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Tomoaki Amagi

Illustrator: Tsukasa Kiryu



Zilbagias the Demon Prince

How the Seventh Prince
Brought Down the Kingdom

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Seventh Demon Prince
Zillbagias Rage

The reincarnated form of Alexander after he was killed by the Demon King. Uses the magic of the Devil God of Taboo, Ante.

Demon King
Gordogias Orgi

The second Demon King. Inherited the Soul Eater lance from his predecessor.

First Demon Prince
Aiogias Vernas

A perfectionist. Nicknamed "the Frozen Hell."

Second Demon Princess
Rubifya Rivarel

A habitual collector of jewels and weapons. Nicknamed "the Pyroclast."

Fourth Demon Prince
Emergias Izanis

The one responsible for destroying Alexander's hometown. Nicknamed "the Envious."

Fifth Demon Princess
Spinezia Sauroe

As her nickname "the Glutton" suggests, she is a voracious eater.

Sixth Demon Princess
Topazia Corvut

Nicknamed "Sleeping Beauty," as she is perpetually sleeping.

Third Demon Prince
Daiagias Gigamunt

A womanizer. Nicknamed both "the All-Loving" and "the Lustful."

"It's time for you to rest. For your soul,"
she bid me to relax.

No worries. I'm not so weak as to
give up this easily. I'll hold on for quite
a while to keep you entertained...
devil god...

As I started dozing off, I thought
I could see Ante smile. Something far
too gentle, far too benign, for a devil
god of corruption. I had to wonder if
that was part of the illusion too.



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Prologue

My name is Alexander. I know this is kind of sudden, but I'd like to tell you about my death.

On that day, the Panhuman Alliance launched a surprise aerial attack on the Demon King's castle. With the aid of the white dragons, we were able to infiltrate their territory from a high altitude. I, together with a crew of handpicked elites from different races, was planning on defeating the Demon King himself... It may sound noble, but really it was just an assassination attempt. Regardless of the outcome, the assault team's chances of survival were slim to none. The Panhuman Alliance was in desperate enough straits that we were forced to rely on these kinds of suicidal tactics. Considering the high altitude we had to reach, a number of the assault team's members froze to death before even reaching the target. In exchange for that sacrifice, we made it to the castle unmolested.

The battle within the castle was fierce. As one might expect, the surprise attack took the demons entirely off guard, but panicked hysteria quickly shifted into organized defensive tactics. Archdevils leading the Demon King's armies, vampire lords with power rivaling the original vampires, liches wielding incredible magic, and countless members of the demonic royal guard stood in our way. That battle wasn't the kind of thing I liked reminiscing about.

Plenty of the heroes—of my allies—fell before reaching our goal. There could be debate about whether it was lucky or unlucky, but eventually we did reach the Demon King. The arrogant monarch greeted us from his throne as we stormed in. Unlike humans, the demons operated on a system of absolute meritocracy. So being the Demon King was synonymous with being the strongest battlemage demon. Even if we hadn't been completely fatigued by the time we reached the throne room...he was still unbelievably strong.

"You've done quite well to entertain me, heroes," he spoke as he hoisted my dying body with one hand, entirely unfazed by the assault.

Overwhelming physical strength. Incredible magical power that warded off any magic we might use on him. And the devil pact, the wicked heresy engraved into his very body: **Soul Eater**. The death of each and every one of my allies fueled him, giving him the strength to continue his carnage. The battle had been a one-sided slaughter, a scene ripped straight out of a nightmare.

“For being so feeble, you humans did well.”

“Damn...you...”

“Oh? Quite the surprise. Even at death’s door you can speak.” Slowly but surely, his grip on my neck tightened. At this rate, my neck would snap long before I suffocated. “Your soul seems quite appetizing. I shall grant you the honor of providing me with sustenance.”

The Demon King’s dark magic flowed through his hand, into my neck, and filled my body. With my physical and magical strength already exhausted, I had no means to resist. I screamed as my body was wracked with a similar sensation to a balloon popping. I felt my flesh burst, my bones shatter, my whole body scatter into a thousand pieces. The Demon King’s raucous laughter was the last thing I heard as my mind slipped away into the darkness.

I was dead. Or...I was supposed to be.

The next thing I knew, my eyes had blinked open, staring into the face of that nightmarish monster once more.

“Hmm? Even for a baby, he has quite the daring look to him.”

“Aba?! Bababuba?! (Demon King?! Why are you here?!)” I tried to scream, but I couldn’t convey my thoughts into words. Something was wrong with my body.

What had happened? It felt like someone was carrying me. For someone to hold me in their arms like this, they must have been enormous—no. I realized I was the one who was tiny. My skin had taken on a strange pale hue and my arms were flabby and weak.

“Abwaba?! (I’m a baby?!)” I had been transformed into an infant—a demon infant, no less.

“He is quite an energetic little boy,” the woman holding me said.

“Hmm. I suppose there is no harm in having more heirs.”

“Your Majesty, if you would, please grant the boy a name.”

“Zilbagias.” The name had barely left the Demon King’s lips before he exited the room.

I was dumbfounded. This was unbelievable. That was hardly the attitude of a father meeting his newborn son for the first time. However, the woman holding me didn’t seem bothered by his behavior, giving a creepy laugh as she cuddled me in her arms.

“Finally... I finally did it... I finally have my own baby...”

The next thing I saw was the cold beauty of a demon woman’s face. Wait, hold on...was this supposed to be my mother?



What filled her eyes was not the unconditional, adoring love of a mother for her newborn child. It was determination, ambition, hatred—a hodgepodge of negative emotion.

“Zilbagias...” she cooed, the sweetness in her voice more unnerving than endearing. “You will be the next Demon King.” A chilling smile lit her face. “And you’ll trample all of those bitches’ brats on your way to the top!” Her voice morphed into uncontrollable laughter.

That was how I, the hero Alexander, met my end...and how I was reborn as the Demon Prince, Zilbagias.

Chapter 1: Prince of the Demons

Nice to meet you. I am the former hero Alexander, now known as Demon Prince Zilbagias.

A good deal of time had passed since my rebirth. The clarity of my memories as Alexander only lasted a brief time. Then I was sleepy all the time, lacked emotional restraint, and had a myriad of other difficulties. The most terrifying thing was that the more my focus slipped, the more my memory of who I once was started to wane.

Huh? Who am I again?

When that happened, it felt like my memories were fading away, as if Alexander was a stranger to me. It wasn't much different to how you could remember your dreams quite clearly when you first woke up, but as the day went on, those memories started melting away.

I am the hero Alexander. No matter what anyone says, I'm the hero Alexander! I repeatedly told myself as I drank from a demon's breast.

Anyway, I'll spare you the details of my life as a baby, and instead summarize the information I gathered during my time in the Demon King's castle.

First, two years had passed since our assault on the castle. In other words, it had been two years since the Demon King had killed me. The assault team had been slaughtered while the Demon King was as lively and healthy as ever. The assassination attempt was an utter failure.

Second, the Panhuman Alliance was still losing the war. With the Demon King still in power, his armies were in tip-top shape. The borders of the Alliance were gradually being driven back, and an entire kingdom was ravaged while I was an infant. Dammit.

Lastly, I was the seventh demon prince. Including myself, the Demon King had seven heirs. His oldest son was seventy years old, and his oldest daughter was sixty. The pattern continued down, each of his children being born about ten

years apart. With a reasonably long life span of about three hundred years, though it wasn't as difficult for them as for the elves, having children was no small feat for the demons. One could say that one child every ten years was actually well above the curve for them. However, seeing as I was his seventh child, apparently the Demon King was apathetic when it came to me as I never saw him after the day I was born. His statement that "there is no harm in having more heirs" seemed to have been an accurate showing of his disinterest in me.

That about sums up everything I had learned. What, you were expecting more? C'mon, I'm just a baby. There's only so much you can do when your daily routine only consists of eating and sleeping.

"Obubu...bonba. (So...what now?)"

Lying in my cradle, I started thinking. I didn't have a clue why I'd been reborn as a demon, but this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. *I may have the body of a demon, but I will forever have the heart of a hero.*

Question was, what should be my next course of action?

"Babuu... (Babuu)."

Damn, thinking can be quite the hassle. I was a hero. My job was to slay the enemies of humanity! When the pope said "go and kill them," my job was to say "gladly!" and rush to the battlefield! I wasn't good at anything else!

With nothing else to do, I tried shaking my cradle a bit. It seemed the cradle's frame was made of bone. As far as I could tell, they seemed to be bones taken from a humanoid creature of some sort. Wait, was it possible this cradle was built from the bones of famous heroes? *Damn you, demons! I will annihilate them all!*

"Boba, buababa (I'm a hero)."

I reached toward the ceiling. My arm was flabby, my skin sickly pale. With training, these weak and flabby arms would take on muscle stronger than steel. As much as it pained me to admit, demons were far stronger than humans. Even without considering their physical strength and stamina, their magic was comparable to that of the elves. On top of that, the blood of the current Demon King now coursed through my body. What exactly were the limits to my

potential...?

“Bobba! (All right!)”

I’d made up my mind. I was going to kill the Demon King! At the end of the day I was a fighter, so my options were limited. Fighting was second nature to me. Train my body, hone my skills, and make our mission to assassinate the Demon King into a success. It was time for an insurrection! I squeezed my flabby little hand into a fist.

“Bogya...”

Having made up my mind, I was feeling surprisingly motivated. So much so I started to cry.

“Bwaaaaaah! Waaaaaah!”

Oh, it’s this again. I’m hungry! Feed me! Feed me!

Unable to suppress my emotions, I could only cry. My tantrum quickly signaled my wet nurse to attend to me.

“Yes yes, little one. Time for milk, right?”

“Babu...”

Filling my belly with milk and my mind with thoughts of the Demon King’s demise, I drifted off to sleep.

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I had a dream. Beyond a nostalgic-looking forest, I found myself in a small rural village. I was young, accompanied by a naive, carefree girl.

“Alex! Dad found a bee’s nest!” Claire said, my childhood friend’s face brimming with excitement. “I saw him putting the honey in a pot!” she continued, donning a mischievous smile. “Let’s go taste it!”

“Wait, really?!” I replied. “You know how precious honey is! Are we allowed to just take some?”

“Of course not! That just makes it all the better!” As young as she was, the thrill of walking the narrow line of what was forbidden was just as sweet and satisfying as tasting honey. That was the kind of girl Claire was. She was

extremely energetic, fearless, and never hesitated to drag me everywhere she went. This usually resulted in my well-being being sacrificed to satisfy her whims.

But...it was fun. Those days of being dragged around the village were a source of nostalgic joy for me now. Both the peaceful village we called home, and the taste of that forbidden honey.

Claire's father was furious when he learned we had eaten the whole thing; hard to blame him since that was a lot of money now down the drain. Claire was of course scolded to the point of tears, and as her accomplice, I received a much more physical punishment from my father. She didn't talk much for a few days after that, but it wasn't long before her pranks were the talk of the village again. That was our childhood, surrounded by the love of our village.

"Hey! They say if you make a soup using red feather grass, it can make your hair fall out! Let's go put some on the chief's head!"

"No way! He'll kill us! It's way too dangerous!"

"Idiot, that's what makes it fun!"

"You're crazy!" My complaining was all talk; I still accompanied her to hunt down the herbs.

Ah, but I already knew. This delightful, joyful era of my life was fleeting. This peaceful, gentle world would soon be overrun by flames and darkness.

"Monsters! Lots of them!"

The sound of someone shouting woke me up that night. In a panic, I ran outside only to see countless tiny lights scattered across the dark mountainside, hovering like will-o'-the-wisps. Those lights were torches. The Demon King's army had traversed the mountains that bordered our kingdom and invaded. Goblins, ogres, and the cruel night elf hunters. Leading them all was a squad of demon soldiers. I was too young to fully grasp everything that was going on. All I knew was that something terrifying was happening. That was it.

"Run!"

The adults were desperate. Grabbing whatever they could carry, then fleeing

the village. But we were too slow. Well, it would be more accurate to say the Demon King's army was too fast. The enemy forces emerged from the darkness, ravaging our village in no time.

"Ahhhh! Stop!" The village chief, trying his best to protect his personal belongings, was killed and devoured by an ogre.

"Someone, please! At least save her!" The baker Sedrick fell, killed by night elf arrows while sacrificing his body to protect his daughter, Claire.

"No! Dad!" Claire sobbed, clinging to the lifeless body of her father. "Help! Someone, help!" The last thing I saw was a night elf grabbing her by the hair and dragging her away. A group of goblins then swarmed around her.

"Someone...!" she pleaded, reaching out toward us—and our eyes met.

"Claire!"

"Don't look!"

I tried to rescue her, but my mother picked me up and ran. In order to save us, my father stayed behind to act as a decoy.

"You're not getting past me!"

"Ha, quite bold for human scum! Die!"

My father's screams as his life was snuffed out echoed up to the night sky. A demon with brilliant green hair gave a shrill laugh, lifting its spear up high. On the tip of its weapon was something round, vaguely the size of a human head, illuminated by the light of burning houses.

I was literally speechless. The shock, the rage, the despair filling me only came out in tears. Just reliving this through my dreams showcased how brutally real everything felt. Even though it was just a dream, I felt powerless. It was like I was being forced to experience that helplessness again and again.

"Dad! Claire!" My younger self could do nothing but cry as my mother carried me away.

I heard the sound of something cutting through the air, dull thunks and my mother's groans, but she continued running. As painful as it must have been for her, she still stroked my hair, trying to comfort me.

“It’s okay...it’s going to be okay...”

Miraculously, we escaped. The Demon King’s army didn’t pursue us any further. Instead, we were chased out by their scornful laughter.

“Run, you insects! Run to your puny lord! Tell him we’re here, and we’re waiting for him!”

No, we hadn’t escaped. They had let us go to draw out more humans to slaughter...and we were the tool used to set this in motion.

“Please...take care of him...” Running through the night and reaching the next town over, my mother used her last breath to ensure my safety. There were a number of black-feathered arrows protruding from her back. The most vigorous of soldiers couldn’t have done what she did, running throughout the night carrying a child with so many arrows in their back. Yet she had somehow found the strength to do so.

In the end, I was the only survivor. At least, as far as I knew. As a survivor and witness of the demon attack, I was escorted to a larger city, eventually being put in the care of the church orphanage. Just a few days before, the demonic kingdom on the other side of the mountains had felt so distant, as if the war was so far away it would be someone else’s problem. Everything had changed. Everything was over.

Not long after that I started training, pushing my body to the edge of death, struggling for every bit of strength I could muster. I’d kill them all. Every demon in that damn kingdom. That was my sole purpose in life.

I decided to become a soldier to prove my determination. The retaliatory force sent by the kingdom to avenge my village was effortlessly wiped out. While I trained, the kingdom’s armies couldn’t muster much in the way of victory—the situation grew more dire by the day.

On my coming of age day, I awakened the holy attribute within me, and so I was sent to the Holy Land to become an apprentice hero. My days were filled with yet more training. But while I dawdled, the kingdom I was born in was overrun. As soon as I’d gained some proficiency in the holy magic I was learning, I was dispatched to the front lines to stand alongside my seniors. The war against the demons was always one step forward, one step back. No, more like

one step forward, two or three steps back, I suppose. The taste of defeat was more familiar than the thrill of reveling in victory.

My life could come to an end in the blink of an eye. But I continued to survive. It took everything within me to endure that festival of blood those disgusting demons brought upon us for even a minute longer, for even a second longer.

“Death to the dark!” I would cry. But it wasn’t enough. No matter how much blood I spilled, the people of my village, my parents, and Claire would never come back.

“Help—”

The last time I saw her is seared into my memory forever, tears streaming down her face as she reached for me.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a room of marble. Lying on a comfortable bed, layered in quality furs. I looked at my hands: disturbingly pale, the skin of a demon.

“Good morning, little one.” A monocled young girl, with reddish skin and a butler’s uniform, floated at my side. I’d gone from reliving a nightmare to an equally disgusting reality. Now, I was a demon prince, awoken every morning by this devil butler. There aren’t many worse ways to start your day.

However, I chose to bear it. I had to stay true to my convictions. If I could survive this, one day I may be able to deliver a fatal blow to the Demon King’s army.

“Good morning, Sophia.” I greeted the devil with an awkward smile.

Two years had passed since my reincarnation as a demon.

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When I’d been a baby, I could babble away without worry—that kind of came with the territory. But once I’d learned how to talk, keeping my true nature hidden was much more challenging. If I slipped up and blew my cover, it would all be over. So keeping a careful eye on my surroundings, I did what I could to act like a proper demon, and somehow managed to survive in my new life.

In two years, my body had grown quite a bit. Like, actually, a surprisingly huge amount. I was about the size of a human five-year-old. According to what I had learned, demons matured much quicker than humans, reaching full maturity by the age of fifteen.

It hardly felt fair. They already lived longer than us, so why did they mature faster too? That said, my rapid growth seemed to surprise the people I met in this new life, so maybe I was growing particularly fast for a demon. Maybe my deep-seated desire to grow up fast so I could take the Demon King's head was accelerating my growth. That wasn't something unique to demons either. Anyone with strong magic could use their words or thoughts to warp the reality around them. And I was a demon now, a race that boasted magical power comparable to the elves. Whatever the reason, if it brought me even one day closer to killing the Demon King, it was fine by me.

As I outgrew my wet nurse, I was then assigned a tutor.

"Today is the day, little one! After your meal, we will begin studying!"

That tutor was this girl...or rather, this devil in the form of a young girl. She wore sharp black and red butler's clothes. Two horns sprouted from her forehead. As calm and composed as she appeared, her fangs alone proved she was anything but harmless. Almost as if an afterthought, small leathery wings akin to those of a bat or a dragon grew from her back, and now kept her suspended in the air. Her trademark was her monocle.

Her name was Sophia, and according to her, she was a mid-level devil that presided over knowledge. Apparently acquiring knowledge dictated her growth, both physically and in social standing. Given her nature, she was basically a proud walking dictionary, which made her perfectly suited to being a tutor. Having made a contract with the mother of my new body, she had tried to force me to a desk to study with an appropriately devilish persistence.

"The wisdom of the Abyss lies in wait for you! Now, let us begin working on our words and numbers!"

"No! Today I wanna explore the castle!" With an arrogance matching that of any demon, I stubbornly refused.

"What do you mean 'today'?! All you do is explore the castle every day!"

