* Ante muttered.

*Yeah, guess that's something else we have to worry about now.* This was hardly the end. In fact, you could say it was the beginning.

Finally wiping her eyes, Layla looked up at me. Her eyes shone gold, holding a brilliant light. Such a strong look was beyond anything I'd expected from her.

"Layla."

"Um..."

We both tried to break the silence at the same time.

"Go ahead."

"No, please."

"It's fine, I'll listen," I said, kneeling down to make myself level with her still sitting on the floor.



After a short time, Layla quietly bowed her head. “Thank you. For summoning my father. And...giving me a chance to say goodbye.” A faint smile rose to her face. “Thank you.” I didn’t feel like what I had done was even worthy of thanks. If anything, I felt pathetic for not being able to do more. “I’m glad I could finally say that.” I desperately struggled to keep my face from twisting into a scowl. In contrast, Layla’s shoulders slumped down, as if the weight of pent-up stress over the years was finally being expelled.

“I really hated you,” she continued. Although her casual confession almost made my heart stop, her words carried an air of gentleness. “Even though you were so kind to me. Even though you did so much for me. I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that you had killed my father. And I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel about that.”

“That’s understandable. No reason to beat yourself up over that,” I finally managed to squeeze out. “You say I treated you well, but it was still only as a servant. That’s hardly compensation for losing your father...”

“I heard from Garunya that if it hadn’t been for a mix-up in the paperwork, I probably would have been given to a different prince,” Layla said, gazing out the window at the night sky. “If that had happened...how different would things be? I might’ve died a lot sooner...” Her gaze snapped back to me. “So I’m grateful. Really. And on top of that, even if it was this short, you gave me a chance to say goodbye to my father...”

Tears welled up in her eyes again, but she wiped them away. “I’d be lying if I said everything was now good and happy...but I can’t waste my time crying like a baby. My father would laugh at me.” She gave a quiet laugh herself. “I will become a dragon that my father can be proud of.”

Well...it seemed this wasn’t simply a girl in need of protection. She was now trying to stand, trying to spread her wings all on her own.

“So, I want to say the same thing to you. You don’t need to beat yourself up over this anymore.”

*Wow. I’m no match for this girl, huh? I have nothing to say to that.*

“Okay. Thank you, Layla.” Suddenly, my heart felt lighter. For the first time, I understood how much weight I had been carrying. “Thank you.” Really. I had

never expected she could forgive someone like me.

The two of us shared an awkward smile. Unfortunately, this unbelievably pleasant moment couldn't last forever.

"I guess we should talk. About what happens next."

Layla nodded seriously.

"Though, there's no reason to stay on the floor. Let's use the sofa."

"Ah, right. Thank you."

Moving to the sofa, we stared at the now empty barrier of bone powder as we discussed what we would do moving forward.

"So, your plan is..."

"Yeah. To destroy the demonic kingdom," I nodded. "Or at least, to kill the Demon King and his successors. The kingdom should crumble not long after that. To that end, I plan to take full advantage of my position here."

"And who else knows about this?"

"Ante, since she's always inside me. Liliana. And now you."

Layla's face took on a somewhat funny expression. "Um...Liliana?"

"Yeah...even given her current state." I thought of Liliana, sitting outside the room where I had told her to wait. "The only way I could get her out of the night elf prison was to seal her memories temporarily. Though that seal is now gone, uh...it seems she decided to stay like that for the time being."

A sad expression passed over Layla's face as I explained that Liliana's experiences had led her to reject her own memories. "In my mind, I always figured I had it worse than anyone else. Guess that was naive of me. There's always a bigger fish, I suppose..."

*Okay, I know Liliana's situation was super tragic, but yours was pretty bad too, y'know?*

"No need to make a contest out of it."

"I suppose not. Sorry."

“It’s fine, you don’t have to apologize. Anyway, after she recovers, my plan is to find her a way out of here.” I looked Layla in the eye. “For that reason...I need a means of transportation entirely separate from my other servants. Something that gives me true independence.”

A light seemed to turn on in Layla’s head. “Ah...!” She squeezed her hands tight. “And that’s where I come in!”

“Right. If you could help me when the time comes, I’d be eternally grateful...!”

“Of course!”

*Thank goodness. I was worried she’d say something along the lines of “a proud dragon never allows someone to ride them.”*

“But...” Her expression clouded over. “Speaking of your servants...that means you’ll eventually...betray them, right? Veene, and Garunya too?” She delivered a strike right to my gut, knocking the wind out of me.