“I hate studying.” I made no attempt to hide my sour mood. Sitting at a desk and learning hadn’t really been my thing even in my past life. After all, being a hero means having the heart of a warrior. The bare minimum understanding of literacy was all I needed. Learning the layout of the castle was much more beneficial.

“There’s more to being the Demon King than just being strong! You also need to be smart!” she said in an attempt to motivate me, but I didn’t really have any desire to be the Demon King. I just wanted to kill him.

“Hmm...I suppose demons have a strong impulse against authority...” she mumbled, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Okay then, little one! It’s time for exercise! Go exercise to your heart’s content!”

“Okay. I’ll go explore the castle, then!”

“Of course *this* time it doesn’t work!” Sophia clutched at her head in frustration as I responded with joy to her failed attempt at reverse psychology. *Too bad! I couldn’t care less about learning! A knowledge devil is no match for me!*

Sophia sighed. “Fine. For now, let’s at least get the waking meal out of the way.” With a snap of her fingers, servants pushed a wagon into the room. Night elves, beastfolk, and imps made up the motley crew.

Imps, like all devils, were bound by contract and thus couldn’t betray their masters. The night elves and beastfolk had been selected for their exceptional loyalty. For the record, they doubled as my bodyguards.

In short order, the servants arranged my waking meal on the table beside my bed. For a human like me, that was an unfamiliar term. Effectively it meant “breakfast,” but I was a demon now. The denizens of the dark were typically nocturnal, sleeping through the morning to wake up in the late afternoon or early evening. In other words, the first meal of their day wasn’t the “breakfast” we thought of as humans, but more like “lunch” or “dinner.” The distinction was quite annoying and confusing to be quite honest.

Unlike the undead, demons had no issue operating in open daylight, but we were still more comfortable in the dark. Looking out my window, I saw the dusky red sky of sundown. Evident by my own servants here, the workers in the

castle were made up of nocturnal species, so the schedule of the castle centered around nighttime.

With fond memories of early morning breakfasts in my heart, I partook of the dinner before me. I scarfed down enough for two demons, using it to fuel my strength to defeat the Demon King!

“You really eat a lot, don’t you, little one?” Even though she was used to witnessing me devour my food like this on a daily basis, Sophia still gave a sigh of equal parts admiration and exasperation. I always ate with the passion of a man fighting to avenge his parents, though in this case I suppose my “parents” were the target of my revenge.

“Where is mother today?”

“My lady has been dispatched for an emergency inspection.”

Normally we ate together, so that explained why I was eating in my room today. Not like it really mattered anyway. If I did see her she’d just nag me about studying, so this actually saved me a bit of trouble. Weren’t demons supposed to value strength above everything else?

“She did leave a message for you. ‘Devote yourself to becoming the Demon King,’” Sophia added almost sarcastically, but I just ignored her.

All right. Now that my stomach was full, I needed to gear up to explore the castle.

“Exercise is certainly important, little one, but while your mind is still soft, you should really be taking the opportunity to learn—”

I just had to ignore the nonstop gabbing devil behind me. It was clear Sophia saw me as nothing more than a mischievous little boy. My camouflage was perfect, if I did say so myself.

Every scrap of information about the demons and the way they lived was useful. Depending on how things played out, maybe I could relay this information to the Panhuman Alliance. Though really, in my current state, any contact with the Alliance would have been quite difficult. Figuring out how to make all of that happen was a different matter entirely. But until I earned that freedom, I’d need to tolerate my current everyday life.

I have no idea how many years that may take...so please, humanity, survive until then!

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“My lady! Sir Zilbagias is neglecting his studies!”

Tattletale.

I was sitting in a small chair made of bone before my mother. After spending all of my time exploring instead of studying, it seemed they had decided to take their scolding up a notch. The demons called this chair the “seat of reflection,” and it was about as comfortable as getting stabbed to death. It was a pain in the butt, literally.

It was apparently used when scolding children or reprimanding one’s subordinates. Its small size was perfect for a child like me. A much bigger (and much more proud) adult being forced into a seat like this would be incredibly more humiliating.

“Zilbagias,” my mother said while snapping her folding fan shut.

“Yes, mother?”

Calling this creature my mother still felt weird. I only had one mom, and it wasn’t her. In turn, her eyes glimmered with cruelty as they gazed at me, a look unfit for any mother looking at her own child. This demon, in all her spine-shiveringly cold beauty, was my “mother,” Pratifya. Her nickname was Prati, a cute nickname that clashed with her cold exterior, but only her superiors within her own family and the Demon King could call her that.

Did he really call her that in private? *That* guy? I couldn’t even begin to imagine it. He probably only called her that to act as though he was showing affection, right?

“I understand your desire to grow stronger. It’s quite pleasing actually,” Prati said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I also understand your distaste for studying. No one wants you to become a scholar.” Leaning forward on the sofa she was lying on, she peered into my eyes. “*You will become the Demon King, Zilbagias.*”

Her eyes were aglow with passion. The atmosphere suddenly shifted into something much heavier. Occasionally, Prati would talk like this, as if trying to imprint something on me. She then watched silently, waiting to see my reaction.

I don't think I need to say it again, but I had no interest in becoming the Demon King. I just wanted to kill him. It was hard to find a response given how she was looking at me.

As I sat quietly waiting for the scolding to end, Prati sighed and leaned back. "My goodness, even for my own child, he is certainly quite willful, isn't he? Don't you think so, Sophia?"

"Absolutely, my lady. He is exceptionally obstinate...in many ways." Sophia nodded emphatically.

"Come now, Zilbagias. Do you really hate studying that much?"

"Yes."

"Not even a hint of hesitation. When I was little I hated studying too, so your feelings are understood," Prati said, massaging her brow as if she was a mother worrying over how to raise her child. "To be serious, if you do not learn at least the basics of reading and writing, your future will be in question. Forget becoming the Demon King; simple tasks like reading the reports of your subordinates would be out of the question. And above all, everyone will view you as an imbecile. I can only imagine what the mothers of the other heirs would say..."

Her otherwise pleasant features twisted in disgust.

"First Prince Aiogias mastered reading, writing, and most of math by the time he was three years old. His mother has been high and mighty ever since. If you can't accomplish more than him, it will be a problem for *me*!" As she talked, her mood was clearly deteriorating, ending with an expression far too hateful for the public eye. She clenched her fingers in anger, and the fan in her hand snapped.

So this was a vicarious battle between the mothers, was it? That said, her outburst had made me realize a misunderstanding I had.

I knew I could read and write to a limited degree, and math wasn't too difficult. But these two thought I was totally illiterate, and couldn't count past my fingers. No wonder they felt so pressured by my unwillingness to study. I had assumed time spent studying reading and writing was a waste, so I instead tried to investigate anywhere in the castle I was permitted to go. Maybe it would be better if I gave a bit of a concession here. That said, I had already declared how viciously I hated studying. It would be quite un-demonlike of me to suddenly switch gears and start following orders for no reason.

"Ah, there's a good idea." As I pondered the dilemma, Prati slapped the armrest of the sofa, apparently having found an answer herself. "Sophia?"

"Yes, my lady?"

"If Zilbagias hates studying so much, then by all means, let us test his abilities."

Sophia's face lit up. "Yes! So the next time he acts up, I can slug him right in the face, right?!"

I couldn't help but do a double take at that. Was that much frustration really lurking behind all those exasperated sighs?! I mean, I know I was being a real punk, but come on!

"Yes, well..." Prati sank back into thought.

Wait, what do you need to think about here? The answer should be obvious! I'm a prince! Letting one of the servants hit me should be out of the question!

"I can't allow that yet."

Yet...?

"Avoid injuring him in any way that would require treatment. He will learn the pain of the battlefield when he's older. We don't want him to grow fearful and timid."

"Then how far can I go?" Sophia asked.

"Nothing more than leaving bruises."

"Yay!" Sophia was very clearly celebrating. That joyous look coupled with her fangs somehow made her look more devilish than usual.

“Of course, fighting without purpose is pointless,” Prati continued. “And if he’s too injured to actually study, then that defeats the purpose altogether. So let us set some rules for the contest.” Only upon attempting to open the fan did she realize she had broken it. Without missing a beat, a night elf maid standing in the corner of the room stepped forward to offer her a replacement.

“Zilbagias, if you hate studying so much, then you will fight Sophia,” Prati declared, hiding a haughty smile behind her fan. “You will fight unarmed. If you can land a single blow on her, you win. Once you do that, you are free to do as you wish for that day. Otherwise, if Sophia is able to knock you to the ground five times before you can land your blow, you lose, and must spend the next hour studying. After that hour and a short break, if you have no desire to continue studying, you will fight again.”

Those conditions were kind of...good?

“Do you not think Zilbagias has too much of an advantage with those rules, my lady?” Sophia remarked.

“You think so? I was trying to take your abilities into account.”

That said, as someone with the build of a five-year-old human child, I needed a considerable handicap. As small as Sophia was, she was still big enough to be an adult.

“Zilbagias, when it comes to demons like us, power is everything. The freedom you desire must be earned by force.”

Ah, that was exactly the kind of thing I would expect a demon to say. Kind of pissed me off.

“This experience should help make you quite strong... Sophia, have you done any studying yet today?”

“Not yet, my lady!” Sophia replied, beaming.

“Can you actually fight, Sophia?” I asked plainly. You couldn’t really judge a devil by their appearance alone, but compared to the devils I had fought in my life as a hero, she didn’t strike me as the fighting type.

“Now now, little one. I am a knowledge devil, remember? What do you think

the very first thing I learned from you demons was?” Sophia flashed a bright smile. “From hand-to-hand combat all the way up to spearmanship, I learned *everything*! And I am more than confident that I can replicate it all!” That bright cheerfulness was soon overtaken by ferocity. “I think my knowledge will be quite beneficial to your education.”

Aha ha ha, you think so? Then bring it on, you lowly devil!

“Now then, little one. Are you willing to study today?”

If I were to be completely honest, after my previous realization, I felt like it would save me trouble in the future if I just did as I was told here. But what kind of demon would just roll over in a situation like this?

“Not a chance,” I declared, standing up from my seat.

“Oh, really? In that case...” Sophia could barely contain her laughter. “It’s study time, little one!”

A flutter of black and red flashed through the air as the butler swung a fist at me without the slightest hesitation.

As she closed the distance between us, my body responded reflexively. She was aiming for my stomach. Should I jump out of the way? No, she would chase me up into the air. I needed to parry it somehow. Slapping her incoming fist aside, I leaned around the incoming punch. My body moved first, my mind racing to catch up and communicate my choices only after the fact.

How ironic. Even in this new body, my old instincts still held strong. As that crossed my mind, I retaliated with a light jab. Sophia’s attack had been quite vigorous, but I could sense a softness in it, the laxness of one fighting with no intent to take their opponent’s life. A single hit was all I needed. At this range, even my little baby hands could reach her no problem.

“Whoa!” But as if to sneer at the laws of physics, Sophia jerked to a halt and dodged away from my fist.

Damn. This is why I hate devils. Floating around without giving a crap about gravity; only natural they’d apply that ability to hand-to-hand combat as well. I had been forced into more than one tricky situation by their illogical movements when I was active as a hero. If only my arms and legs were a bit

longer... I couldn't wait to grow up.

Giving up on a pursuit, I extended my left hand and held my right hand near my hip, shuffling sideways as I observed her.

"Oh?" It seemed Sophia was content to wait and see as well. She dropped to the ground, the sound of her claws clicking on the floor signaling her return to gravity. "You're pretty good, little one," she said, tilting her head in confusion as she looked me up and down. "But where did you learn to fight like that?"

My blood, boiling at my first fight in years against one of the denizens of darkness, quickly froze. There was no way a two-year-old would know how to fight like I just had. Dammit! My natural fighting instincts were actually backfiring!

"I saw them practicing at the parade ground." Mind racing, I squeezed out an excuse.

"Really? Doesn't seem like any demonic martial arts I know of..." Sophia copied my movements, sticking her left hand out and pulling her right hand back, then sliding sideways.

A shudder passed through me. She had almost perfectly replicated the stance, one taught by the Holy Church to its monks as an all-purpose close combat fighting style. After only seeing it a single time?! But wait, this was actually much worse! If she was replicating it, that meant I was showing it off clearly! Anyone familiar with it would immediately recognize it! As a cold sweat ran down my back, I glanced over at Prati.

"Unfortunately, no one else can replicate movements just by looking at them like you can, Sophia," Prati sighed, fanning herself. "It only makes sense his movements would be off if he was trying to copy what someone else did. Besides, you're only familiar with demonic martial arts, right? That doesn't include any of the styles used by the other races."

"I see. I suppose you are right," Sophia admitted.

"Zilbagias's movements look fairly close to the martial arts that the beastfolk practice. He must've seen some of the rank and file training." Conveniently, she found a way to explain my abilities for me. "As expected of my son. If you can

pick up things that well just by watching, I look forward to seeing what you can learn in the future.”

I was saved. As she had said, this particular form of martial arts was designed by mimicking the movements of the beastfolk. Giving it some more thought, the martial arts of the Holy Church were rarely witnessed on the battlefield by the Demon King’s armies. Unlike the beastfolk who could fight empty handed, or at least with teeth and claws, we used swords and shields. Losing our weapons usually meant we were dead long before we had a chance to engage in unarmed combat. Anyone who recognized my movements would have had to practice the same style, or be some kind of weirdo who was constantly getting into fistfights with humans.

“It seems we should’ve started his physical training earlier. I thought he was too young for it.” While I was overcome with relief, Prati continued, conspicuous disappointment in her voice. “Zilbagias, as a proud prince of demons, having picked up the beastfolk’s martial arts first will be a stain on all of our reputations. You are to abandon what you have learned for now, and focus on learning the martial arts of our own people.”

“Okay,” I replied after a short pause, a little nervous. Luck was on my side today, but next time I may not be as lucky. Whether Prati commanded it or not, abandoning what I knew about fighting would be like throwing away a piece of my past as a hero.

“Now then, Zilbagias. It’s time to teach you the honorable and historied lineage of martial arts passed down among the demons.” Though she hid her mouth with her fan, there was no missing the sadistic grin that crept onto her face. “Don’t worry. We have all the time in the world. Sophia, please take it from here.”

“Yes, my lady.” Sophia took a stance again. This time she had both hands raised, an aggressive stance that looked ill-suited to a girl of her stature.

Ah, so this is the “honorable and historied” martial arts of the demons?

“Honestly, you’re putting up much more of a fight than I expected. I’m going to enjoy this more than I thought. It seems underestimating your moves is not an option. Actually, I might even be able to learn something from them.”

Dammit! If I slip up again, she'll memorize my moves in a flash. There's no telling when that would come back to haunt me.

"All right, here I go!" Casually announcing her attack, Sophia lunged forward.

With my skills from my past life forbidden to me, what I had to offer was nothing special. In no time at all, I was flat on my back. That said, I was still a child, so she was obviously pulling her punches. Compared to the pain of being disintegrated by the Demon King, this was nothing.

"Ah! I did it! Finally! Finally we can study!"

Glancing back at the deep emotional event Sophia seemed to be experiencing, I reluctantly trudged over to the desk. I had lost, so it was time to study. There was no helping it. For now, I'd pretend to make an effort here to learn the bare minimum of reading and writing. *But once I get older, I'll beat the stuffing out of that damn devil!*

As I entertained those thoughts, a piece of paper was placed in front of me.

"Now then, little one! These are what we call letters!"

Some kind of cipher was written on the page. It was practically gibberish to me.

"Wait...huh? These are letters?" I said dumbly.

"That's right," Sophia replied, "these are the letters of the demonic language."

Now that I thought about it...I remembered something one of the priests I had served under said once. Even though we spoke the same language, the demons had a different writing system...so even if we swiped their sensitive documents, it would take time to decipher their contents.

"Now, little one! The letters of the demonic alphabet are all phonetic. Each has its own unique sound. This one sounds like 'ah.' This one sounds like 'ee.' If you combine them, the sound changes. Ah, you're probably curious since I called them phonetic, but there are also ideographic alphabets out there too, used by humans and elves and such. In those alphabets, each character has its own meaning, rather than its own sound—"

Sophia continued her rapid-fire explanation. I could feel my soul leaving my body already. My horrifying memories of studying reading and writing day in and day out back at the orphanage started to resurface.

Facing this fate again may have been the greatest despair I had felt since my rebirth.

I could really never forgive these demons...

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I'd been getting strange headaches as of late, and before long, I sprouted horns.

Five years had passed since my reincarnation. As I sharpened my fangs for my inevitable rebellion, I spent my days studying, practicing the demonic school of martial arts, and investigating the castle (running around it basically). Out of nowhere, I was tormented by an agonizing pain coming from both sides of my head. Kind of hard to describe, but it was drastically different from one of Sophia's punches. Despite the strangeness of the situation, I went to bed like normal, then woke up to find my pillow soaked in blood. Something felt off, so I checked and sure enough, I had horns. Even though they were still quite small, those horns were symbolic of all demonkind, and they were growing from the sides of my head.

"Congratulations, little one! Actually, that name isn't quite suitable anymore. Congratulations, Lord Zilbagias!" As I sat dumbfounded, feeling around my new accessories, Sophia entered the room while clapping. Even though it was the same old Sophia, I was left speechless at the sight of her.

At first, it was like I could see a storm of magical energy swirling inside of her. But that wasn't exactly right. It was more like she *was* a storm of magical energy. Rather than being a physical being, it was more like she was a howling wind that had been forced into a humanoid form. Everything about it seemed so...unnatural.

It actually made a lot of sense. That would explain why devils exploded to varying degrees when they died. Their "form" was being destroyed, so all the energy bound within them was being released at once.

“Ah, looks like you can see it now, Lord Zilbagias,” Sophia grinned, spreading her arms like a magician onstage. In between her outstretched palms, magical energy leaked out and formed a collection of words in the demonic alphabet: “Congratulations on Graduating From Hornless-ness.” Even when taking my past life into account, this was the first time I could see magical energy so vividly.

So, this is how mages see the world? I suppose other races adept at using magic, like dragons and forest elves, could see the same thing. It was common knowledge that a demon’s horns were an important sensory organ, but I’d had no idea they were this powerful. It was like I was seeing everything in a new light, even the world before my very eyes.

“My lady will be pleased to hear about this! Especially since it happened so early. Normally demons don’t grow their horns until eight or nine years old, and for some late bloomers, not until they’re ten.”