“Eventually...yes.” I gulped and admitted through gritted teeth. “In my previous life, both of my parents were killed. My father by the hands of the fourth demon prince, Emergias. And my mother by a night elf.”

This time it was Layla’s turn to gulp.

“On top of that, the Alliance has been infested with the night elf information network. Like a colony of termites, sowing discord and chaos everywhere. Because of that, my plan for revenge doesn’t stop at the demons, but also extends to the night elves.” After everything that had happened, there was no point concealing my feelings. Even so, as pathetic as it sounds, I couldn’t muster the courage to make eye contact with her while delivering my declaration. It was all I could do to bear the weight of her stare from outside my field of view. “Veene has been good to me since I was little. But...that’s an entirely different issue.”

And then there was Garunya.

“As for Garunya, I don’t want to waste her great kindness and loyalty. Really, I don’t.” I had no personal grudge against the cat beastfolk. “But the white tiger beastfolk have a long history of being oppressed by humans. They hate us, and hold quite a strong grudge. Kind of like my hatred for the demons and night

elves.”

Layla listened in silence.

“In terms of what to do about Garunya...I don’t have a clue. I’m well aware of how pitiful that sounds.”

I would kill the Demon King. I would wipe out his descendants. I would make the night elves pay, and I would destroy the Dark Portal. I would reduce the demonic kingdom to ash. Yet when it came to the beastfolk...it didn’t take much to imagine what would happen after they were stripped of the protection the demons provided, but...

“I don’t know what to do.” Hesitantly I glanced up at Layla, to be greeted by a surprisingly mellow expression.

“If you had said something like ‘who cares about them’...that might’ve been scary.” Timidly, she reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. Her small hand offered unexpected warmth. It seemed she was at even more of a loss for words than I was.

It made some sense. If the answer was easy, my suffering wouldn’t be so immense.

“I’ll keep that issue in mind for the time being.” I knew I was just delaying the inevitable, but I pushed the conversation forward regardless. “That’s my plan for the future. I want to utilize my role as a prince as much as possible to bring down the demonic kingdom. If the opportunity presents itself, I’d also like to give Liliana her freedom, and relay information to the Alliance. As far as I can tell, the night elf spy network hasn’t infiltrated the forest elves yet...” Ironically, despite being experts of disguise, the night elves were unable to pull off the forest elf look.

“What about...the dragons?” Layla asked nervously.

“That’s...complicated. I told my mother that my good treatment of you was part of a front—”

“Your mother?”

“Oh, right. Archduchess Pratifya.” I all but gasped at my own slip up. *Come on*

*now, I'm supposed to be Alexander!*

"Prati and the other high-ranking demons are afraid of the dragons rebelling. So..." I gave Layla a rundown of the "plan" to use her as a figurehead to unite the former white dragon faction.

"The white dragon faction..." Layla repeated, her clouded expression making it seem like she was struggling to wrap her mind around it all. "Back when I lived in the cave with the other dragons...some didn't harass me. They just observed from a distance." A dark, vacant look passed over her face. "I suppose they belonged to the faction you're talking about." Her tone was as if said faction was entirely unrelated to her.

"Honestly speaking...as strange as it is after making a declaration that I'd be a proud dragon..." Layla seemed to shrink. "I've spent so much time in this form... I barely feel like a dragon at all. Father and mother are different...but it feels like those dragons in the cave are of a completely separate race from me..."

*Man...what did you do to this girl, Oruphen?*

"But even so, I don't want to hate anyone. That would be...too painful," she said, clasping her hands to her chest. "Even so, I can't say I care what happens to the dark dragons." Despite her hesitation, she made her feelings clear. She couldn't care less about the dark dragons. "Of course, I don't want those who didn't attack me to get hurt any more than is necessary, but..."

"I see. Honestly, I haven't given that detail much thought yet. In a likely scenario...I'll be pitting the dark dragons against the demons."

Layla responded with a nod. Her serious expression lacked even a hint of scorn for the dark dragons or satisfaction at their impending fate.

*Poor dark dragons. They had their chance at salvation just sitting in their lap, only to crush it with their own hands. Any opportunity to regret or reflect on that mistake will likely never come.*

"That's about it. Although there's more I'd like to discuss...if we continue any longer, the others may get suspicious," I said, thinking of those waiting beyond the door. "Anyway, please keep all this a secret."

"Of course." Layla nodded again, her hands squeezing tight.

“Once you’re able to fly, I guess we could use the sky to hold our private conversations.”

“I learned how to fly from my father. So I should probably be able to fly very soon!” she declared with a strength that was quite rare to see from her. *Really, he gave her that much?*

“That’s great! But I guess we’ll need to explain that to Prati.”

Layla tilted her head. “Explain what?”

“We’re going to need proof that you’re completely trustworthy. Prati is, uh...pretty worried you’ll betray us one day.”

“Ah...” Layla nodded, not the least bit surprised. “How can we prove that, though?”

“As far as Prati is concerned, I plan on telling her that I taught you to think logically regarding the future of both you and the dragons. And that the only way to secure that future is with the help of allies.”

“So...we need to give her a reason that shows I will definitely never betray you?”

“That’s right. Have any ideas?” I asked, seeing her pensive expression, but expecting little.

Layla nodded. “What if we got married?”

Her unexpected suggestion left me wordlessly spluttering.

# Epilogue

“That’s strange...” Enma spoke, her face terrifyingly blank. “You killed Faravgi not too long ago, right? Such a powerful dragon shouldn’t have disappeared already...” she muttered. “One second.”

Stepping up beside me, Enma drew out a huge amount of dark magic from herself.

*“Come forth, Faravgi.”* Her magical arms—really more like tentacles—plunged into the gate I had opened. “No sign of him. How bizarre.”

“Actually, I might know why...”

Enma and Claire both turned to me.

“What do you mean?”

“At the last moment, he said something about ‘I don’t care what happens to my soul!’ Then he used something that seemed to be his trump card.” My face was all but triumphant. Plus, it was nice being able to tell the truth for once.

Enma smacked her forehead. “Ah, I could definitely see light magic taking a toll on the soul! Why didn’t you say something sooner?!” she complained, smacking my shoulder.

“Uh, sorry. I beheaded him before he could even finish, so I figured it wasn’t a big deal.” That was also not a lie. Well, disregarding the huge gap in the timeline.

“Hmm...I understand how you feel, but...”

“Professor, you only brought up Faravgi recently, right? Can you really complain?” Claire jumped into the conversation, stepping up beside me and placing a hand on the same shoulder Enma had slapped. “There’s no way he could’ve guessed you would try to use Faravgi as material, right?”

“And I suppose by that point, it was already too late,” Enma sighed, despondent. “It’s just a shame. I was so excited to tinker with Faravgi’s soul that

I didn't prepare a backup plan. But you must be superstrong, Zil. You made a leader of the dragons use a forbidden spell like that?"

"Who knows? I don't have a clue what he was thinking," I answered bluntly. I almost followed up with "if summoning him was still an option, maybe we could've asked nicely," but being talkative was characteristic of liars. It seemed best just leaving it at that while maintaining the truth where applicable. So I made a disappointed face instead, keeping my mouth shut to make sure I didn't give anything away.

Even with the planned lesson canceled, it was too much of a waste to call it a day already, so we decided to study Enma's literature for a bit. Sophia could hardly contain her giddiness as she stepped into the reference room, leaping right into a book.

*At least she's happy. Now that I think about it, she's been kinda loose ever since she got drunk. Is she really okay?*

"Oh, by the way, I'll have to postpone our next lesson for a while," Enma suddenly announced while I was studying.

"Hm? Why's that?"

"I've got some work to do on the front lines."

I stiffened up at her casual declaration. *The Dollmaker herself is heading to the front lines?*

"What's with that face? I'm not getting my hands dirty in battle or anything. Just cleaning up some dead bodies."

"I'm tagging along too!" Claire added, waving from her desk where she had her head down in a book. Apparently a number of Enma's subordinates would be accompanying her to help look after the undead.

"I'm the only lich that has a commander-level rank, after all."

"I see..."

Dealing with dead bodies on the battlefield was always a cause for concern. The labor was significant and it was terrible for morale, but it couldn't be ignored without risking disease outbreaks. If those dead bodies could get up



and leave of their own accord...well, that would be the easiest solution, wouldn't it?

"Are there that many dead bodies?" That seemed like the only logical explanation as to why a whole unit of necromancers had been ordered to deal with them. And I imagined most of those bodies were human.

"Your older brother Lord Emergias punched quite deep into enemy lines, apparently."

"Oh? My brother ran ahead of everyone?"

"Not quite. Based on how it sounded, that seemed to be all according to plan."

*That's weird. Isn't the demonic kingdom's strategy to advance slow but steady? Hard to imagine the Demon King just let Emergias run wild so he could pad his resume. What's really going on?* Since the Rage Family were healers within the demonic kingdom, they tended to get tactical information quite late.

"What's wrong? You look...panicked?" Enma asked, a mischievous look on her face.

"One of my brothers is out there making a name for himself. Of course I'd be worried." I tried to pass it off, rubbing at my face.