My thoughts drowned out her voice as I bit my lip. This was proof. I was no longer human and had been reborn as a demon. Until now, I’d been able to distract myself from that reality by immersing myself in my daily life, but there was no denying it anymore. The world I knew was completely different now.

There was also another shocking realization—I’d never be able to sleep on my side again. *But I can never manage to fall asleep when sleeping on my back...*

“Incredible! Is this the first time a child has grown horns this young?!”

As expected, Prati was ecstatic. She was probably itching for any opportunity to go brag to the mothers of the other heirs. With those pessimistic thoughts in mind, I took a moment to observe her to get a gauge on her magical potential.

She was strong. Easily a high-level demon, which was fitting as a wife of the Demon King. Compared to the whirlwind that was Sophia, her presence was more like a massive, solid boulder. Having a physical body likely was a major factor in that regard. For better or for worse, she was more stable.

“Congratulations, Lord Zilbagias.”

“Congratulations!”

I turned my attention to the servants in the corner of the room, bowing as they congratulated me. Despite my familiarity with these maid imps, they somehow seemed smaller. If I were to compare Sophia to a lion, these imps were more like rabbits. It would probably take a hundred of them to even come close to her beastly energy.

Speaking of which, the beastfolk seemed even less reliable. Their physical capabilities trumped that of the imps, yet they were greatly lacking in a magical sense. Kind of put into perspective why demons treated them as a lesser race. Humans probably didn't look much different. Last were the night elf maids. They also seemed weaker than I had expected. More impressive than the beastfolk, sure, but they were on about the same level, maybe a smidgen higher, than the imps.

The story goes that the night elves were the descendants of elves that had been exiled from the forest elves' society. In ancient times, the elves worshipped the spirits, so their lifestyle complemented nature by living in harmony with the forest and its animals. But over time, some of them came to reject the wholehearted embrace of nature. They indulged in hunting, and had no qualms trying to twist nature to suit their whims. In the end, the friction between these two groups of elves blossomed into a civil war, and the rebels were exiled from their forest homes.

Likely because they had lost the favor of the spirits, their magical abilities diminished and their life spans began to shrink. Despising their forest brethren, they turned to worshipping the gods of darkness, calling themselves "night elves." At this point, they were effectively an entirely different race. On one side were the forest elves, proud wielders of incredible magic and with a rich, healthy tan to their skin. On the other side were the night elves, abhorring sunlight and sporting deathly pale complexions.

Losing their magic had some upsides. The night elves adapted to life in the darkness, their crimson eyes able to perceive heat as well as light. Their skill with bows was so widely renowned it surpassed that of the forest elves. Granted, forest elves had little need for bows and arrows given their incredible magic.

Anyway, the night elves waged a perpetual war of revenge against their forest

brethren. While clinging to the hope of reclaiming their magic and long life spans, they offered their blood as sacrifice to the gods of darkness out of desperation. So despite being of an entirely different race, they had jumped at the chance to cooperate with the warmongering demons in their invasion of foreign kingdoms.

With the same love for bloodshed and cruelty, and the same sickly pale skin, the demons and night elves got along quite well. At least, on the surface.

“Congratulations.”

Though the night elf servants congratulated me all the same, there was a certain coldness to their smiles. The night elves were treated well due to proving their loyalty time and again, dating back to when the demons formed their kingdom, but their weakness in the realm of magic led to them earning the disparaging nickname of “the hornless.” No matter the similarities to demons in terms of looks and demeanor, the lack of horns and thus magical abilities meant they were perceived as being weak. There were also the devils, a race bearing the same magical prowess as the demons, and even growing similar horns.

“Congratulations.”

There was nothing I could do but ponder about the true feelings behind those cold smiles as they congratulated me for getting my horns, the symbol of great magical power.

But there was one thing I knew for certain. The Demon King’s army was no monolith.

“Once again, congratulations, Zilbagias. I’m sure you will gain a new perspective on the world from this day forward.” Having calmed down a little, Prati continued fanning herself. “At minimum, you should be capable of defending yourself. Until now, we have put firm restrictions on where you may go, but now we can give you more freedom.”

“I can defend myself?” I echoed, tilting my head in confusion.

“Firm restrictions” was no exaggeration considering I had basically never left the castle, and there were some places within the castle which were completely off-limits. For one, I was forbidden from entering the palace where the Demon

King and my older brothers and sisters lived. The reasoning I'd been given was that it was too dangerous. There was no telling what the other princes and princesses or their families would do to me, but did growing horns really change the circumstances that much? What, did demons literally lock horns when they fought or something?

"Allow me to demonstrate the blessing that those horns are, Zilbagias." With a suspicious smile, Prati snapped her fan shut. Energy poured out of her, flooding the entire room.

"Kneel."

The pressure in the room became immense. It was as if the surrounding atmosphere was turning into a gel. I could feel a definite compulsion coming from those words. Reflexively I defended myself. When learning how to fight against demons, this was always step one: imagine a hollow, transparent shell around yourself. The purpose of it was to defend yourself against magic and curses.

Carrying out that simple action was shocking. Just by having horns, that act of self-defense became incredibly trivial. My whole body instantly felt lighter. The magical energy I was controlling actually felt palpable. In my previous life, using magic had always felt vague and uncertain. It was like I'd had to write something while blindfolded, and now I could see the page clearly. The difference was monumental.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the beastfolk servants kneeling, hair standing on end. The night elf maids were desperately trying to resist. The imps looked moderately uncomfortable, like they were standing in the smoke of a campfire, while Sophia was entirely unfazed.

"Incredible," Prati smiled, her eyes gleaming. "Even against my pressure, your knees didn't so much as bend. That's wonderful!"

The pressure in the room dissipated. The beastfolk returned to their feet gasping for air, while the night elves sighed in relief.

"As expected of my own son. Even without horns, you were a child with an especially strong will." Something about her wording caught my attention.

The pressure from her words had a weight of familiarity. The difference in intensity didn't hide the fact I had felt it before.

"You will become the Demon King, Zilbagias."

Back then when she spoke those words, was that some kind of curse? A spell to turn her own son into someone capable of becoming the Demon King? That realization sent a shiver down my spine.

"If you can withstand my pressure, you'll be fine. You should be able to enter the palace without fear of perishing. Ah, I'm so glad you turned out to be so strong! If you were a coward who used foolish tactics like layering yourself in talismans to fend off curses, I'd never hear the end of it." Prati laughed, clearly in a fantastic mood. "I suppose we can accelerate things a little bit. I'm sure you're quite looking forward to going to the palace and meeting His Majesty Demon King Gordogias, aren't you?"

I was a hero. Even when face-to-face with the Demon King himself, I feared nothing. At long last, I had been given permission to enter the palace where that bastard Demon King lived. Few things would make me happier.

Though, to be completely honest, I hope you would forgive me for being a little anxious. On my last "visit" to the Demon King's castle, I'd at least had my sword, shield, and protective talismans.

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I was probably fortunate I wasn't able to storm the palace that day. Having graduated from "hornless-ness," I was to be given a proper court rank, a procedure that would take a little time. Practically speaking, I would be granted the rank of esquire.

Demon society followed an insane hierarchical system, treating every single individual as some form of nobility. Growing your horns made you an esquire, reaching adulthood at fifteen years of age made you a knight, and from there you could climb the ranks based on your service to the kingdom or during war.

Heritage and territory meant little for one's social standing; titles were

granted to all children, not just the eldest. Even the Demon King's own children started at the bottom of the hierarchy. This system was drastically different from the one used by humanity. These ranks also correlated to the chain of command on the battlefield. The highest rank was of course the Demon King. Hating to take orders from anyone, demons spent every waking moment pouring every ounce of strength they had into climbing even one rung up that hierarchy.

By the way, ranks were also given to the non-demon species. Night elves and dragons were considered first-class citizens. Some members of the undead that were particularly loyal to the Demon King were also in that class. Leaders among the beastfolk, like their kings and chiefs, and devils were also treated as being on the same level as demons.

"Me? Probably a baroness or something." It was study time. While correcting an essay I'd written, Sophia responded to my question in a bored tone.

"You don't seem to care much," I commented.

"My work has nothing to do with combat, so the title written beside my name on paperwork is nothing more than a formality," she replied. "Besides, anyone can assess the strength of a devil just by looking at them."

True enough. A devil's strength was tied to their magic. I'd come across a number of devils around the castle since my horns came in, and I could very clearly tell which ones were stronger or weaker than her with just a quick glance. If that was the case for a demon like me, it must have been second nature for actual devils.

"But if anyone can climb the ranks with strength alone, doesn't that cause issues in regard to succession of the throne?"

"In what way?" Sophia asked.

"The archdukes are the rank just below the Demon King, right? Wouldn't they jump at the opportunity to be the Demon King themselves one day? Seems like that could cause an endless cycle of succession wars."

"I'm not sure if I follow. How is that a problem?"

I stopped writing at Sophia's confused response. Ah, that's right. The Demon

King wasn't decided by bloodline at all. Lineage meant nothing, just the strength to take his place. That meant it also didn't matter how vicious the battle to become the next Demon King was.

"The current Demon King killed everyone that opposed him, even his own siblings. Those who swore allegiance to him from the bottom of their hearts were spared. Only someone who could come out on top after such a brutal power struggle could command the respect of a willful race such as the demons."

"So showcasing that huge disparity in power is what makes everyone fall in line."

"Exactly. You need to prove yourself worthy to inherit the Demon King's Lance."

That lance. I remembered it all too well from my fight with the Demon King. It was a simple, brutal-looking weapon that seemed to be made from obsidian. Clearly it was an artifact of incredible power. Despite the numerous protective wards and prayers placed on our shields, it had pierced them with ease like they were nothing more than paper.

"What is the Demon King's Lance?" I asked.

"Ah, I guess we've never explained it to you. It's common knowledge to us, so I never thought to bring it up." Clapping her hands together, Sophia began another gleeful lecture. "The Demon King's Lance is inherited by each Demon King. It was forged by your grandfather, His Majesty the first Demon King Raogias, at the cost of his own soul."

"At the cost of his soul? Sounds like something a dwarf would do."

It was kind of like dwarven trueforging. Using their racial magic, they could enhance their blacksmithing to create a weapon or piece of armor, pouring their very soul into it to create a magical item of tremendous power.

"Exactly! I'm surprised you know about that!" A puzzled look played over Sophia's face at my mumbling. "Wait...how *do* you know about that?"

Oops. Trueforging had never come up in any of my studies, and this was the very devil that managed my entire education!

“I think I saw it in a book once.” I gave a pitiful excuse, feeling a cold sweat start to form.

Sometimes I could hardly recognize myself. I had learned the demonic alphabet, the human alphabet, and was now starting to learn the elven one. I could read perfectly well, and had made my way through a number of textbooks already. Maybe because I was so young, my memory was quite strong. Thanks to this devil, my distaste for studying was gradually starting to dissipate.

“Ah, that history book I assigned for you to read 371 days ago did mention the dwarves, didn’t it? I never gave an in-depth explanation on that topic, so it seems you actually read it properly!” Narrowing her eyes as her gaze drifted away, she eventually gave an emphatic nod.

That was close. Waaaaaaay too close. She knew the contents of every book I ever read front to back! If one of those books hadn’t mentioned dwarves, I would have been done for! Gotta think before I speak next time. No more sharing my thoughts either.

“Anyways, let’s get back to the lance. Go on.”

“Right. As you may have guessed, Lord Zilbagias, the Demon King’s Lance is a magical weapon. The power of **Soul Eater** that the first Demon King received from his pact with a devil god is contained inside it.”

Soul Eater. The heresy that granted the Demon King his absurd power. Even we in the Panhuman Alliance knew its name, but our knowledge of it pretty much ended there. My heart was racing, but I silently urged her to continue.

“**Soul Eater** is the authority of the Devil God Kanibal, a magic that uses the souls of one’s enemies as nourishment for magical power. The Demon King’s Lance contains that power, as well as much of the magical energy of the first Demon King, which is all inherited by anyone who uses the lance.”

The key to the Demon King’s incredible strength and that wicked heresy called **Soul Eater** was that lance!

“As such, you could say that the struggle for the throne is really a struggle for ownership of that lance. But it isn’t as simple as just getting your hands on it.

That struggle, the slaughter over succession, completes the curse that makes its power subordinate to the last survivor.”

At some point, my mouth had gone dry. That meant... That meant...

“So, then...” Even though I had just decided to think before I spoke, I couldn’t hold myself back this time. “If by some chance we lost that lance...it would be a huge problem, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Sophia replied. “If that lance were to be lost, and there was no longer anyone powerful enough to serve as king, then unfortunately the ties holding the demonic races together would crumble,” she continued, a sarcastic tinge to her voice. “However, I have my doubts whether anything exists in this world that is capable of destroying that spear. It’s the crystallization of the first Demon King’s soul, and bears the authority of a devil god. And above all, the current Demon King keeps a watchful eye on it at all times. He’d never allow anything to happen to it.”

That was fine. I couldn’t care less whether he kept an eye on that lance or not—I was going to kill him. Finding the glaring weakness at the heart of the demonic kingdom was all I had ever wanted.

“Oh, that’s right! There’s a book that talks a lot about this. The first Demon King wrote it himself!” As she spoke, she pulled a massive book out of a crease in her clothes. Kinda looked like a dictionary.

“Where did that come from?!”

“I have a library inside me.”

“A *library*?!” Having no restrictions on your physical body has to have some limits, right?!

Bewildered by this new revelation, I took the book she offered me. It looked unremarkable, with a solid, utilitarian cover. The name printed on the front was similarly plain: *Founding of the Demon Kingdom*. A book written by the first Demon King, Raogias. What could possibly be written inside? I glanced over the preface.

“Originally, demons were savage people. Though blessed with individual strength, as a whole we were not superior to our peers by any stretch.”

What?! A demon, talking bad about other demons?! If anyone other than the Demon King talked about demons like that, they would get the crap kicked out of them. I instinctively checked the cover again for the author's name.

Sophia smirked at my reaction. "The first Demon King was quite a strange man, wasn't he?"

"It looks that way..."

Though it was called *Founding of the Demon Kingdom*, the book was effectively an autobiography. Why had he become Demon King? How did he become Demon King? What did he think about his people? The first half of his life was explained in extreme brevity.

The first Demon King Raogias was born into a small tribe. His father was the chief, with so many wives that he had lost track of how many children he had.

"Savages, that is the only accurate description for demons at that time."

He reflected on his life at that time.

"Clad in furs and pelts, living in caves, sitting on bare earth. Only cooking we did was to heat our meat up before we ate it with our bare hands. Once our stomachs were full, we grabbed our spears of stone and patrolled the 'sacred ground,' a small hunting ground where we fought with other tribes of demons."

He wasn't kidding when he called them savages. The demonic kingdom had appeared on this continent out of nowhere about 250 years ago. Taking into account the first Demon King's comments, that meant as early as 300 years ago demons were living an entirely primitive lifestyle. Well, I still considered them savages, but even little things like the use of tableware showed that they had clearly developed significantly as a civilization.

"I was born with exceptional strength. No one in my generation could best me, and as I got older, neither could those older than me. I took the lives of many warriors in battle, and was chosen to be the next chief."

"One day, I looked up at the sky and saw a flock of birds passing overhead. Where had they come from? I asked those around me, but none of them had an answer, nor did they care. They saw the birds as nothing more than potential

prey that had crossed over the mountains and into our sacred ground."

"I had grown tired of the endless monotony of meaningless battles. Knowledge of the outside world and the mystery beyond the mountains is what I sought."

Sick of the battles between his own kind, Raogias fled. The land the demons came from was isolated from the rest of the continent, surrounded by a harsh range of mountains. The scarcity of food and water made conflict between the demon tribes necessary to keep their population low, Raogias surmised.

The journey across the mountains was a brutal one. He used the migrating birds as a guide, and even shot some down for food. He also used fire magic to melt snow and ice for water. Despite all of that, he barely managed to survive the crossing.

"Beyond the mountains was an endless and bountiful land. I couldn't die until I had fulfilled my curiosity. That was the determination that carried me down the mountain."

And he made it. The land he found was so filled with abundance it seemed like paradise. Thinking of his brethren still living in that tiny "sacred ground," shedding blood over the tiniest scrap of land, filled him with pity.

However, naturally, this paradise was already inhabited. The humans, the elves, and the beastfolk already roamed the lands. And despite the paradise they inhabited, they still warred over land.

"The first human kingdom I approached saw me as a creature of evil, giving me a rather violent welcome. Of course, with the furs I wore, the filth coating me from my long journey, my pale skin, imposing horns, and powerful magic, their fear of me wasn't without reason."

"I swept aside their 'welcome' with ease, cutting down anyone who dared to attack me as I made my way to the kingdom of the beastfolk. They happened to be at war with the humans, so when they saw the humans attacking me, they lent me their aid."

"It was the beastfolk who truly welcomed me. And while they were pathetic in terms of magical prowess, their force of arms was nothing to scoff at. Once I

demonstrated my strength, they listened to me. It was interesting to see them offer loyalty purely based on power.”

“After listening to the stories of the beastfolk, I made my preparations and began wandering the continent.”

Raogias spent some decades traveling. He learned to read and write in the alphabets of the other races. A lot of time was spent immersing himself in their cultures. He battled humans, and even befriended a few. At times he came across the exclusionist elves, sometimes traveling together with some of the eccentric ones that left their homes. He was amazed to learn of dwarven blacksmithing, traveled alongside beastfolk caravans, and even fought dragons. As he traveled the world and met all kinds of people, he had to confront and come to terms with the pathetic nature of his own people.

“I couldn’t bring myself to live out the rest of my life alone here in the outside world, I thought. But how could a leader regain the respect of his people after abandoning them once before? I also lacked the strength to unite and lead the other tribes.”

“The land beyond the mountains was plentiful and rich. The only thing that stood in the way of demonkind taking this land for ourselves was unity. But my people did not submit to logic and reason. Beyond anything else, overwhelming strength of arms, incredible power, was necessary.”

“How might I obtain that power for myself? I continued my journey in search of that answer. And in a place not so far from my old home, in an abandoned barren wasteland that was said to be cursed, I found it. There I found scars left from the wars of the gods, a warping in space and time. I found a Dark Portal, a gate leading to the Abyss.”

It was a small hole connecting to the world where devils dwelled. Due to the warping of time and space, the area was quite unstable. Lacking in magical power, the humans and beastfolk couldn’t even approach it. The elves’ love of nature led them to despise the place, and the dwarves’ obsession with blacksmithing meant they never gave it a second look. I didn’t know what Raogias had hoped to find when he ventured into that hellish wasteland, but what he found was a gateway to the Abyss. He recklessly threw himself into

that distortion, finding himself in the Abyss and meeting the devils for the first time.

“Once again I was greeted with violence. Unlike my previous encounters, however, the devils possessed considerable power, making them formidable opponents.”

But the vicious battle that ensued caught the eye of a great devil.

“The Devil God Kanibal. His power was beyond anything I had ever witnessed. He offered me a contract for a curse that would allow me to consume the souls of my foes. In exchange, a small portion of the power I gained would go to him—and above all, he wished for my life to serve as his entertainment.”

The pact was sealed. Having obtained the heresy of **Soul Eater**, he began the journey home, killing and devouring the souls of all who stood in his way. A small portion of all that new power flowed back through the Dark Portal to Kanibal. Returning to his homeland, he used his overwhelming new power to unite the demons. He became their king. In order to solidify his rule, he took what he had learned from the humans and imposed a class structure. In coordination with each other, the demons took turns crossing the mountains, invading the rich and abundant outside world...

...and everything after that was an all too familiar history. The human kingdoms were decimated. The beastfolk kingdoms united with the demons. The goblins and ogres were conquered. The elven forests were set ablaze. The night elves joined the demons' ranks. The dragons were subdued. The undead were subsumed.

Once he had obtained enough power for himself, Raogias shared the secret of the Dark Portal with his people, allowing them to forge pacts with the devils beyond it. The contracts they wove bolstered the strength of the already powerful demons. Learning that they could easily amass more power in the outside world, weaker devils began pouring out of the portal as well.

The Demon King ended his records with the following.

“Demonkind, my people. Embrace unity. You cannot underestimate the strength sheer numbers give to the weaker races. Conflict among yourselves will only serve to ensnare you. The days of warring over the sacred ground are over.

Learn from your enemies, refine yourselves. Do not mistake the correct target for your aggression.”

“Demon Kings, my successors. Lead your people. Without a great cause, demonkind will not stay united. As such, you must conquer. Rule. Continue creating new enemies for yourselves. Drench the land in their blood. That will wash away the memories of the old demonic tribes. Do not allow our people to sink back into uncultured savagery.”

I closed the book. *Okay, I think I get the idea now.* The feelings of the first Demon King were understandable enough. All of this was an attempt to unite the demons in order to work and thrive as one. The only way to keep them united was to use overwhelming strength to rule, and an enemy to aim their warlike tendencies toward. *I see, I see.*

Go. To. Hell.

That’s it? That’s the only reason?! You destroyed my home! My village! Everyone I knew was killed for *that*?! Go to hell!!!

That’s why everyone here has to scrape and claw to the death to preserve their stupid livelihoods?! Serves you bastards right! You’ve brought all that suffering onto the other races just to protect your own filthy bloodlines?! Know your place, you disgusting freaks!

My hands were shaking. It took everything I had not to rip the book to shreds. If Sophia hadn’t been watching, I probably would have.

“So, what do you think? The first Demon King’s thoughts and feelings come across really well, right?” Sophia asked innocently.

I took a few long, deep breaths to calm down. She just needed to think the rage on my face was the result of me being emotionally moved.

“It shook me to my core.” More than anything ever had. “King Raogias... I understand his thoughts quite well,” I spoke slowly, biting off each word one by one. “This was eye-opening.”

As I stopped talking, Sophia replied with something stupid like “glad to hear it.”

Yes, it was eye-opening in more ways than one. *First Demon King, I know your feelings oh so well. I understand, and I'm gonna ruin all of it. I'll wreck all of your dreams.*

And I knew just how to do it. It was only fitting that *Founding of the Demon Kingdom* would act as the basis for my plans. Just had to take everything it said, and do the exact opposite. I'd bring this kingdom to its knees. I'd send the demons, all the denizens of darkness, back to their primitive lifestyles where those savages belonged. They'd be lower than even wild animals. And when I was finished, maybe I'd write my own autobiography. Maybe I'd call it *Destruction of the Demon Kingdom*.

As much as the book infuriated me, what I had gained was priceless. For example, I had learned that in the time it would take me to grow up, the Panhuman Alliance wouldn't be destroyed. The Demon King's army made painfully slow progress in its invasion. While they might take half a day to topple a fortress standing on the front lines, it took them weeks to secure the surrounding land. Even if they made preparations against a counteroffensive, it was out of character for them to be so cautious. But this book had made me understand why that was.

If they moved too fast, their enemies would be wiped out in no time. An overwhelming assault might grind the Alliance to dust in no time, but that would just cause more problems for the demons. So they never fought to their full potential, giving the Alliance time to rebuild its strength. They'd then come back and assault the demons head-on, satiating the demons' own appetite for battle.

There was plenty of time before the Alliance would be destroyed. Not that it meant I could just fool around.

The second thing I had learned was about the presence of the Dark Portal. The Alliance had always wondered how the Demon King's army had recruited so many devils into their ranks, but I never would have guessed they had a direct path to the Abyss.

"Did you also come here through the Dark Portal, Sophia?" I asked her during a break between sparring bouts.

“Of course. Nowadays, no devils answer summons anymore.” And she responded as if the answer was obvious. “Summoning rituals are dangerous for the summoner, as they consume life force in addition to magical energy, but it’s not exactly a pleasant experience for us devils either. To put it in a way you’d understand, it’s like trying to squeeze yourself through a really tiny hole.”

“That sounds awfully painful. And using the Dark Portal is different?”

“Totally different. Like walking through a tunnel.”

“Then why didn’t devils use the Dark Portal from the get-go?” Considering the convenience of it, I figured they’d be pouring through it.

“It’s simple. If a devil walks through the portal on their own, they won’t reach this world. They need someone to link them to it first, kind of like a bridge, so basically they need to travel with a demon.”

According to Sophia, the Dark Portal on the Abyss’s side was a dimensional hole with no known destination. Some devils had tried traveling through it alone, but none had ever made it back. On the other hand, if they traveled together with someone connected to this world, they could traverse with ease.

Damn, that portal was going to be an issue if I didn’t do something about it. Honestly speaking, though, that warp in space seemed like a much bigger phenomenon than the Demon King’s army. Chances of me being able to do anything about it were slim.

I would have to weaken the demonic kingdom, the demons themselves. With the devils around, it made the already strong demons even more powerful. Weakening the demons’ reliance on the devils for assistance was a top priority. At the same time, I needed to do something about the Demon King’s Lance to put a dent in the fragile unity that held demonkind together.

Humanity could still win this.

“I guess it’ll be your turn soon, huh?” Sophia said, nodding thoughtfully.

“My turn to what?”

“To take a trip to the Abyss, of course.”

“Uh, what?”

“You’ve got your horns now, and your magical strength is adequate,” she explained. “The first demon prince Lord Aiogias turned a lot of heads by visiting the Abyss for the first time when he was eight years old to make his first pact. I doubt your mother will pass up the chance to shatter that record by taking you there at five.”

Yeah, that sounded like her. Prati wouldn’t let such a tantalizing opportunity slip through her fingers.

“It’s a critical part of your growth and education as a demon. I’m really looking forward to finding out what kind of devil you make a pact with,” Sophia laughed.

So, a hero like me was going to travel to the Abyss and make a pact with a devil? Actually, that was fine by me. I needed to defeat the Demon King and destroy this kingdom. If making a contract with a devil would give me the power to achieve that, so be it.

“By the way, how do I find a devil to make a contract with?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. When you go through the Dark Portal, you’ll naturally come into contact with a devil that suits you.”

“I-Is that so...”

What kind of devil would naturally suit a former hero like me?

A few days later.

“Zilbagias! It’s time for you to head to the Abyss!” Prati ordered. “We will find a suitable devil for you before you set foot in the palace.”

Chapter 2: The Devil's Pact

Hello, I'm Demon Prince Zilbagias, and I'm on my way to my auspicious first trip to the Abyss.

Ever since being reborn, I had been cooped up in this castle. It seemed it was finally time to venture outside. With the growth of my horns also came more freedom. I was excited and all, but for my first trip outside the castle to be the Abyss, wasn't that a bit *too* dramatic?

"Nice weather today, isn't it?"

Early in the afternoon—which was quite early for demons—the woman who had given birth to me, Pratifya, stood looking out from a large balcony on the corner of the castle. Normally wrapped in a gorgeous dress, today she had surprisingly donned pants. Her outfit looked like riding clothes (that a savage might wear), giving off the impression of a proper lady (or at least, the chieftain's wife). The entire look was ruined by the accessories she wore made from animal fangs and pelts. Otherwise, she would have looked quite nice. I was one to talk, considering I was dressed similarly.

Speaking of my appearance, I currently had the build of a ten-year-old human child. I had the icy good looks and silver hair of my mother and the bright red eyes of my father; I was quite the specimen. The one singular thing Prati had going for her was her good looks. And it's a blessing I'd inherited those. If you ignored the grossly pale skin and sinister-looking horns, I looked the part of a young noble. I *was* a prince, after all.

As I entertained myself with these mundane thoughts, the sound of wings flapping came down from above, followed by a dragon with coppery red scales landing on the balcony. Yes, this was a landing platform for dragons.

"By all means..." The dragon spoke with a voice resembling scraping metal as it stooped down for us. There was a saddle on its back to make it easier for us to ride.

The magnificent dragons were a race with no less pride than the demons. The white dragons that had helped us in our assault on the Demon King's castle were willing to let us use ropes to stay on their backs, but had vehemently refused any riding equipment like this. And those were the white dragons, who were generally more reserved. I had no idea how the more violent dragons would react to the suggestion of a saddle being put on them.

And yet, the one before me didn't utter a complaint about being used as a tool for transportation. Ever since being subdued by the first Demon King, most dragons were subservient to the demons. Or maybe it was more accurate to say they couldn't disobey. The dragons' hatchery was beneath the castle. Their adorable little children and eggs were being kept as hostages.

Apparently at one point this castle had been the home of the sky dragons. Once it was conquered by the first Demon King, he had declared, "This is a magnificent marble mountain! It shall serve well as my castle!" before using magic to carve a building out of it. Even the dragon in front of me right now stared menacingly at the ground, refusing to meet my gaze. It didn't take a genius to surmise he wasn't happy about this arrangement.

"Been quite a while since the last time I rode a dragon. Oh, you'll love flying, Zilbagias." In one swift motion, Prati pulled herself up into the saddle. Even something small like this displayed her physical capabilities. Even if she was the Demon King's wife, she was a fully-fledged warrior in her own right.

"I'm looking forward to it, mother," I nodded, attempting to follow her up into the saddle.

"Leaving while the sun is so high? You have my sympathy, Pratifya," a voice called out from behind me.

Turning around, I saw there was a demon woman standing in the shade of the balcony entrance. She was wearing a blue dress highlighted with snow-white furs. Her glittering blue hair was tied up in an elaborate weave, decorated with jewels and fangs. Her eyes blazed gold like a full moon, and there was an air of arrogance about her, yet she was also regal like a queen.

"My, if it isn't Lazriel. You came all the way here to see us off? Who knew you had a friendly side," Prati replied, almost sneering.

“My presence here isn’t for you,” Lazriel snapped back, opening her fan to cover the lower half of her face. “I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to see this son you are oh so proud of. After all, this may very well be my last chance.”

Her gaze shifted to me. As her appraising eyes rested on me, a faint magical energy seeped out of her, slowly creeping in our direction. Judging by the situation, she was likely the mother of one of the other heirs. Very unlikely she’d do something reckless here, but just in case, I wrapped myself in my own magical energy.

And then returned her gaze head-on. A demon always countered a glare with a glare.

“Not even an ounce of charm,” Lazriel snorted, snapping her fan shut. “You’re planning on taking a boy this little to the Abyss? You have a heart of ice, Pratifya.”

“He is my very own son. He’ll manage just fine. Though I guess I couldn’t say the same for other children.”

“Hmph.” Lazriel glanced back at my face for a moment. “It would be nice if you returned alive, little boy. Farewell.” Turning around, she sauntered her way back into the castle.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“She is the mother of Aiogias, the first prince,” Pratifya spat. “She can’t function without ensuring she’s always ahead of the pack.”

So, just like you, then? But I had my doubts. “Was she planning on stopping me from entering the Abyss?”

“Maybe. She can’t act conspicuously, though. The best she can do is try to scare you. Of course, you’re my son. You aren’t some weakling that the likes of her could frighten,” Prati scoffed. “Remember well, Zilbagias. Such petty harassment accomplishes nothing but to reveal your own insecurity. She must have feared the Abyss herself at one point. Beneath her proud swagger is a coward.”

Prati looked at me, her eyes clouded. *“But cowardice isn’t in your nature. You are a strong boy, Zilbagias.”*

Well, I'd heard a lot about the Abyss from Sophia, but the material became very vague. Something about how one's mind became more concretely reflected in the world around them. If you stepped into the place trembling in fear, nothing good would come of it. I had no idea what to expect when I went there, to be honest; it was nothing like launching an assault on the Demon King.

Prati seemed satisfied with my calm reaction. "Time is of the essence. Let's go."

By the way, the dragon had spent the entire exchange huddled low to the ground. Accepting the hand Prati offered, I jumped up into the saddle with her. I tried to seat myself behind her, but she lifted me up and put me down in front of her instead. *Damn, she overdid it with the perfume.* Anyway, she strapped us together at the waist, holding me in her arms. She then gave a soft kick to the dragon's side.

"Let's go. To the Dark Portal."

"As you command..." the dragon replied in a low grumble, as if relieved to finally be moving. After a short run, the dragon pulled up into the air. *Whoa, this was a lot of shaking.* Were a small leather belt and a handlebar the only things ensuring I didn't die again? Were those sufficient enough safety precautions? I wasn't going to get thrown off, was I?

With a touch of anxiety, our journey through the sky began. Though the takeoff was a bit stressful, once we got a bit of altitude, the ride became more steady.

It was a beautiful sunny day. We were five hundred meters in the air, high enough that chances of surviving a fall were easily zero, but probably still low by a dragon's standards. We soared through the air, the scenery below us whizzing by. With the help of Prati's defensive magic, there was almost no wind pressure, so the ride was a breeze. I could sit back and enjoy the ride. Unlike last time, I didn't have to cling desperately to a rope to keep from falling. I could breathe easily, and there was no risk of freezing. The magic we had used to conceal ourselves back then couldn't be used with any other magic, so we'd had to tough it out on guts and stamina alone.

"Flying is great. It feels so free up here." Above my head, Prati spoke

cheerfully. Twisting my neck to look up at her, I found a totally relaxed expression on her face, a complete departure from how she usually looked. It seemed she was under considerable stress while living in the castle. But talking about feeling free while riding an effectively enslaved dragon was pretty bold of her. *Don't think I didn't see that little twitch, mister dragon.*

The dragons' desire to rebel might become useful later. They couldn't do anything while their hatchery was held hostage, but if I could do something about that...

"You're quite calm, aren't you, Zilbagias? Hard to believe this is your first flight," Prati said, cutting off my train of thought.

"Uhh...there's a lot less shaking than I expected. I'm actually enjoying it."

This dragon had a mastery of flying, though. There had been a lot of shaking and swaying when we took off, but it was doing a good job of catching the wind and maintaining altitude, gliding as much as possible to reduce the turbulence we experienced. My previous experience with the white dragons had made me expect the worst.

"As expected of my own son. How reliable." Prati seemed satisfied with my answer as she started patting my head. This kind of affection was pretty rare. If only I could see my face now. Of course, it was probably a good thing she couldn't see it.

After flying for about half an hour, the scenery below us started to change. The rich greenery gave way to a barren wasteland. The houses of demons and beastfolk became more and more sparse before disappearing entirely. A single stone road cut through the otherwise empty plain.

"Ah, you can see it now."

Looking straight ahead at Prati's mumbling, I saw some sort of wavering, rainbow mirage.

It glittered like a prism. Under more tranquil circumstances it may have been quite beautiful, but it had an unsettling, dreadful feeling to it. Something in my base instincts told me to keep my distance as it could be dangerous. At the base of the rainbow mirage was a variegated cityscape.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That is Cosmologie. It’s a city built for demons and devils to live together. It also acts as a resting place for relatives to await their family’s return from the Abyss, or for devils to get accustomed to their physical bodies after traveling to this world for the first time. This is where I’ll stay while waiting for you.”

“You won’t be going in with me?”

“I can’t go into the Abyss anymore. My soul is crowded with devilish power already,” she explained, a tinge of frustration in her voice. “Sophia warned me that the next time I enter the Abyss, there is a strong possibility I will never be able to return. So I will have to wait here for you.”

“I see,” I answered. “Well, I’ll be fine on my own. You don’t have to worry.”

Prati gave a quiet laugh, patting my head again. She sure was in a good mood today...but thinking about it rationally, she *was* my mother. A close relationship between a mother and child is completely normal. This side of her being somewhat rare was honestly a blessing for me.

Setting down on the outskirts of the city, we began walking toward its center. An incredibly strong—no, bizarre was more accurate—an incredibly *bizarre* magic filled the air. After walking for some time, we arrived at the city’s heart.

“That is the Dark Portal,” Prati explained.

The source of the wavering rainbow. It looked like a new moon on a dark night, a blackness that threatened to devour me if I stared even a second too long. A murky black hole in the world. That was the only description that came to mind.

No matter what angle you looked at it from, it appeared as a flat, black disk. It was almost as if it wasn’t actually real. There was something about its nature I just couldn’t grasp. Without the magic circles drawn on the ground beneath it, it would have been hard to even gauge my distance from it.

I could feel the portal pulling me in as I stared at it. Pulling on my body, my heart, my soul. The sense of great danger I felt from it was palpable, like I was about to get goose bumps. It was as if the world clearly declared this thing to be

wrong.

“What was the first Demon King thinking when he jumped into this?” An honest question sprung to my lips. Now, we knew it was a gateway to the Abyss, but he had jumped in without any knowledge of that. Was he trying to kill himself? Or was he just that desperate to save the future of demonkind? Surely even desperation had to have its limits.

“I’m sure His Majesty the First had some idea of what he was doing,” Prati said, a smug look on her face. Even though what she said basically amounted to “I don’t have a clue.”

“Anyway, I guess the Abyss is on the other side,” I said.

“That’s right. Your steady calmness is promising, Zilbagias.” Prati really seemed to be impressed. “Even I felt overpowered by it on my first visit.”