"It's been on my mind for a while, but..." Enma suddenly slipped closer. Like really, *really* close. "You're aiming for the throne, aren't you?"

And not just physically.

"I'll leave that to your imagination." I had yet to take a stance against the other heirs, so no way I could talk to Enma about it.

"I'd be very happy if you became Demon King. You seem to understand us better than anyone else. That's all I wanted to say," Enma finished with a grin. It seemed like she was really getting a kick out of this. Just like how I didn't declare my intent, she avoided declaring her support of me.

I supposed that was fair.

After wrapping up my **Necromancy** lesson, I returned to the surface to get in some training time with Prati. The pressure I had been feeling lately had been on full display while fighting, so Prati immediately took notice that it was no longer present.

“You seem rather soft today.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

I already had a decent grasp on how to shake off her curses, or at least enough to ignore them. Now it was all about brute strength! Dealing with her triple-wielding was a real pain. But with the remains of the human soldiers acting like my armor and with a bit of time to adapt, it was manageable. Those fallen soldiers were now my comrades in arms.

Continuing to practice until morning was near, I managed to win about half my bouts with Prati. It was taking longer and longer for either of us to come to a conclusive victory during our training battles, so we spent a lot more time training than usual. As rough as it was on me, I couldn’t imagine it was any better for her. I guess her title of archduchess wasn’t just for show.

“Okay, Layla.”

Layla nodded.

As usual, we followed up my combat training with Layla’s flight training. But today things should have been different. She started slipping out of her clothes...then glanced over to me. Without a word, her face suddenly flushed red, and she held her clothes tight around herself as she fled somewhere out of sight.

*Wait, why now?!*

She had never shown an ounce of shame in stripping in front of me before, so it had never crossed my mind to look away. *Should I have?! But why now of all times is it bothering her? It’s not like she seemed shy about her human body before. The way I looked at the situation, anyone would probably be unashamed if they were transformed into a dog or cat with no clothes on.*

“I told you...” Veene muttered.

“He definitely did something to her...” Garunya murmured back.

“They were alone for so long...”

Veene and Garunya started whispering.

*Okay, that’s not what happened! You’re totally wrong!*

*“Your little tryst did have her sobbing on the floor,”* Ante pointed out.

*Don’t word it like that!*

“Okay then...” Layla timidly released her transformation from behind me.

“I’ll...try to fly now.”

But the timidity in her voice was soon blown away. With a light kick off the ground, she stretched her wings and flapped hard. Unlike her previous uncoordinated attempts, her movements were now smooth and graceful.

“Wow...” It took my breath away. Each time she flapped her wings, she pulled higher into the air.

“Whoa!” Garunya and the others started to get worked up behind me. Layla was in the air—and she wasn’t falling. “Amazing!”

It was like she was swimming in the sky.

“I’m flying!” she said, excitedly flitting around the parade ground. It seemed like she was having a lot of fun. Like she was so happy.

*“So she is,”* Ante murmured, a heaviness to her voice.

*Yeah...she is.*

That’s how she was supposed to look. Lying down on the parade ground, I looked up at Layla flying through a gradually brightening sky.

It had been seven years since I left the front lines. So much killing had occurred that they needed to mobilize necromancers to deal with the bodies. What was the story there? Despite the demonic kingdom’s current principles, Emergias had made a considerable advance.

What was happening? Or maybe, what were they trying to make happen? I couldn’t help but get a bad feeling about what was on the horizon.

Even now, the soldiers of the Alliance were dying...

...as they watched this same sunrise.

## Side Story: The Archduchess's Nightmare

Archduchess Pratifya was the greatest healer in the Demon King's castle. As a high-ranking member of the Rage family, she had the authority to manage the human slaves used as body doubles for **Transposition**. Prior to Zilbagias's acquisition of Liliana, that was how she had secured so many slaves for his training.

"Our stock has been taking quite a hit lately. Maybe we need to start increasing production in the villages."

As she wracked her brain over the production schedule for slaves, there was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, mother. I have something serious to discuss with you..."  
Strangely enough, Zilbagias had come to her private room to speak with her.

"Oh? What is it?" Reseating herself on her sofa, she couldn't help but feel like there was something...wrong.

Upon closer inspection, he wasn't alone. Someone wearing a large hood was accompanying him. A chill ran down Prati's spine, though perhaps that was due to the thick dark magic emanating from the hooded figure.

"A pleasure to meet you, mother-in-law." The figure drew back her hood, revealing the pale, sickly face of a human woman.