“Maybe I’m calm because it’s just so...different.”

I spent every day steeped in unease and a feeling of being different. Everything in the demonic kingdom felt foreign to me. Though the Dark Portal was much more intense, I could easily write it off as being more of the same.

“I should get going,” I said. “What should I look for? Someone to serve as my maid?”

“You’ll find whom you find,” Prati replied. “Some encounter minor devils on their first visit, while others form pacts with high-ranking archdevils right away. You will meet whomever you need to meet.”

“Understood.”

Well, I guess it was time to go. Without getting too excited, I marched my way to the portal. My calmness was even a surprise to me. Among all the heroes of the Holy Church, had anyone ever tried assaulting the Abyss? This was a relic of the age of myths, a scar left by the war between the gods. Thinking rationally, traveling between worlds was an incredible phenomenon. Though it didn’t feel that way, maybe I was desperate in my own way.

Eh, whatever. After a small sigh, I jumped into the hole.

It took a while for me to get my bearings. Getting used to the unfamiliar wind, the unfamiliar light, and the unfamiliar sound took some time. It was like an overwhelming intoxication. Everything was murky, and my senses were out of whack.

The ground was shrouded in darkness. Actually, maybe it was bright. The light here was strangely black. Was this a forest? I couldn't tell. It was like I had a good vantage point to see everything, but when I looked to the horizon, a dense wall of treelike shadows obscured my vision.

It was information overload with how dense everything was. I felt incredibly feeble and fragile. I felt so shallow.

"Hello."

I shifted my focus to the source of the voice. What I found was a cane wearing a tailcoat standing there. There wasn't any better way to describe it. It looked like an old wooden cane, stuffed into a formal tailcoat suit.

"It is quite rare for people like you to come here." His voice was calm and composed. Was that cane this devil's true form? Despite looking like that, was he actually much stronger than he looked? I couldn't tell. Perceiving magical energy was quite difficult here.

"Hello. Who are you?" His calm demeanor helped me respond naturally, even with his bizarre appearance. I'd been told I would meet the devil I needed to meet when I entered the Dark Portal. Was this the guy, then?

"A pleasure to meet you. I shall guide you in your next steps from here. I am the Devil of Guidance, Odigoth." Despite there being no arms in his sleeves, the suit still dutifully put an arm to its chest and took a bow. It suddenly became clear that this devil, Odigoth, was conscious about how he presented himself. To him, showing up as a naked cane was inappropriate, which explained the suit.

"Ah, thank you. I'm Ale—" *Wait, what am I saying?* "Zilbagias. I'm a demon prince."

"Oh, my my. It seems we have quite a unique visitor today." Odigoth swayed from side to side, clearly quite intrigued. Even without a face, it still felt like I

could see an expression there. “Visitors to the Abyss may need guidance, and it’s my role to ensure they find their correct destination. As such, I will be showing you the correct path to take as well.” Immediately after explaining his purpose, he dropped to the ground, like a puppet whose strings had been severed.

Both the cane and the suit around it struck the ground with a thud. He was now pointing to the horizon, where a black sun was rising in the west.

“You should proceed in that direction.” Lifting himself off the ground, Odigoth started beating the dust and dirt off his suit.

So much for guidance. All he did was fall over!

“Really? That way?”

“There is no mistaking it,” Odigoth replied confidently. “I am the Devil of Guidance. My sole purpose is to show you the correct path.”

“What kind of devil is waiting for me?”

“That’s not within my authority. I can tell you which path to take, but not what you may encounter on said path.”

Really? *Really?* Well, if he was who he said he was, I might as well believe him. Not like I had any other options.

“Okay. I’ll be going, then. Thank you.” This was my only lead, so I walked off in the direction he had indicated.

“Walking without purpose only elongates the journey to your destination, sometimes even by centuries,” Odigoth called out from behind me. “What is your objective? Picture it clearly in your mind and hold on to it as you take each step. Farewell.”

Turning around, I saw that the tailcoated stick had vanished. It was like the area I’d started at was a distant memory.

“My objective, huh?” That was easy. “I will defeat the Demon King and destroy the demonic kingdom. I want the power to fulfill those goals.” A pact with a devil would grant me incredible power, just like the first Demon King.

I felt a sudden pulling on my body, like I was accelerating. Assuming, of

course, that something like speed even played a factor here in the Abyss. The surrounding scenery transformed at a bewildering pace; with a single step I traversed mountains and rivers. I passed through valleys, climbed waterfalls, crossed deserts, and soared over oceans. It was as if I was tracing back the history of the Abyss to its origins in the west, to where the black sun rose.

The next thing I knew, I was standing in a palace. Or was it a graveyard? It was hard to tell whether the enormous stone structures around me were towers or gravestones. Walking over white and black tiles through the empty palace, I navigated through thousands of corridors before reaching a dark, open chamber.

“Hm? A visitor?” A lisping voice called out from the darkness. The sweetness of the voice sent a chill down my spine, its venom turning my gut into a block of ice.

She sat on an obsidian throne in the center of the room. She had smooth, dark skin and silver hair that shone like stars in the night sky. Too young to be called a young woman, but too mature to be called a little girl. She sat cross-legged while looking down on me from her throne. Murky eyes probed my entire body, heavy and chaotic in their vibrant color.

So, this was the devil I was destined to meet, huh?



It was near impossible for me to gauge her magical energy, so her strength was a complete mystery to me. As I tried to get some idea about how strong she was, she narrowed her eyes with clear suspicion.

“Why is there a human here?”

For a moment, it felt like my heart had stopped. My journey in the Abyss thus far had felt almost like a dream, but those words turned my blood to ice in an instant. She could discern my true nature? Was this some kind of joke? Were all those years of effort just pointless?

“What are you talking about?” I tried to play dumb, but the obvious tremble in my voice did nothing to hide my uneasiness.

“What am I talking about? *What am I talking about?!*” Initially, she seemed shocked by the question, but it didn’t take long for her to burst into a fit of laughter. Quite violent laughter too, with the way she held her stomach and started tearing up. “Please. Only a fool couldn’t see something so obvious. Come, take a look at yourself.”

The devil traced an image of me in the air, and suddenly a person appeared. The figure that appeared...that was me.

It was a man, dangerously thin. Brown hair, tanned skin. Sunken, dark eyes that glittered with an unnatural light. Though it was a far cry from the refined physique of my previous life, I would have been a fool to deny it. That was the hero, Alexander. The one bizarre thing was the holes all over my body, like it had been eaten away by worms. Those holes were filled with a pale, translucent light...like they were patched up by the skin of a demon.

“What...?”

Physical forms were unstable in the Abyss. But above all, I was the hero, Alexander.

It is quite rare for people like you to come here.

Odigoth’s words suddenly leaped to the front of my mind.

“Who are you? Tell me your name.” The devil’s question yanked me back to reality. In a panic, I scanned the entire room. I was surrounded by walls on

every side. The corridor that I had entered from was gone. There was nowhere to run.

The devil chuckled. "What an adorable child you are. Did the thought of fleeing cross your mind?" I felt her breath on me as much as I heard her sickeningly sweet voice. I didn't know when or how she'd moved, but she was now standing right beside me.

What now? What could I do? How do I deal with this mysterious devil?

"The quiet type, are you?" She grinned with another chuckle.

"Hiding things from me is taboo."

A violent pressure assaulted me, forcing my tongue.

"I am...Alexander. A human hero." My mouth moved against my will. "Also...I am now a demon prince. I was killed by the Demon King...and then ended up like this."

Idiot! Stop!

I used my hands to force my mouth shut, but it was too little too late. My biggest secret was now revealed.

"Oh! A reincarnation, is it? To retain your original form so well is quite rare. I certainly have never seen it." Looking me up and down, the devil was circling around me, clearly intrigued. "You were killed by the Demon King, were you? I imagine you were devoured by Kanibal's curse, then."

Kanibal's heresy, **Soul Eater**.

"Seems he failed to properly digest you, though. Your will is remarkably strong. I suppose we cannot underestimate humans, can we? So? What brings you here?"

I kept my mouth shut.

"Obstruction is taboo."

"Gah...!" My desperate attempts to resist were futile as my hands moved

away of their own accord. “My horns grew in, so I was sent to the Abyss... I want power...to defeat the Demon King...!”

Dammit!

“How tragic. Yet, how heroic! Even after your soul has been worn down to this extent, you have not forgotten your hatred of demonkind. Incredible considering you likely forgot almost everything about your past life. Like a distant dream.”

“What are you...talking about? I remember...everything.”

“Oh? Let’s test that out, shall we? Where were you born? What was the name of your hometown?”

“It was—” I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. No matter how hard I tried to remember the name of my village, my mind drew a blank.

No, that’s ridiculous. Just absurd.

“Your parents’ names?”

Mom was mom. Dad was dad. Their names were...

“Your close friends?”

“Claire.” That one was easy. And her father, the baker, Sedrick.

“The name of your teacher?”

Which one? My teacher at the orphanage? My instructor from the church? The priest that was my commander?

“Professor...Miralda...”

I could only muster a single name.

An empty fear engulfed me. My memories weren’t completely gone; I could remember events quite clearly. But I was forgetting the names, like something was eating away at my past. It was like...

...like the figure of me hovering in the air.

“Do you get it now? Poor thing.” The devil chuckled again. “Seeing people like you get strung along by fate will never get old. So brave, yet so comical. You

may return to your silence, now.”

“Who are you?” The power compelling me to speak had vanished, but this was one thing I needed to know.

“Did I not say you could remain silent if you wished? No matter.” Returning to sit on her throne, she answered. “My name is Antendeixis, Devil God of Taboo.”

A devil god. The title of those who ruled over the Abyss. They were far more problematic, far more vicious than average devils!

“So, what exactly shall I do with you?” she drawled, licking her lips. “Due to Kanibal’s deal, I am supposed to offer demonkind whatever assistance I can.”

“A devil god is going to bow down to demons?” I taunted her.

“Bow down? What foolishness is that? Respecting agreements has nothing to do with bending the knee. The ones on their knees begging for power are the demons, are they not? We do have them to thank for the abundance of energy flowing into the Abyss, though. The wealth they have brought us means we have some responsibility to them,” she said, leaning on her elbow with a bored expression. Her eyes then began to shine with glee. “But to think there is a human, a hero burning with the desire for revenge no less, masquerading as a demon prince. My, what a serious affair. If I were to unmask you, there’s no telling the kind of entertainment that may bring.”

The one thing I feared most.

“Please, don’t.”

“You realize I rule over taboo, yes? Telling me not to do something will only fill me with the desire to do it all the more.”

“So if I told you to do it, that wouldn’t really matter, would it?”

“Of course not,” she replied. “Given that has the potential for the most entertainment possible, after all.”

So I was screwed no matter what I did. What the hell? Or...wait. Hold on.

“So, you just want entertainment?” This brief encounter had revealed one thing. She was *bored*, rotting away in this moldy old palace.

“Oh? And you have an idea?” Antendeixis replied, her eyes narrowing. “Surely you do not intend to request a pact? Such a pathetic attempt at self-preservation will get you nowhere.”

“And just who is the right kind of person to make a pact with you?”

“Is it not obvious? One who violates taboo, and any half-hearted attempts are useless.”

“In that case,” I said, looking her straight in the eye, “there’s no better candidate than me, right? I’m a hero who swore to protect humanity by fighting the denizens of darkness. Yet here I am, charading as a demon prince. How many innocent people do you think I’ll have to discard in order to keep up this facade? How many people will be trampled, cut down, and turned into stepping stones to ensure my path forward is clear? What’s more taboo than killing the very people I am sworn to protect?”

This had been on my mind for a while. The plan was still to destroy the demonic kingdom, but there was no avoiding the obstacles to reach that goal.

“At the same time, I’m a demon prince. An inheritor of the will of the Demon King, my very body offered as a sacrifice for the kingdom. Even so, I am plotting to destroy it. I will betray all of my loyal subjects, betray the father and mother of this body, and slaughter my own brothers and sisters. A traitorous prince who destroys his own kingdom is another extreme taboo, is it not?”

Whether it was Prati and her high expectations, the night elf and beastfolk servants, or even Sophia who spent every waking moment teaching me, I was going to betray them all. Each and every one of them would be sent to hell by my hand.

“As a hero, as a demon prince, as a human, as a demon. I’m drenched in taboo from head to toe.” I dumped all my feelings at her feet, as if I was spitting blood. “I shall ask once more, Devil God of Taboo. Is there anyone more appropriate to make a contract with you than me?”

Antendeixis sat up on her throne. “True,” she spoke after a long pause. “Your talents in that regard are noteworthy. I acknowledge that.” But as she crossed her legs again, she continued. “Even so, being qualified is insufficient. Insufficient to persuade or move the heart of a devil god such as myself.

Acknowledging you have the qualifications to make a contract with me is just that, acknowledgment. Is there anything else you can offer to make a contract worth my while?"

I needed something that could sweeten the deal for a devil god.

"And allow me to say in advance, I am not so shameful as Kanibal. In terms of power, you have nothing to offer me. You wouldn't even qualify as a light snack. Your soul is of no interest to me either. Such a wretched, tattered thing would be more trouble than it is worth. So go ahead, offer me something more fascinating if you can."

What could I offer to the Devil God of Taboo? Not power, nor my own soul. There was only one thing that came to mind.

"I'll offer you another taboo." Ignoring the dubious expression on her face, I continued. "I'll destroy the Dark Portal."

The devil god blinked. "What?"

"I don't know how. I don't know when. If I want to destroy their kingdom, cutting off their power source, the Dark Portal, is a pivotal step. So, help me." I firmly gripped her delicate shoulders. "Think about it. You are a devil god. One of the pillars supporting the Abyss. You could eradicate the agreement between the devils and the demons. You could strip the Abyss of its wealth, and in turn, reduce your own respect and status to dirt and mud. Just imagine it. Imagine the despair of the devils trapped in our world, unable to return home. Imagine their anguish." I kept going, each word like a drop of poison pouring directly into her. "My offer is the chance at the ultimate taboo."

And her glittering eyes—

"Don't be stupid." She slapped my hands away. "That's complete nonsense. You expect my assistance in destroying the Dark Portal? Do you have any idea what a boon it has been to us? How much it has invigorated the Abyss? You want me to break the pact between demons and devils? You want my hand to bring about that much suffering on the cute little devils under me? My reputation would be tarnished..."

She began to fidget.

“That would be...incredible...” She brought her hands up to her flushed face, giving a deep sigh.

“Does that mean you accept?” I asked, seeing her breathing turn ragged.

“Hmm... Very well. In deference to your wit and resolve, I will make this pact with you.” Antendeixis regained her composure. “In that case, I suppose I will keep your identity a secret from your cohorts. Having you killed before you can fulfill the terms of our pact would be no fun at all.”

Had I somehow overcome this obstacle? Luckily for me, she was the type to get all hot and bothered at the thought of violating a taboo. *Wait, so I'm really making a pact with this weirdo?*

“What is that face for?” she asked. “You are swearing a pact with one of the most ancient of devil gods. You should be cowering with gratitude!” My duplicate was making a rather grim expression. Antendeixis slapped the arms of her throne, clearly displeased with my response.

“I was just thinking. A hero making a contract with not just a devil, but a devil god.”

She chuckled. “What a fall from virtue this must be for you. I am sure our pact will provide you with a suitable amount of power as compensation for such a sacrifice.”

“So, what exactly is your authority, then? Is it just ‘breaking taboos makes you stronger’?”

“It’s not that simple, but you have the right idea.” Spinning to lie down sideways on her chair, Antende—okay, that name was way too long. I think I’ll just refer to her as Ante. So, Ante continued.

“I am the devil god who rules over taboo. Where there is taboo, there is my power. Whether in the Abyss or in the material realm, violating taboo bolsters my strength. The same goes for those who swear a pact with me. The more you violate taboo, the greater your own power will grow. With more familiarity with this power will come the ability to create taboos of your own.”

“Create taboos?”

"Blinking is taboo," she suddenly intoned.

"I...can't close my eyes?"

"Precisely. That is the same power I used to make you speak earlier."

So a magic to restrict or force people to do things against their will? That sounded pretty impressive. My opponent may be able to resist its effects if their magical energy was strong enough, but the threat of it would always be in the back of their minds. Being able to throw out a powerful curse like that with no complex incantation or ritual had many advantages.

But, while I was thinking about the applications of this power, I still wasn't allowed to blink.

"My eyes! They're so dry! Stop it!"

"What, really? You're already at your limit? What a pity," Ante drawled playfully. "And the more you tell me to do something, the less I want to do it. Quite the dilemma."

"Come on! My eyes are dying here!" Don't put curses on people you're (probably) signing a pact with!

As I got more and more angry, Ante continued to watch me with unveiled amusement...until her own eyes started to water. "Gah, my eyes feel terrible too! I forgot to mention, the same effect is applied to the creator of the taboo."

"What's the point, then?!" I cried as the curse was finally lifted. I had thought of all sorts of powerful applications like "breathing is taboo," but none of that mattered if it would just backfire on me!

"Is it not obvious? I am the Devil God of Taboo. I am bound by these strictures more tightly than any." Her face melted into a wicked smile. "That was why your suggestion was so...attractive."

"Are you saying you can't violate taboos yourself?"

"Not anymore. I have become too powerful. Even just moving my own body can be a tall task," Ante muttered, draping herself over her throne in exhaustion. "Devils and devil gods all rule over some concept, no matter how large or small. As our power grows, so does the level and purity of our very

being. We transform from a being wielding a given power to a being of pure power itself.”

Do you understand? her eyes asked me, their brilliant color now seeming empty in their limitless power.

“This world is probably not much different. The ground, the air, everything at one point was likely a myriad of powerful beings. That is my hypothesis, at least. But they grew too strong, fused with their power as it became too pure, and no longer possessed a will of their own. In the end, they have been reduced to corpses for us parasites to feed on.”

“The scale of this conversation is getting pretty big...but come on, you can spin it to be at least a bit more positive. Like calling yourselves children of the land they became instead of parasites.”

My honest rebuke seemed to catch Ante off guard. “Ha, I suppose. At any rate, we should get back to the matter at hand. Let’s forge the pact.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Guess I shouldn’t waste any more time.” Talking to her had become more natural, but she was still a devil god. She could have some sudden whim and this pact could go south in a hurry. The quicker I could get her power and leave this awful place, the better.