*So it was an undead after all... Wait, mother-in-law?!*

Just as confusion set in, Zilbagias and the woman linked arms and shouted in unison.

"We're getting married!"

"What?!"

*Whaaaaaat?!*

"Wh-What are you saying, Zilbagias?!"

“Mother, we have been thinking long and hard about this,” he replied while wearing a serious look. “I tried to bury myself in my training to forget, but I realized these are not simple, fleeting feelings. I love her. There is nothing for us to do but get married.”

“What are— That’s absurd! I will never allow this!” Pratifya shouted.

Of course, her reaction was only natural. After all, Zilbagias was merely five years old. Five! No matter how mature he looked, he was far too young to be getting married! And never mind that, getting married to a human? To a human *corpse*?! There was no way she’d ever let that happen!

Although she allowed her son to proceed with his **Necromancy** studies, she had a religious aversion to the undead. She had only allowed him to continue since she didn’t want his growth to be shackled by something as mundane as common sense.

But this?! She had never imagined it could backfire so spectacularly. Had his relief in their last training session been because he had decided to marry *her*?!

“Anyway, I will not allow this.” Pratifya glared at him...but he wasn’t done.

“On that note, mother, I have another thing I’d like to discuss with you.” At some point, Layla had appeared beside him. Held tight in his arms. “We’re also getting married!”

“What are you even saying?!” Her screaming had become hysterical.

“Mother, this will allow us to solidify ties between the dragons and the demons.” His face became serious again. “Though it may seem a bit premature, I’ve discussed things with Layla about the white dragon faction. Our dreams align for the future we imagine for our people together. It resonated with us so much that we grew closer. The situation with her father is truly a tragedy, but we feel as though destiny has been drawing us together to overcome any obstacle. We love each other!”

“I love you, Lord Zilbagias!”

“See?”

“She is obviously trying to deceive you! Open your eyes!” Pratifya tried to slap

her son, but for some reason she couldn't move properly. As she struggled against her own body, Layla smirked down at her.

*You witch! How dare you seduce my son!*

"Also, there's one more thing, mother."

The next thing she knew, Zilbagias was holding Liliana in his arms. And she wasn't wearing her usual dress, but of all things, a wedding gown.

"We're getting married!"

*"Bark!"*

"What on earth?!" Pratifya could hardly breathe.

"Liliana's devotion to me has clearly exceeded the realm of being a pet. So I thought I needed to return the favor by giving her proper respect. In order to do that, I want to elevate her position beyond just being my dog..."





*“Bark bark!”*

“Zilbagias, you are being ridiculous!” Pratifya cried, feeling very much like she was lost at sea and quickly sinking. “I’ll never allow any of this!” She slammed a hand on her desk.

And then she woke up.

After blinking in a moment of confusion, she looked around the room to find she was alone. She wasn’t on the sofa, but at the desk in her study. The statistical documents laid out on her desk were now scattered everywhere.

*“A dream...?”*

It seemed she had nodded off while working on her paperwork. Likely due to her recent exhaustion. With a heavy sigh, she wiped the sweat from her forehead and slouched back in her chair. What a ghastly dream that had been.

“Excuse me, my lady, but we heard a loud bang...” one of the maids timidly called out from beyond the door of the study.

“It was nothing,” Pratifya replied. “No need for concern.”

That was a good point. Not even her son would be able to visit her without making his presence known to the maids. Her fatigue must have blinded her judgment to not realize that.

*“I-Is that so? Also, my lady, your son is here and wishes to see you.”*

“Zilbagias? Here? That’s rare. Let him in,” Pratifya replied, hiding the strange anxiety growing in her chest. It was just the timing of his visit after such an awful dream, nothing more, she told herself.

*It was just a dream. A nightmare. Nothing to be worried about!*

*“I’m sorry for bothering you, mother.”*

*See? He is just as calm and polite as always.*

*“I have something serious to discuss with you.”*

*Wait, why do you look so nervous, Zilbagias?*

*“It’s about my relationship with Layla—”*

“I’ll never allow it!” Pratifya roared.

“Huh? Uh, what?”

It took quite some time for the prince to calm down his raging mother as, for quite a while afterward, Pratifya had nothing but icy glares for Layla...but that was a story for another time.

# Bonus Short Stories

## Confessions of a Veteran Courier

The foundation of the enormous Demon King's castle was the territory of the dragons. Originally, the castle itself had been merely a mountain the dragons called home, but now the upper levels had been taken and became the demons' domain. Although the space granted to the dragons at the base was quite large, binding the rulers of the skies to an underground dwelling was not some pittance of humiliation.