“So, what form shall our pact take? Naturally, I shall be the superior.”

Devil pacts took two forms: “true pacts,” in which the contractor offered the devil something, and the devil granted them magic in exchange; and “subordinate pacts,” where the contractor supplied the devil with magical energy, and the devil obeyed them in return.

Sophia and the devil maids around the castle were examples of the latter. Using magical energy Prati provided for them, they were able to sustain physical bodies in the material world, and in exchange took on menial labor like teaching and cleaning. In between fulfilling their responsibilities, they carried out actions that aligned with their authorities, allowing them to slowly gain power. For example, Sophia would spend her spare time engrossed in literature, while other fun-loving devils would be constantly playing pranks on others.

“I’ll give you a taboo, and in exchange, you’ll give me power,” I declared. “Is there anything else that needs to be addressed?”

“The issue is the scope. How much of your soul shall my power fill?”

That was a good point. One couldn’t make unlimited deals with devils. Both forms of contract involved filling oneself with the devil’s power. Everyone’s limits were different, so you couldn’t just go around making ten thousand contracts with imps.

“As much as possible. The more you give me, the stronger I’ll become, right?”

“I suppose that makes sense if you wish to take down the Demon King. Well, I intended to fill you to the brim just before bursting anyway, but it never hurts to make sure.”

“Would be best if you didn’t say something so eerie...” Her filling me with power until I literally burst wasn’t even a joke. Considering her strength, that would be child’s play.

“Hold out your hand, contractor.” Ante extended her hand. I did the same, placing my hand on hers.

“In the name of the Devil God Antendeixis, I shall grant the hero Alexander power.”

“In the name of the hero Alexander, I shall offer up taboo to the Devil God Antendeixis.”

Our gazes met.

“The pact is sealed.”

Power flowed through her hand into mine. That sensation made me immediately regret my decision. Something twisted, rotten and corrupt invaded my soul, entirely separate from ideas of good and evil, light and dark—a disgusting torrent flowing from somewhere beyond the laws of nature.

“Too late, I’m afraid.” Ante gave a sadistic laugh as she saw my contorted expression.

There was no way I could answer her with my composure nonexistent. It took all I had to bear the sensation, like countless poisonous insects swarming into

me and remaking me from the inside.

“Ah, your soul is so *empty*. It can take so much power. It accepts me like a desert thirsting for rain.”

Rain? Don't make it sound so pleasant! It was more like a flood, one in which I was drowning!

“Rejoice. No one has ever been gifted with such power from a devil god before.”

As she drew her hand back, I dropped to my knees, gasping for air. Looking up at the mirror of myself...I had changed. No, that word didn't do it justice. I had *transformed*. My sickly thin limbs now sported robust muscles. However, my skin had taken on a dark tint akin to Ante's smooth skin. My brown eyes were now swirling with vibrant, chaotic color. I even had horns. Strangely, they looked exactly like a demon's horns.

“It seems it is impossible to tell whether you are human, demon, or devil now,” Ante laughed. “Once you return to the material realm, never enter the Abyss again. Becoming more accustomed to this place will just make it impossible to go back.”

So this was my first and last visit. Frankly, that was a relief.

“I won't look any different when I go back, will I?” I asked.

“Maybe minor changes in your appearance, but nothing unprecedented for a pact with a devil.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Speaking of which, would it be a bad idea to tell people I made a pact with a devil god?” Prati would no doubt be elated, but things could take a turn for the worse if I was asked what kind of pact I'd sworn with the Devil God of Taboo. I couldn't just say, “I promised to wipe out demonkind!” I had no idea what kind of cover I could use.

“Potentially so. But luckily, you bear two names. As long as you refrain from using the name ‘Alexander’ when wielding my authority, the power expressed should be suppressed. In short, you should have no problem masquerading

your contract as one with some average devil.”

“That’s good to hear.” It hadn’t really occurred to me until just now that I’d used the name Alexander when making my contract with her. *I guess I’m Zilbagias now, in more ways than one...*

“So instead of the Devil God of Taboo, Antendeixis, I’ll tell people I made a pact with the Devil of Constraint, Ante.”

“‘The Devil of Constraint, Ante’? What a pitiful name...” Ante looked hurt, but it didn’t take long until she had wrapped her arms around herself and started shaking. “A devil god like me? Treated like some lowly imp? What blasphemy is this...!”

Okay, so she was definitely a perverse weirdo. On top of that, I felt myself grow quite a bit stronger when I called her that. I guess talking down to a devil god like that was violating a considerably heavy taboo.

“Well, um. This has been great and all, but I should get going back home.” Looking away from Ante as she was panting on her throne, I turned to leave.

“Yes,” she finally managed to reply. “I suppose you are right. It is a shame.” Coming back to her senses, she stood up. “It is time to say goodbye to this palace for a while.”

“Um...what?”

“Ah, it has been so long. I haven’t seen the outside world in thousands of years. I must say, I am quite looking forward to it.”

“E-Er, Miss Ante? Why are you talking like you’re tagging along?”

The Devil God Kanibal had stayed behind in the Abyss after he gave his power to the first Demon King. There was no way beings on that level could casually walk around in the material world. Uh...right?

“What are you saying? Of course I will be returning with you.”

My expression turned grave.

“Fear not. I say that, but only a tiny fraction of myself will go through the portal with you. Besides, the level of our contract has exceeded my expectations. The power you are supplying me with is more than enough to

maintain a physical body.”

“Really...?”

“In addition, I have created a space inside of you to house myself, should the need to economize present itself. Look.”

Ante suddenly jumped forward and wrapped her arms around me. Or, so I thought, but instead she turned transparent and passed right through me. Wait, no, she passed right *into* me!

“*There, this is good,*” her voice echoed out from my chest.

“There’s nothing good about this at all!” I shouted back.

What was this devil god doing?! I know I said it felt like I was being remade from the inside, but that was supposed to be a metaphor! I didn’t want it to actually happen! Was this perverse creature going to be hanging around me all the time now?!

“Stop it! Get out!”

I literally beat my own chest, but all that accomplished was inflicting pain onto myself. The only answer I got from her was the reverberation of her laughter coming from within me.

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Ante was holed up inside of me for quite a while before she eventually came out. Apparently, the temporary living situation was fairly comfortable. At least she felt that way. I didn’t like it at all. The weird, icky sensation of having someone hang out inside of you is hard to put into words.

“Your concerns will be short-lived. In due time you will grow accustomed to this arrangement.”

“I don’t *want* to grow accustomed to it!”

It was like having a burp rising in your throat, but refusing to actually come out. She seemed pretty offended when I worded it like that, but she deserved it. As a bonus, violating the taboo of mocking a devil god caused my powers to increase slightly. Unfortunately, her reprisal was to forbid me from breathing for a period of time, nearly killing me. When she was inside me, her taboos

didn't affect her—which was super unfair, if you asked me.

Leaving her palace behind, we traveled over black sand and under a red sky. The journey here had taken mere moments, but getting back home felt like an eternity.

“Feels kind of far, huh?”

“This is perfectly normal. Was your trip to the palace not quite the trek?”

“I got to the palace in a flash. Maybe that devil of guidance had something to do with it.”

“Ah, so you crossed paths with that weirdo Odigoth?”

“You know him? Wait, he's a weirdo?” Kind of surprising since I figured an ancient being like Ante would be above knowing the name of some run-of-the-mill devil.

“His status is inferior to us devil gods, but he is old and powerful in his own right,” she explained.

Guess Odigoth wasn't some ordinary devil, then.

“If he's old by your standards, he must have been around for quite some time.”

“His existence dates back to the inception of the Abyss.”

So he was just as old as the Abyss?

“His existence is a rarity among the neutral devils,” Ante continued. “He lives not by swearing fealty to any of the greater powers, but only by offering guidance to those who wander the Abyss. However, there are vanishingly few people here who would benefit from his guidance. If his will and the power were great enough he could go wherever and do as he pleases.”

“So even since the beginning of the Abyss, his chances to gain power have been limited?” I asked.

“Or perhaps greeting visitors from beyond the Abyss is particularly advantageous for him,” Ante suggested.

“Then he probably should just make a contract with someone and leave.

There are plenty of lost people in the material world.”

“Apparently it was his own power that guided him to the mouth of the Dark Portal,” she explained. “Perhaps guiding newcomers to the Abyss is the best place for him, or maybe he has simply yet to meet a suitable contractor. It seems even he has yet to discover that answer,” Ante shrugged. “And yet, he is such a high-level devil. The cost to maintain a pact with him would be tremendous. I would be surprised if anyone was willing to accept that price.”

“Then why doesn’t he form a contract with someone where he is the superior?” I asked.

“That would mean the contractor would only be able to provide guidance for those lost in the material realm. Would you expect any demon to take up that mantle?”

“Of course not.” That was an easy answer. *Kind of feel bad for Odigoth.* “By the way, what was that ‘neutral devil’ thing you mentioned earlier?” I asked as we crossed over a deep black river. Instead of water there was something thick and muddy flowing down the river. Even though it flowed and had waves like water, we had no issue walking across it.

“Devils are divided into three categories: those who rule virtue, those who rule corruption, and those who are more neutral.”

“Wait, there are virtue devils?”

“They are nearly extinct, but a few of them are still around. Typically, they rule over things like loyalty, sincerity, and courage. Devils of the former two are rather powerful since they have woven quite a number of contracts. If you go out looking for them, you should stumble upon one of them occasionally.”

I really wasn’t a fan of a world where powerful devils were just hanging out all over the place...

“Wouldn’t you consider guiding people who are lost to be more along the lines of a virtue?”

“Alignments of good or evil are irrelevant. Odigoth’s services do not discriminate.”

“So that’s how it works. By the way, which one are you?”

“Ha. Do I look like a devil god of virtue?”

“I was just curious,” I muttered to myself.

The barren landscape seemed to stretch on forever. We had yet to cross paths with other devils on our journey thus far. Maybe it was because of Ante’s presence, but it was also possibly because I had zero interest in seeing any more devils.

“Now that I think about it, Odigoth saw what I originally looked like too. Is that going to cause issues?” It was also possible other devils had seen me during my travels unbeknownst to me. Wouldn’t news of a mysterious human traveling the Abyss cause quite a stir?

“You fear he saw your true form? I do not believe there is cause for worry,” Ante replied, crossing her arms behind her head as she walked. “First, Odigoth doesn’t have loose lips when it comes to secrets. Second, the flow of time in the Abyss is quite different than in the material realm, and there is no reason for anyone to assume you are a prince. Though perhaps not through the Dark Portal, there have been cases of humans wandering into the Abyss. It is quite rare, but not unheard of. For example, when they fail at summoning magic.”

Guess it was something I didn’t need to worry about.

Ante suddenly gave a wicked smile. “I am quite looking forward to this.”

“To what?”

“To witnessing you wear the mask of a demon prince once again. I can only imagine what that must be like.”

“Please don’t do anything stupid.”

“Fear not. Unmasking you would render you incapable of fulfilling your end of our pact,” she said, prismatic eyes glittering. “Until the moment our contract is complete, you can rest easy with the knowledge that I am your unwavering ally.”

I suppose that puts destroying the Dark Portal at the end of my to-do list.

After walking for what felt like an eternity, the Dark Portal finally crept into my line of sight. With how black everything else in the Abyss was, I was worried that black disk would be easy to miss, but there was no missing the portal's overwhelming presence.

"Farewell, Abyss! We shall be parting ways for a while! Ha ha!" Ante crowed, taking a hold of my hand. She really did seem sick of this place.

In reality, I was heading back home with not just a devil, but a devil god in tow. Life sure knows how to keep you on your toes.

"Let's go."

We both stepped into the Dark Portal.

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The smell of the wind. Sound. The concept of *weight*. Looking up, I saw a bright sun hanging in a blue sky. Ah, that's right. I'd almost forgotten what light was supposed to look like.

The sensation I felt was the familiar feeling of a solid, physical body. It kinda felt *too* solid. Maybe I should've been accustomed to it by now, but the sensation made me feel less than pleasant.

"It has been so long, I forgot how it felt to exist here." Looking to my side, I saw Ante stretching.

Now that we were back in the material world, I could perceive magic more clearly. Even though I could recognize there was a swirl of magical energy in her, it was hard to get a good read on it. When I looked at an imp, or at someone like Sophia, I could grasp their nature with relative ease. They looked like a tiny whirlwind, or a tornado. But with Ante, it was much harder to tell. She was much more stable, more like a demon than a devil. With her modest pair of horns she could probably pass for a demon.

But if you paid close attention, if you really looked at her, you could tell. Her magical energy was too dense, too compact. Rather than wind, it was almost like steel. And the next realization sent a shiver down my spine: this form was

nothing more than a mimicry of an archdevil. Her true form must have been even more intense.

“You’ve really hidden yourself well.” Hiding so much of her raw power was quite the feat.

“This is nothing more than the tips of my toes,” she replied with a grin. Given the weird sensation I currently felt, I could only imagine how it felt to have only a tiny fraction of yourself in this world.

“I guess the first order of business is to introduce you to my mother.”

“Your mother? Ah, I can hardly wait...”

Ante began to chuckle ominously. Please, I’m begging you, keep your perverse quirks in check and don’t say anything stupid.

I surveyed the area once again. This was the city of demons and devils, Cosmologie. It was a place for devils to stay after leaving the Abyss, and for demons to stay while waiting for relatives who went to the other side. As such, there were plenty of facilities to entertain the residents during their stay, like shops and cafés (or at least what looked like them) surrounding the portal. I suspected Prati was waiting at one of them.

“Ah, there she is.” I saw a demon woman, clad in riding clothes (savage-like clothes, might I add) seated in a shaded terrace. She was lying flat on a table. Had she gotten tired after waiting for so long? Lazing around like this was so unlike her. Normally she was high-strung and vigilant about everything.

The real world still feels quite uncomfortable, I thought while rolling my shoulders. It was painful, like something was tightly binding my entire body.

“Mother, I have returned.”

My voice caused Prati to slightly twitch before slowly lifting herself off the table. What shocked me the most was her face. Her once frigid beauty was now marred by a sickly thin complexion and thick, dark circles under her eyes.

“Who are you...?” Her reply sent a second shock through me. Her voice and expression were both so hollow.

“Uh, mother? It’s me, Zilbagias.” Was she an amnesiac now or something?! If

that was the case, what would happen to me once I returned to the castle?!

“Huh...?” For a while she stared at me in a stupor, but gradually light returned to her eyes. Dozens of emotions flashed across her face. From confusion, to shock, to doubt, to outright suspicion. After a long pause, she finally spoke again. “What is the name of your tutor?”

“Uh, Sophia?”

“Who was the first person you ever fought?”

“I guess that was also Sophia.”

“Why did you fight?”

“Because I didn’t want to study.”

Prati leaped from her seat, causing a chair to clatter to the floor. She then approached me on shaky legs. Wait, wasn’t she kind of...short? The angle from which she was looking at me seemed kind of off.

“Is it...is it really you? It’s really you, Zilbagias?” Prati squeezed out, grabbing onto my shoulders.

“Uh...yes?” Bewildered by her strange reaction, I found myself looking away and finding a reflection of myself in the window of the café. What I found in that polished glass filled me with a torrent of fear, like I was seeing my image in the polished steel of a drawn blade.

A young man stared back at me, a demon with a sharp, daring air about him. By human standards, he looked to be fifteen or sixteen years old. His clothes were ragged, like they were moments from falling apart.

“Why am I so tall?!” I cried out in surprise.

“It’s you?! It’s really you! Zilbagias, it’s really you, right?! Thank goodness! Zilbagias...!” Prati clung to me with a cry of her own. Nearby demons and devils watched us with open curiosity.

“It appears there has been quite the dramatic influence on you after all, Zilbagias,” Ante said, her grin wider than ever.

If I had to guess...had it been that long since I entered the Dark Portal? *Years?*

Would that explain my body growing this much? That couldn't be the case, though; Prati was wearing the same clothes as she had been when I first entered the portal.

“Zilbagias! Thank goodness! Zilbagias!”

Above all, I needed to figure out how I was going to handle Prati. I wrapped my arms around my mother as she wailed, totally at a loss.

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After a few minutes, Prati managed to calm herself down the best she could. According to her, I had spent half a year in the Abyss. Considering I'd thought I was there for years, that news was a relief to me, but my situation was apparently an anomaly. Normally, trips to the Abyss lasted a few hours, or at most a few days. My extended trip meant they had lost all hope for my survival.

Though most devils looked fondly on demons, there were some who wouldn't hesitate to attack and devour a visitor on sight. Seems there were many cases of demons entering the Dark Portal never to be heard from again—a fact Prati had kept hidden so that I wouldn't get frightened before entering the Dark Portal.

“Even I had started to give up hope...”

Her confidence had been intact for the first few days, but after five days that confidence started to decay. Apparently, the mothers of the Demon King's other children stopped by to antagonize her while she waited.

“Your son hasn't come back yet?” they'd laugh.

“I sure hope he's okay,” with a veiled smile.

“The youngest to ever enter the Dark Portal,” they'd say while snickering, “and to ever go missing there,” with riotous laughter.

Starting with Lazriel, they took turns all the way down to Puxukus, gradually eating at Prati's mental state like pesky parasites. She lost her appetite, and found herself unable to sleep. With no place in the castle, she spent every day for half a year in Cosmologie praying for my return. That completely explained why she was in such rough shape. Reinvigorated by my return, with bloodshot

eyes Prati swore, “I’ll make those bitches regret ridiculing me.”

“Since you have returned, that means you managed to make a pact, then?” she said.

We were in a room in one of the inns. Sitting on a sofa, Prati shifted her attention to Ante, who’d had a grin plastered on her face since the moment we stepped foot in the material realm. Judging by her frown, it seemed Prati wasn’t too fond of her arrogant demeanor. They sized each other up using nothing but their fierce gazes. I couldn’t help but think that this must be what it felt like to bring a bad girl home to meet your mom.

By the way, I had acquired a change of clothes and was now clad in a savage-like fur vest. It had been early spring when I stepped into the Dark Portal, but it was now well into autumn.

But really, going from the size of a human ten year old to a human fifteen year old so quickly is quite the drastic change. Ante had quietly explained that my tremendous growth was a result of our pact. So when I returned to the material realm and my physical body was reconstructed, it was rebuilt to better reflect my new nature. Physical changes upon returning from the Abyss weren’t rare even for regular demons. What I went through was just an extreme version of that—or, so Prati had decided.