At any rate, a dragon with coppery red scales now landed at the cave's entrance.

*Today was a good haul.*

With that, the dragon stomped into the cave. As he did, three dark dragons emerged from the opposite direction. Without a word, he stepped out of their path and bowed his head. These dark dragons outranked him by a considerable margin, in an assortment of ways.

"Oh, one of the couriers. Good work today," one of the dragons sneered, noting the saddle on the red dragon's back.

"The passion for your work is pleasing to see, but don't lose sight of your pride as a dragon," another of the dark dragons spoke up, making no effort to hide the disdain in his voice.

"Cut him some slack. It's thanks to guys like him that we're able to maintain our positions of pride." The third dragon's sarcastic comment made the other two chuckle in agreement as the trio exited the cave.

After waiting for the dark dragons to be out of sight, the red dragon let out a snort.

The red dragon was both a veteran courier and a freelancer. He was not beholden to the Demon King's army, nor was he bound to any clan or family. All

jobs he took on were his decision alone, even ferrying demons about at his own discretion.

Being a mode of transportation for the lesser races, demons included, was certainly a considerable mark of shame. There was not a single dragon pleased with providing such a service, only doing so out of obligation. As the third dark dragon's comment pointed out, by other dragons including the red one here carrying out such a humiliating service, the dark dragons are able to avoid experiencing that same shame. Of course, the dark dragons didn't do much in the way of work in any respect.

With the king of the dark dragons currently at the head of all dragonkind, the other dark dragons were given priority in the truly good work, granted court titles, and allowed to live leisurely off of their salaries. That meant their enemies or those beneath their notice were bombarded with the actual dirty work which required greater investment, like patrolling the front lines or delivering messages over great distances.

There were some who rejected that kind of work and elected to work independently from the Demon King's army. These individuals were couriers just like this red dragon. His strength, size, or even the beauty of his scales may have been lacking when compared to other dragons, but there was one thing he had perfected—his flying technique. He was capable of carrying demons with minimal shaking or turbulence, resulting in a much more pleasant experience for them. That had earned him a number of regular and quite affluent customers.

*My wealth is incomparable to theirs.*

At one point, he had even ferried an archduchess along with her son—the seventh demon prince. Similarly, today he had carried some members of nobility which earned him quite a good amount.

If anyone asked what all the money was for, it was for buying treasure, of course. He was particularly fond of precious metals. No amount of money he made could sate that appetite. His own dwelling was filled to the brim with gold and silver treasures.

After taking a moment to rest, he fully intended on heading to the hobgoblin

market near the front lines to scour through their recent spoils.

Ignoring the slight from the malicious dark dragons, he moved to quickly retire to his home...but as he did, he stopped at one of the connection points where many tunnels branched off.

Until a few days ago, a poor little girl had been kept here. After the dark dragons' schemes forced out the white dragons, she was the only one who had failed to escape—the king of the white dragons' daughter.

She had been forced to sleep here, with no room to properly lie down, where other dragons were constantly coming and going. Forced into human form and collared, she was the target of frequent torment by the hands of other dragons. Those who were members of the white dragon faction or those who were independent like the red dragon never contributed to her harassment...but they also never offered her a helping hand.

*And in the end, she was given away as a gift to a demon prince, was she?*

The other day, the king of the dark dragons declared that she had been given as a slave to the seventh demon prince. The same demon prince the red dragon had once carried on his back had gained a reputation of being cruel beyond his quite few years. This came about as word spread of him making a hobby out of mutilating the minds of women and turning them into his pets. Her fate being at the hands of such a cruel demon prince was a cause of celebration among the dark dragons...but it was something the red dragon did his best to avoid thinking about.

*I suppose it's better fate than her being tortured to death here.*

Perhaps having her mind destroyed would in some way be an act of mercy. Seeing her forced to bow and scrape to everyone that passed, possessing not even a scrap of the pride of a dragon, her only purpose in life to stay alive for another day...it was painful to watch.

*This was for the best...surely...*

So the red dragon told himself.

The dragons—the rulers of the sky—were no longer the rulers of this

territory. This was what the demons had turned them into. What would their ancestors, the truly proud dragons, think of what had become of the dragons?

*Never mind. I'm just going to make myself depressed,* the red dragon sighed. Although he had planned to go shopping to cheer himself up, at this rate, he would end up spending far outside his budget.

He would eventually be quite shocked to learn the true fate that came of the daughter of the white dragons, but that's a story for another time...