“This is, uh...Ante, she’s a devil of constraint. We’ve formed a true pact.” Without intervention on my part, it seemed Prati and Ante would be satisfied staring at each other until the world ended, so I reluctantly decided to try and break the ice. Prati turned to look at me.

“I assumed as much. Maybe the lengthy time in the Abyss also changed you in some way. Your magic has grown to be so much more powerful to the point it is nearly unrecognizable. Does that mean she is an archdevil of some sort? She seems rather...unique.”

Meanwhile, Ante was shuddering in her seat, muttering something about “the humiliation of being treated like some lowly imp” again. Saying she was “unique” was probably the nicest way of putting it. On the bright side, it seemed Prati wasn’t able to see through Ante’s disguise.

“She is without a doubt a powerful devil,” I said. Never mind being an

archdevil, she was literally a devil god.

“What is her authority?”

“The terms of our contract state I’m limited in what I can reveal about the contract itself or her powers,” I answered evasively, “but you can think of it along the lines of putting a constraint on myself and my opponent. Besides that, I get stronger from putting constraints on others or breaking them myself.”

“Hmm...so some sort of curse magic. Even though it wasn’t without its troubles, your first visit to the Abyss seems to have been a resounding success if you managed to make a pact with an archdevil. I expected nothing less of you, Zilbagias. Even so, would it have killed you to come home a little sooner?”

A despondent look played over her face. She must have understood how pathetic she’d looked, waiting for my return for so long. Reminiscing about the suffering she had endured at the hands of the other mothers had only soured her mood even more. But thinking about it rationally, no matter how upset she was now, she knew better than to randomly throw a tantrum.

“I had to go pretty far...”

“Did the devil of guidance not assist you?”

“He assisted me, yes. But even with his help, it still took quite a while, as you can see.” Considering how quick the trip to the palace had felt, I never would’ve guessed I was there for half a year. “Regardless, I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Prati paused for a moment. “It’s fine. You came back safe and sound. That’s all that matters and that’s enough for me.” With a short sigh, she seemed to switch modes. “But next time you go to the Abyss, please try to keep your stay brief.”

Hold on a second, after all that worrying she did she is still planning to send me back? Thank goodness I have the perfect excuse!

“Well, about that...I can’t go to the Abyss anymore.”

“What?”

“As a result of my contract my soul was filled to the brim, so if I go back I won’t be able to return.”

Prati's look of shock turned into a vicious glare directed at Ante. "Devil! What have you done?!" The table was probably the only thing stopping her from grabbing Ante by the throat.

"What's with all your nagging?" Ante replied with a frown, sticking a finger in her ear. Okay, she was definitely toying with us. The look in her eyes was a dead giveaway.

"You filled his soul with your contract?!"

"Naturally. I poured my authority into him until just before he burst."

"Just before he burst..." Prati echoed in disbelief. "How could you? How is he supposed to form contracts with other devils now?!"

"Is there a problem with that?" Ante played dumb, crossing her legs and sinking back into the sofa.

"Of course there is! Without more contracts he will struggle to acquire subordinates, and he will be limited to a single authority!"

"That is how it should be," Ante snorted. "It is insolent of you mortals to lust after multiple authorities. That kind of greed is detrimental to the contractor as well. Forging multiple pacts dilutes the strength of them all, thus having the opposite intended effect. No one who claims multiple authorities can accomplish anything great. In a quest for more strength, all it shows is weak character."

There it is! She said "weak," the ultimate trigger word for a demon!

"The only ones allowed to talk like that," Prati all but growled, "are those who have real strength and the accomplishments to back it up."

"Then test me, if you dare," Ante replied, somehow managing to look down at Prati while leaning back on the sofa as if she was on her throne.

Without hesitation, Prati drew a metal rod from her belt. It looked like the hilt of a sword draped in ivy, but as she poured magical energy into it, it snapped open into a full-length spear. Was that a magic weapon?! Without a hint of hesitation, she lunged at Ante.

"Spearmanship is forbidden."

But with those three words, Prati snapped to a halt, the tip of her glowing spear stopping a hair short of Ante's eyes. Prati grunted, attempting to resist Ante's curse with sheer magical power.

"Resistance is forbidden." But the next curse discarded Prati's attempt to weave a protective shell around herself. Strength drained from Prati's limbs, her spear dropping to the ground as she fell motionless. Meanwhile, Ante lounged on the sofa without needing to lift a finger.

"So? Is that the extent of your strength?" she taunted Prati again.

Glaring up at her, Prati dug deep to muster as much magical strength as she could. With a snap like a leather strap breaking, Ante's curse was broken.

"Oh my." Ante gave an impressed hum, before shooting me a meaningful look.

She'd said, "spearmanship is forbidden," not "spearmanship is taboo." So this is what she had meant by saying there shouldn't be an issue pretending to be a regular devil.

"Okay, I admit it. You are strong," Prati spoke quietly, returning her spear to its more portable form.

"Obviously," Ante replied flippantly. "Consider yourself in good hands." Her smile dripped with malice.

"I will mold your child into the perfect Demon King."

Prati gulped, repelled by Ante's mysterious intensity. After speaking, Ante slowly got to her feet and stretched.

"As to be expected, this world is quite taxing on me. I will need to enter a slumber for some time." She then stepped forward as if she was attempting to hug me. But just like last time, she slipped right inside of me instead. Prati watched with unveiled confusion.

"Uh, she said in order to conserve magical energy, she made room inside of me so she had a place to rest."

“I’m familiar with the idea of devils placing a part of themselves in their contractors after a true pact, but to put their entire body inside is something I’ve never witnessed with my own eyes...”

Ah, so devils putting themselves in people wasn’t all that rare.

“At any rate...Zilbagias.”

“Yes, mother?”

“You returned with quite the peculiar devil.”

“It wasn’t without its challenges.” When I first met Ante, I had thought all my hardwork would be for naught. The fact I was able to continue the facade of being a demon prince was nothing short of a miracle.

“Good. I wouldn’t have it any other way. We should return to the castle immediately.” Prati returned to her feet, slapping her cheeks to regain focus.

“Already? Maybe it would be best to rest for a bit...” Though my return had reinvigorated her, Prati was clearly still fatigued. A carriage would be one thing, but riding a dragon? Falling off meant death. It was too risky.

“Officially speaking, you have been written off as deceased. If we don’t amend the record as soon as possible, the road ahead will only get more difficult.”

“Ah...”

And so, with barely any rest at all, we departed from Cosmologie on dragonback. Unlike on our trip there, the autumn sky was quite cold. As I started to snuffle at the frigid wind, Prati suddenly recreated her barrier, as if doing so had briefly slipped her mind. After lifting off and getting to a stable altitude, Prati started to waver in the saddle.

“This really was pushing it, huh?” I muttered. Oh well, there weren’t any other options. “I’ll hold you up, so please rest.” Taking the handle from her, I wrapped my arms around Prati to keep her upright.

“Really? Okay...thank you...” she murmured, surrendering herself to my arms. She tried to fend off her drowsiness, but it was only a matter of time before she succumbed and drifted off. She had guts, sleeping while riding a dragon like

this...

“What a loyal son you are,” Ante’s teasing echoed from my chest.

Shut up. If she died now it would just cause more trouble for me. Besides, what was that she’d said earlier? She was going to mold me into the perfect Demon King? What was that about? I had made my intentions for more power clear, but I’d never said anything about becoming Demon King.

“It’s quite simple.” Ante gave another sadistic laugh. *“You wish for power to defeat the Demon King, kill your brothers and sisters, and even betray your own mother. If you satisfy your revenge against the demons, you will become the Demon King whether you like it or not. Hence, my promise to her.”*

I had never thought of it like that. That was my wish, in the end. That bloody fate was the thing I desired the most.

“I am truly looking forward to this. That day cannot come soon enough.” Ante then grew quiet.

I stared out at the horizon, feeling Prati’s warmth in my arms, while keeping an eye out for the Demon King’s castle.

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The library in the Demon King’s castle. Said castle when viewed in a positive light could be seen as one built with strength and sincerity in mind. In a more blunt or negative light, it could be viewed simply as one of the most cultured locations in the world. That said, most of the collection was written by humans and elves. There were only a small handful of books written by demons. There also was no concept of a librarian here. As a result, any books or scrolls discovered from conquered lands were haphazardly thrown in here, packed onto shelves without rhyme or reason.

Among all that chaos sat a small girl, reading books with a voracious passion. Her name was Sophia, and she was a devil that ruled over knowledge. Gaining knowledge also gave her strength. Reading was like eating for her. However, that hunger for knowledge was an appetite that could never be satisfied.

So glad I have so much free time nowadays!

Closing the now finished book in her hands, she returned the tome to its original location. Then she began scavenging for something new, licking her lips as her eyes scanned each book. She had made a contract with one of the Demon King's wives, a woman named Pratifya, and her duties ranged from doing menial paperwork to educating the prince.

No, it was more accurate to say she *used to* do those things, up until half a year ago. Up until that dumb bra—that mischievous prince went missing on his trip to the Abyss. As Pratifya waited bravely in Cosmologie for her son to return, Sophia was left alone with no work to do in the castle. As such, her days once filled with menial work were now spent reading. It wasn't like she had come to the material realm with a burning desire to work nonstop. The only true desire she had was for knowledge, information that was fresh and born from beings of great intelligence.

Lord Zilbagias's education was one thing, but all the paperwork I had to do was just a waste of time. Considering my capabilities, why does someone like me have to cover for all the mistakes of those damn hobgoblins?! she snorted indignantly, all while partaking in yet another book.

Most of the administration of the castle was handled by hobgoblins and night elves. Devils were starting to get more involved in administrative work, but the important posts were all taken by the former two.

The hobgoblins, a race that bent the knee to the first Demon King shortly before his conquest of the goblins and ogres, were relatively intelligent. Despite having “goblin” in their name, they shared little to no relation with goblins. The difference between them was akin to the difference between humans and apes. They were ugly, smart, and above all incredibly fussy when it came to accounting.

Of course, all of that praise had to come with the caveat of “for a goblin.” Even if their calculations were spot on, they had a tendency to make minor errors such as getting the starting values wrong or copying things incorrectly. And all those minor errors added up.

For better or for worse, the demonic kingdom was tolerant of their follies, but for a knowledge devil like Sophia, it was hell. Seeing the dizzying amount of

mistakes in their accounting papers, she'd storm into their offices and demand they redo them from scratch. Actually, the reason her secretarial duties took up so much time was because of how much of that time she wasted dealing with those errors. When there was a hobgoblin mistake, it was expected that Sophia would come storming into their offices. Even though she was unaware of it, they feared her as a quite literal devil of a boss.

It's so quiet...

The library was virtually devoid of people. There were a few demons that would visit occasionally, but to put it mildly, they were demons lacking all sense of ambition and magical prowess, effectively being the dropouts of demonic society. The library was a place for those who couldn't wield a spear to waste their time. That was how most demons viewed it. Despite having a major cultural resource at their disposal, there wasn't much hope for demons to develop culturally. They were just too primitive.

It would be nice if there were some more culturally progressive demons around.

The thought brought back memories of the prince she was responsible for teaching, Zilbagias. For a demon, he'd had a rare knack for literature and art. Despite his initial rejection to the idea of studying, once he was forced to partake in his studies, he had absorbed knowledge like dry earth taking rain. In addition to being young and pliable, he must've been talented in his own right.

I wonder if some evil devil ate him.

Thanks to the pact of cooperation signed by the Devil God Kanibal, devils typically treated demons quite well, but every rule has its exceptions. Kanibal's agreement with the demons wasn't a contract, so while most respected it, it had no compulsive power over the devils. For that matter, trying to dictate the actions of all devils everywhere was an impossible task from the start. While some devils possessed the power to make others fall in line, there were just as many with the power to bring chaos to disrupt that organization.

Not even the greatest of the devil gods was omnipotent. As much as they styled themselves as rulers, they were anything but. For starters, most devil

gods never took a single step outside their own territory. In short, the Abyss was a brutal place. Even for Zilbagias, that mischievous, cultured demon.

I guess he couldn't survive in a place where his title had no meaning...

It was a shame. Those feelings were a surprise to Sophia herself. Initially, she had thought babysitting some demon kid would just be a headache.

Well, if it was too much for him, there's no use complaining now. I can only hope his final moments weren't too painful, Sophia thought dismissively. But as she reached for the next book...

“Lady Sophia! Lady Sophia!” A shrill voice echoed through the library. With a scowl she looked up to see one of Pratifya’s beastfolk maids bursting into the room in a panic.

“Please, lower your voice. This is a library.”

“My apologies! But this is urgent!” The maid from the white tiger tribe—evident by her fluffy, twitching pair of ears—announced. “My lady and Lord Zilbagias have returned!”

“What?!” Sophia shouted back, her shock causing her to forget her previous request.

A storm of thoughts ran through her mind all at once—he was actually okay? What was she going to do about his curriculum? What kind of devil did he make a pact with?

And at the same time, she realized her extensive vacation had finally come to an end.

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After leaving Cosmologie, we made it back to the castle in about thirty minutes without a hitch.

“I shall report your return to His Majesty the King,” Prati declared after returning to our living quarters and changing into a dress, quickly departing. Her short nap had done wonders and totally revitalized her. It was kinda weird. Watching her head off felt like I was watching a soldier heading off to battle, or a member of the mafia heading off to start a turf war.

On that note, what are your plans now that we are back at the castle, Ante?

“What do you mean?”

You are a devil god, right? Wouldn't it be risky walking around where there will be a lot of eyes on you? Someone might recognize you. You got lucky that no one recognized you in Cosmologie, but...

“Your worries are unwarranted.” Ante gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Didn't I explain this to you already? The greatness of my power comes at the cost of limiting my ability to move of my own volition. I've been stuck in my palace for ages upon ages, and I can count on one hand those foolish enough to wander into a devil god's dwelling.”

So...

“The only ones who would recognize me are other devil gods or ancient beings like Odigoth. I'm doubtful anyone of that ilk is in the castle. If they were, chatter of their departure to the material realm would've found its way to me.”

Hmm, okay. If you say so, I guess everything should be fine. I guess it's like being so high in rank that the new employees wouldn't even recognize you.

“Lord Zilbagias! I heard you returned!” The door to my room slammed open, revealing a young, monocled devil.

“Hey, Sophia. Yeah, I'm back.”

Sophia froze upon hearing my response. Blinking as if she couldn't believe her eyes, she took off her monocle and wiped it with a handkerchief before putting it back on.

“Uh, aren't you a little...big?”

“Yeah. I grew a lot when I stepped out of the portal.”

“No!” Sophia clapped her hands to her face with an agonized cry. “You were so receptive as a kid! Your ability to learn will be ruined!”

“I'm gone for several months and that's what you're worried about?!”

Despite that little spat, Sophia seemed genuinely happy about my safe return.

“Just because you're bigger doesn't mean you can get out of studying!”

“Yeah, whatever you say...”

“So, what took you so long? Did you make a contract?”

“Right. It’s a bit complicated, but in the end I did manage to make a contract with a pretty impressive devil.”

I should probably introduce her to you too. This is Sophia, the devil who oversees my entire education.

“Uh-huh.” Though she seemed entirely apathetic, Ante nevertheless stepped out of me and onto the floor.

“Let me introduce you,” I said. “This is the devil I made a pact with.”

“Allow me. I am—”

A violent gasp cut Ante off, and Sophia’s face contorted in a way I had never seen before. Her eyes were so wide I thought they might pop out of her skull.

“Wh-Why?! Why?! Why now?!” she babbled, shuffling backward before tripping and falling on her backside. “What is a devil god doing here?!” A waterfall of sweat broke out on her face. “The Devil God of Taboo, Antendeixis!”

What the hell?! Your cover was blown just like that?!

“You said only ancient devils would recognize you!”

“I’m just as perplexed as you are,” Ante answered. “I have no recollection of crossing paths with this person. Hey, devil. How do you know me?”

Sophia jerked, at some point having gotten on her knees and bowed low to the floor. “B-Back when I was first born...I was so foolish...” Sophia spoke, voice trembling as she pressed her face to the floor. “I was fearless, so I sneaked into your palace to sate my curiosity...my sincerest apologies...”

“Hm?” Initially she stared off into space with a frown, but finally something seemed to click in Ante’s head, signaled by her clapping her hands together. “Ah! It’s you! The little imp!”

“So, you *do* know her?” I asked.

“That was quite some time ago. A tiny little imp sneaked into my palace,

vandalized my walls and rummaged through my books.”

“She did all that without you noticing?”

“I was in the middle of my nap. When I awoke, I found her antics plenty amusing, so I let her continue for some time. I made sure to teach her quite the lesson about her foolish fearlessness as I kicked her out. Didn’t I?” Ante asked, prompting a pathetic squeal from Sophia, still shaking on the floor. If she weren’t a devil, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had soiled her pants. What kind of punishment had Ante given her? Also, it was interesting to know even the intellectual Sophia went through a bratty phase.

“My! To think that little imp has grown so much! You’ve truly done splendidly!” Ante laughed, smiling like a grandmother as she gave Sophia a pat on the head. “So, what shall we do about her? Disposing of her seems suitable.” Her smile didn’t so much as waver as the hand that was stroking Sophia’s hair abruptly shifted its attention to the devil’s neck.

“Wait, hold on,” I said as Sophia gave another sad squeal. I started to massage my brow; the pitiful sight of Sophia trembling before us was starting to bring on a headache.

Getting rid of her for recognizing Ante was a valid suggestion. Rather, Sophia knew too much, so it was the natural conclusion. However, that seemed kind of excessive. It wasn’t like I was taking pity on Sophia herself, but she *was* one of Prati’s subordinates.

“You can’t just waltz in here and start killing devils that are contracted to my mother. If you do, we’ll have to explain ourselves.” I hesitated a bit after that, but steeled myself and pressed on. “Besides, she’s my tutor. I still have a lot to learn from her.”

“Lord Zilbagias...” Sophia whined.

At the same time Ante gave a low hum, shifting her hand from Sophia’s neck to her jaw, lifting her face into view. Tears streamed from her terrified eyes. “Answer me this. Will your lips remain sealed if I demand my identity stays a secret?”

The intensity in Ante’s voice caused Sophia to tremble. “M-My contract

forbids me f-from keeping anything secret from my lady that might prove disadvantageous to her..." Sophia replied as if reading her own death sentence.