## **The Proud Prince vs Sleeping Beauty**

Aiogias Vernas was the first demon prince and the eldest son of the Demon King. Since the moment he was born, he was saddled with the hopes and expectations of the Vernas family. The rare level of talent and extraordinary ambition he displayed at a young age set him apart from his peers. There were already no others around his age that could compare to him. At his current growth rate, achieving the rank of archduke was all but guaranteed, making him an obvious candidate for succession. But...perhaps it should have been expected, in an environment with no strong opposition, Aiogias's followers quickly grew arrogant.

"Move it! The next Demon King is coming through!"

With Aiogias leading the pack, a group of young demons of the Vernas family were marching through the castle like they owned the place. Other demons quickly and fearfully cleared the way for them, while the servants immediately bowed low. Such behavior only served to further inflate Aiogias's ego.

Aiogias was heading to the garden located in the castle's upper levels. According to a report he had received from his subordinates, his younger sister, the sixth demon princess Topazia Corvut, made the foolish decision to spend time there alone.

"Hm. No sign of her." The courtyard was blanketed in plants which, at first glance, seemed to be unattended. Releasing a wave of powerful magic, Aiogias stripped the concealing barriers from the area.

"You can't hide from me, Topazia."

And there she was, curled up in a ball sleeping among the flowers.

So it seemed she hadn't been hiding, but simply sleeping. This discovery took some of the wind out of his sails, but he quickly recovered.

"Wake up, Topazia." There was no sign of her stirring as he approached, so he lightly smacked her cheek. With a tired groan, Topazia's eyes finally cracked open.

"Sorry for waking you so early, but I need you to make up your mind. Whose side will it be? Mine, or Rubifya's?" Aiogias declared, looking down his nose at his sister despite her obvious sleepiness.

Among all the heirs, he knew he was best suited to become Demon King. Which meant it was only natural his siblings fell in line beneath him. But the second princess Rubifya, in all her impudence, had made an alliance with the third prince Daiagias. They were insufferable. Although the fourth prince and fifth princess had joined hands with Aiogias, that meant the only one yet to show any allegiance was Topazia. Aiogias expected nothing from someone like Topazia who was lacking in both ambition and motivation when it came to combat. But winning over the Corvut family with their specialization in earth and stone would be a great victory toward his goals.

"So, what will it be? Think carefully." Aiogias continued to press her...but the blank expression she wore made it difficult to tell if she was even listening.

"What is it?" There was no answer. And then he noticed. Her eyes were open, but she was still asleep! "Hey! Wake up! I'm talking to you!"

In his frustration, Aiogias moved to slap her, but before he could, something akin to a chime stopped him as a mysterious ringing filled the air.

"Hm? What was that?" Aiogias asked, but no reply came. All he heard was the sound of the people behind him falling to the ground. Every single one of his followers had collapsed.

"What...?!"

The bell chimed again, and this time Aiogias's vision started to blur. The next thing he knew, he was on his knees.

*This sound...it's coming from Topazia?!*

Lifting his head, he started to hallucinate. Although the space had been empty just a moment before, something was not floating over Topazia's sleeping body. Something round, with a long nose, and black-and-white fur. It was actually kind of cute. Above its head, something was spinning, filling the air with that ringing sound, distorting Aiogias's vision further.

"A...devil...? No way...how could...I...?!"

How could someone with such overwhelming magic resistance such as himself succumb so easily to a curse like this?

With a thud, Aiogias fell victim to the mara's spell. The only sounds that remained in the garden were the soft snores of many young demons.

And, though still asleep, Topazia gave a satisfied smile as she rolled over.

After experiencing the shame of being so handily dispatched by his younger sister, Aiogias's attitude toward others greatly changed. This time was also marked by a new zeal for his studies.

By the way, Topazia eventually ended up siding with Rubifya.

## **Her Royal Arsonist Visits the Abyss**

Rubifya Rivarel was the eldest daughter of the Demon King, and the second princess. To summarize her personality, you could say "she hates to lose." Nothing could satisfy her unless she was at the very top. There was even a story about how when she was younger upon first realizing she was the *second* demon princess, she got so frustrated she could hardly sleep for days.

Naturally, she grew to hate her older brother that had taken first place from her. But when she set a new record for the youngest demon to graduate from hornlessness at seven years old, she felt much better about her situation. After her horns came in and she became able to perceive magic, she quickly lost herself in playing with it, acquiring the Rivarel family **Wildfire** curse—a spell that could set fire even to water and stone—in no time. It didn't take much



longer before she became an expert in all things fire magic.

However, this early excellence sat her with a bad habit of attempting to set things on fire the moment she discovered them. When she went to observe her father at work, she “accidentally” set fire to some rather important paperwork. She had brought no small amount of corporal punishment on herself for similar incidents. Even those within her circle began referring to her as “Her Royal Arsonist.”

“So this is the Abyss!”

At nine years old she set yet another record, becoming the youngest to go to the Abyss as she was in search of greater power. Black light illuminated the otherworldly landscape. The forests flickered and wavered, like shadows in fire light. Everything felt vague and insubstantial, like a dream, but vibrant and real like a nightmare. Everything she saw, everything she felt, was entirely different from anything she had experienced up to that point. Even the ever fearless nine-year-old princess was a bit uneasy. But when the shadow trees of the Abyss succumbed to the **Wildfire** curse like any other tree, she felt much better.

“I heard you’re supposed to meet some guide after entering the Abyss...”

“Would that be me?”

The sudden voice behind her caused Rubifya to let out a girlish scream. Turning around, she found what looked to be a stick...somehow wearing a tailcoat.

“My apologies. It was not my intention to frighten you.”

“I-I wasn’t scared! You just...surprised me!” Rubifya shouted back, her brilliant red hair practically standing on end. “So? Are you the guide or not?!”

“Indeed. I am the Devil of Guidance, Odigoth. Allow me to show you your path.”

Almost before he finished speaking, the stick dropped to the ground. Although she was a bit suspicious of the talking stick, she had been told Odigoth’s guidance was always correct. So she pulled herself together and walked in the direction the stick pointed.

“Wait right there, my perfect devil!”

Or rather, she ran. In a straight line across the expanse of the Abyss. To stave off the unease building in the back of her mind about how she would return home, she just ran harder. But no matter how far she ran, she never found anything but a barren, dusty wasteland. No longer were the shadow trees of the Abyss present, and not even an imp showed itself before her. Running didn't tire her in the least, so she continued going full tilt.

*Is this really the right way? Did the guide mess up?*

No matter how much her nervousness brought her to tears, all she could do was keep running.

And as she did, she finally saw something. Far, far off in the distance, she saw a figure. It was the first resident of the Abyss she had encountered.

“Yes! That has to be my...gaaaaah?!” Before she could even finish sighing in relief, she started to scream. Because the figure—

“Heh! Heh heh heh! Gah ha ha ha ha! Such a lively little creature has decided to visit me!”

This person was definitely up to no good. For starters, he was burning. His hands and his head were like live torches, burning fiercely. He was tall and lanky, with a build like desiccated wood, wrapped in worn-out black clothing. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes wide and rabid, and drool dripped from his twisted, unnatural smile. This person was definitely suspicious...no, obviously dangerous.

And he immediately ran toward her at full speed.

Rubifya let out another scream, instinctively turning and bolting back the way she came.

“Waaaaaaait foooooor meeeeeee!” the creature giggled maniacally.

“No way! Stay away! Get away from me!” As the devil pursued her, she threw her favorite fire magic back at him—

“Oho ho! What a flame! I'm buuuuurning up! Aha ha ha ha ha!”

But all her **Wildfire** curse did was excite the devil even more as it simply

washed over him. In retrospect, it made sense that a devil who naturally has its head and hands on fire wouldn't be harmed by fire magic.

Rubifya kept trying to flee as fast as her legs could carry her until something dawned on her. The dust that filled this barren, empty wasteland wasn't dust after all—it was *ash*. This place had been incinerated!

“I burned it aaaaaaalllllll! All of it! But you still came! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Let's burn together!!!”

All Rubifya could do was scream as the voice steadily grew closer...until it was all but whispering in her ear.

“Got you!” Blazing hands took hold of her shoulders. A stream of fire elemental magic poured into her.

Rubifya screamed again, this time in pain, as her body was wrapped in an inferno.

That was how Rubifya met the Devil of Arson, Pyrkagia. Though somewhat by force and under the impression she would be burned to death, she formed a contract with him. When she eventually came back to her senses, the mixture of her feelings of fearing death and relief of still being alive nearly brought her to tears. However, this was short-lived as she would be further traumatized by the sight of the Devil of Arson dancing madly ablaze before her.

In the end, Pyrkagia and Rubifya were a perfect match...but the trauma of the experience stopped her from ever returning to the Abyss (and led to her burning Odigoth's coat in a rage on her way out). She never obtained a familiar. That was the day her habit of setting fire to things at random was cured. It also gave her an instinctual fear of overassertive men.

And only a few years later, Daiagias would be born...



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Zilbagias the Demon Prince: How the Seventh Prince Brought Down the Kingdom Volume 2

by Tomoaki Amagi

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