That wasn't good. *Well, thanks for everything, Sophia.* On the upside, I would likely get a power boost from breaking the taboo of harming someone who took care of me. *At least your sacrifice won't be in vain—*

"Oh, is that all?" the devil god gave a devilish smile. "In that case, we shouldn't have a problem. After all, you will find that this secret will very much be to your mistress's advantage."

"Huh...?"

"Think about it. A prince has made a contract with a devil god. What do you think will happen if news of that gets out?"

"Intervention from the other heirs will grow much more severe. They will try to crush him before he becomes a threat to their power...but it shouldn't be an issue keeping this information from spreading even if I tell my lady." As she spoke, the fear in her eyes started to wane ever so slightly, replaced by an inquisitive light. "But the fact you don't want me to tell her means there is something about the details of your contract; I can only guess what exactly that is. For a devil god, especially the Devil God of Taboo, to be enticed to come to the material realm...there's no way those contract details are anything good. There is an extremely high possibility it will cause problems for my lady..."

Sophia seemed to be driving herself further into a corner. The more she caught on, the less she could bring herself to keep quiet.

"You seem to have a few misunderstandings," Ante said. "While you're correct that I wish the details of my contract to be kept secret, my situation is much different in comparison to a servant like yourself. Keeping the details hidden builds mystique around our contract, and thus bolsters its strength."

"I...understand that," Sophia replied, clearly unconvinced.

"As far as causing problems for your mistress, think about it, Sophia. Think about it *real hard*. What is that woman's primary objective?"

Sophia turned the question over in her head. "To make Zilbagias the Demon King, solidifying her own social status."

“Precisely. In that case, something ‘disadvantageous’ to her means something that threatens that objective. You could think of it as any obstacle preventing Zilbagias’s attempt at the throne, could you not?”

“I suppose so...”

“Then keeping my identity a secret only makes sense. By keeping the details of our contract a secret, it grows more powerful, thus improving Zilbagias’s chances.”

“But...still...” Sophia seemed to be having trouble accepting Ante’s logic. I couldn’t entirely blame her. Telling Prati about Ante’s true identity without revealing the contract details was always an option. But that would be pretty much admitting that we were hiding something.

Was killing Sophia really the only option? How in the world would I even explain that to Prati? Damn, I was starting to feel awfully cornered myself.

“You are quite the stubborn little imp. Very well, I will let you in on the details of the contract.” Ante leaned in close; her constant grin didn’t hide how much she reveled being in this situation as she whispered into Sophia’s ear. “I admit it. The contract between us is, in fact, nothing good.”

Sophia began to visibly tremble again. What did Ante think to gain by telling her that? Was Sophia no longer a threat if she knew? So she’d ultimately be silenced...

“This boy has seduced me, a devil god, a ruler of the Abyss, with promises of an exceptional taboo.”

“He offered a taboo to the Devil God of Taboo?” Sophia echoed.

“Yes. Of course, what that exactly entails I cannot delve into...but you understand, don’t you?”

Sophia’s eyes wavered as she started calculating, her brain no doubt working at a dizzying pace.

“By the way, Sophia. Do you like the Abyss?” Ante asked.

“I don’t really hate it. It is my home, after all.”

“Hiding your feelings is forbidden.”

“I despise it. That wasteland is nearly devoid of knowledge.” Sophia gasped, like a small animal being constricted by a poisonous snake.

“What is it that you desire?”

“I want...knowledge. I want to get stronger.”

“You surely don’t want to die, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I have yet to read all the books in the library. I want to make the truth of this world into my plaything, to become a devil god of knowledge,” Sophia whined, tears starting to flow again.

“Ah, yes. I empathize with that sentiment. That lust for power. That little imp has blossomed into a wonderful devil,” Ante started stroking Sophia’s hair again. But her expression was a sharp contrast to the gentleness in her voice. “The contents of our contract are nothing good. However, consider the impact they will have, the course they will take. The fact they enticed me enough to come here,” she whispered, like pouring poison into a glass. “But they will in no way hinder the objectives of your mistress. You are intelligent, so you must be able to see that, yes?”

After a long pause, Sophia finally answered. “Yes.”

“Then, let me ask you once more. Is there any need to reveal the truth to that woman?”

Another pause. “No,” she managed to squeeze out between sniffles, earning a satisfied nod from Ante.

“Good girl. Continue your dutiful work as a servant, both to your mistress and to my contractor.”

Seems what Prati told me about devils not being able to disobey their contracts wasn’t entirely the case. I couldn’t even make any more contracts, though, so it didn’t really matter in my case. At any rate, satisfied that Sophia had been thoroughly convinced, Ante returned to her resting place inside of me.

Man, that was quite the introduction. I couldn’t take my eyes off Sophia, who was sitting on the floor like her soul had left her body. The conversation had

kind of gone over my head a bit. *What exactly happened, Ante?*

The devil god chuckled. *"She was able to ascertain the harm our contract will bring to the Abyss."*

The destruction of the Dark Portal, you mean?

"I highly doubt the conclusion she came to was that specific, but at the very least she knows it will be unpleasant. Luckily for us, she's pretty apathetic toward the Abyss, so she is willing to let it slide."

I guessed she liked her life in the material realm enough to not care what happened to the Abyss. She was devilishly practical, as always. *I'm most surprised by the fact you were able to get her to not say anything to Prati. Is there some kind of loophole in the contract you exploited?*

"No, nothing like that. No such loophole exists. If there is even the slightest chance of harm to her contractor, she is obligated to inform them."

Uh...

"However, that adorable little imp's desire to live was so great that it distorted her own perception of reality. Such a thing is no small blow to a devil of knowledge. Her desire to become a devil god someday has become even more improbable; her response made sure of that. Her tears were confirmation that she understood that much. Well, I suppose that is a better outcome than having that desire and everything else stripped from her entirely."

I was speechless.

"Distorting one's own contract for personal gain is a severe taboo for a devil," Ante gave a low chuckle. *"I have to say, I feel quite nourished."*

Looking at Sophia, sitting limply on the floor with empty eyes, I couldn't help but see myself in her. My contract with Ante didn't feel all that different.

But I didn't care. My objective was to destroy the demonic kingdom. Accomplishing that came first; whatever happened to me was an afterthought. Until the Dark Portal was destroyed, Ante would be my ally. That was enough for me. It didn't matter what happened after that. However my story ended, it would be worth it.

“Zilbagias!”

While I was lost in my thoughts, the sharp clack of footsteps approaching my door pulled me back to reality, and once again it swung open. Prati came marching furiously into the room. She looked...how should I put it? Like a member of the mafia who had started a turf war, only to find out her enemies had joined forces.

“Things have taken a frustrating turn.”

Everything was about to go downhill, wasn't it?

“It seems a servant of one of the other heirs already went about reporting your return,” Prati growled through gritted teeth. “They have mistaken you for someone else, given your sudden growth. As a result, they believe all my waiting has driven me mad, and that I dragged some other poor child home to replace you!”

I'd seen her get worked up, but not like this. The amount of anger, that much hatred, in her voice was completely surprising.

“So, Zilbagias! You must prove your bloodline!”

“O-Okay...”

“Sophia!”

“Y-Yes, my lady!” Hearing her name called caused Sophia to finally snap back to her feet.

“We will have to accelerate our schedule. Commence Zilbagias's magic training at once.” Prati then left, saying she had other business that needed her attention, and that she'd leave the lecture to Sophia. How would magic training help me prove my bloodline?

“Okay then, Lord Zilbagias. Let's get started with your magic studies.” Sophia turned to me, adjusting her monocle. As expected of a devil, she could switch modes at a moment's notice.

“Oh? Maybe I will listen in as well.” But as Ante tried stepping out of my body, Sophia's legs immediately started shaking.

“Cut it out.” *Leave the poor girl alone.* I delivered a swift, light chop to the top of Ante’s head as she emerged, prompting her to start trembling herself while mumbling something about the treatment she received at the hands of an insect like me. More than some perverted weirdo, she was more like a— actually, you know what, I don’t want to say it. Of course, I felt myself grow a little stronger. I guess smacking a devil god like that was a taboo too. Watching the entire exchange, Sophia looked like her eyes were about to pop again.

Go back inside, Ante. You can still listen in from inside me.

Now then, about magic.

“The word ‘magic’ refers to many different phenomena, from curses to miracles,” Sophia introduced her lecture, calming down slightly as Ante retreated back inside of me. “Over time you will learn many different types of magic, Lord Zilbagias, but the one that you need to be aware of for now is the magic passed down in your family, what we call ‘Bloodline Magic.’”

“So a magic inherited by blood?”

“Exactly. It is a form of magic unique to a given family, passed down through the generations.”

There were similar things among humans, jealously guarded secret arts or miracles.

“Is that kind of magic a thing for all demons?” I asked.

“Not all of them. In fact, only bloodlines with long and strong histories possess them.”

Ante snorted at that. She probably thought it was pitiful that demons called their families historied when they had all been wild savages only a few hundred years ago.

“My lady’s family, the Rage family, is one such bloodline. And naturally, His Majesty King Gordogias’s is the same.”

“So to prove my heritage, I need to display the Bloodline Magic capabilities of both families?”

“Precisely.”

That shouldn't be an issue. I'd figured I inherited considerable strength from my parents, but two kinds of magic on top of that? The possibilities were limitless in what they could bring toward accomplishing my goals. Ironically enough, they could be instrumental in taking down the Demon King's family.

"So, what kinds of magic are they exactly?" Trying my best to keep my elation under wraps, I kept my voice steady as I asked.

"The magic belonging to His Majesty the King is called **Naming**."

What the heck did that mean?

"It allows you to empower yourself by declaring your name before engaging in a fight."

That explained a lot. Back when we attacked him and he shouted, "I am the Demon King, Gordogias," that had been him using magic.

"I am sure you will get a grasp of it under the tutelage of His Majesty or another member of the Orgi family. Naturally, I can't provide much insight into how it's passed down," Sophia explained, a small tinge of frustration in her voice. I guess, as a knowledge devil, the urge to want to know something so private was eating her up inside.

"Next is the magic of the Rage family, belonging to my lady. Actually, the Rage family magic deals with healing, so they are famous as healers throughout the kingdom."

Healing?! Prati was a *healer*?! The denizens of darkness could perform healing miracles?!

"To that end, their Bloodline Magic is the **Curse of Transposition**."

"Wait, it's a curse?"

"Yes. They take the injuries or illnesses of one person, including themselves, and transpose them onto another. You can think of it as a kind of sympathetic magic."

So, rather than healing...

"It's more like forcing an injury or illness on someone?" I said.

“That is correct.”

Okay, that made sense. That sounded exactly like the kind of curse used by the dark races. “But if they possessed a magic like that, why couldn’t it save the first Demon King?”

The first Demon King Raogias had been defeated by a human hero. He’d let his guard down on the battlefield, been thoroughly impaled by a holy-enchanted blade, and kicked the bucket. So why couldn’t he be saved from his injuries? Did it have something to do with the holy property of the weapon?

“There are some stipulations to the curse. The target for the **Transposition** curse has to be someone ranked below you, someone connected to you by a curse, or someone under your dominion,” Sophia explained. “The Rage family tried to heal him, but none of them were successful. Even if he accepted their curse, his natural magical strength resisted it.”

So the Demon King’s unbelievable magical power backfired in the end, making him resistant to the healing curse. Unlike healing miracles, this curse seemed pretty narrow in utilization. *Serves them right.*

“If the Demon King had possessed that magic for himself, things likely would’ve turned out differently,” Sophia continued. If that happened, the Demon King would be able to inflict any injury he received on his attackers. He’d be one of the strongest beings in history... Wait a second. That kind of strength would be just ridiculous.

“Is the Rage family actually extremely powerful?” I asked.

“Yes. They are one of the leading families in the kingdom,” Sophia confirmed, looking entirely disinterested. “The Rage family warriors are able to make easy work of any races lacking in magical talent. Due to their magic, they can easily inflict injuries onto their opponents. Of course, while fighting someone of an equal or higher level, a bit more creativity is needed to make the curse stick.”

A bit more creativity, huh? Hey, Ante.

“That sounds like it could provide intriguing applications.” The devil god gave a wicked laugh.

“However, due to failing to save the first Demon King, the Rage family

plummeted in social standing,” Sophia continued.

Yeah, that sounded about right. The other families had probably gleefully heaped criticism on them for their failure.

“The delay in Lady Pratifya’s marriage was for the same reason. But with how much the Rage family has supported the kingdom, they should have been at the top of the list of qualified candidates.”

So as punishment for failing the first Demon King, they were dropped down to the bottom of the list? Prati’s obsession made more sense now.

The sound of footsteps clicking down the hallway returned.

“Zilbagias! The time has come to receive your Bloodline Magic!”

Speak of the devil. Or the demon, I suppose. Prati had returned.

“Did Sophia give you the lecture?”

“Yes, mother. About the **Curse of Transposition** and the Rage family.”

“Good. Someone with your talents must be already able to see the vast potential in our magic. With the Rage magic and His Majesty the King’s magic at your disposal, you will possess suitable qualities to become the strongest Demon King in history.” Closing the door tightly behind her, she filled the room with magical energy and clapped her hands. A sudden sensation of the atmosphere being pulled tight engulfed the room. “A barrier to keep out nosy pests.” With that explanation, she then pulled her portable magic spear from her belt.

“Receiving the **Transposition** curse is simple. All it takes is to be affected by it.” Prati stroked the tip of her spear with a nostalgic smile. “It’s a bit sooner than I expected, but I suppose it’s time you become familiar with the pain of being on the battlefield.”

It was hard not to have a bad feeling about this. I wasn’t scared about a bit of pain, but that didn’t mean I *wanted* to be in pain. That makes sense, right?

“Prepare yourself.”

Right after that, Prati pressed the blade of her spear into her own palm. With a wet, thick sound, it punched through and out the back of her hand. But she

barely flinched. The smallest twitch of her lips, not enough to take the vicious smile from her face.

“That looks...extremely painful, mother.”

“It is. But you should be able to withstand it. *Me Ta Fesui.*”

The next moment, a searing pain exploded in my right hand.

Ow. It really felt like an invisible blade had been punched through my hand, through the palm and out the back. And just as you would expect, there was a neatly opened hole there to match the sensation. The distinctive blue blood of demonkind poured from the fresh wound. Back in my previous life, I had suffered all sorts of terrible injuries, not to mention the way I’d died. I had become accustomed to various kinds of pain, but that didn’t mean this sensation was pleasant.

So this was the **Curse of Transposition**. On closer inspection, I noticed magical energy swirling around the wound, traces of the curse slowly dissipating. Meanwhile, Prati’s wound had completely vanished.

“You didn’t even flinch.”



Prati breathed a sigh of admiration. “Most children, no matter how resolute, would lose their nerve after being stabbed for the first time, but you remained calm. I suppose you have been building up your grit since an early age.”

Maybe I should have put on more of a scene? Oh well. Too late now.

“Does this mean I can use the **Transposition** curse?” I asked. It didn’t feel any different. The only thing I felt was how much my hand hurt.

“Not yet. I will use the curse to transpose the wound back to myself. At that point, you should understand the curse’s mechanics.” It was about instinct, she claimed. “We are parent and child, and I delivered that wound on you. We possess a powerful bond as far as curses go. Don’t lose sight of that, Zilbagias. Focus on the connection between us.”

Prati’s hand, packed with magical energy, reached out and touched my wound.

“Me Ta Fesui.”

It was a bizarre sensation, like the wound itself was being torn off my hand.

For a brief moment, I saw a vision—the curse, passing through generations of the Rage family, unbroken. It all began when one mother of the Rage family used the **Curse of Transposition** to take on her child’s wound. As a member of demonkind, miracles of healing were impossible for her. Even so, she wanted to relieve even an ounce of her child’s suffering. From that moment onward, every time a child of the Rage family was injured, their parents endured that injury themselves to protect them.

That practice polished and refined the **Transposition** curse. This also opened up more potential applications for the curse. They learned to force the curse on those who weren’t their blood relatives, such as their prey while hunting and their enemies in battle. Thus, they began to use it more while hunting and while engaged in combat.

The magic all began from a mother’s love, and had ripened into a fully-fledged curse, to the point a mother would inflict wounds on her own child to allow it to be inherited more efficiently.

“So it all started from love,” I murmured, looking at my hand. The only remnants of the wound were some traces of blood. *Now look how it ended up.*

“It still is a thing of love,” Prati answered, blood flowing from her hand once more. “That is why only a beloved child can inherit it.” As she gazed at the wound that had returned to her hand, she gave a gentle smile. An expression that was quite rare here in the Demon King’s castle.

“Zilbagias, you’re now a novice mage. It will still take practice to become truly proficient in its usage, but if you happen to get ambushed, you should be able to find a way to survive. As long as you aren’t actually killed, that is.”

The atmosphere in the room suddenly lightened, signaling that Prati’s soundproof barrier had dissipated.

“Garunya! Enter!”

“Yes, my lady!” A high-pitched cry answered from outside the room, quickly followed by a beastfolk maid, covered head to toe in snow-white fur, stepping into the room. I had encountered her many times before, so I recognized her immediately.

“Garunya, I am appointing you as Zilbagias’s personal attendant. You shall serve him as your master, and shield him with your life.”

“Yes, my lady! He will be my master, and I will shield him with my life!” Snapping to attention like a soldier, Garunya repeated Prati’s declaration back with a mild lisp before turning to me and bowing deeply. “Lord Zilbagias, as unworthy as I am, I shall endeavor to guard your life. Thank you for allowing me to serve.”

“S-Sure...” I responded, not quite knowing how to respond to the sudden formalities. With a nod, I turned my questioning eyes to Prati.

“The white tiger tribe is a small tribe of beastfolk under the protection of the Rage family. At the dawn of the demonic kingdom, we rescued them from persecution by humans. They swore their loyalty and the rest is history.”

“We owe you our lives after being rescued from those human skin hunters!” Garunya replied cheerfully, stroking her own fur. There were rumors that one of the now fallen kingdoms in the west had occasionally raided neighboring

beastfolk kingdoms, putting their denizens through no small amount of hardship. It was hard not to have mixed feelings looking at the young beastfolk girl.

Whatever she saw in my expression, Prati decided she needed to provide further explanation. “The white tiger tribe are sincere in their loyalty, Zilbagias. From this moment on, Garunya will never betray you. She’s incapable of doing so. If by some chance someone attempts to bend her will against you by any means, her oath of loyalty will take her own life.”

“Yes, my lady! I would sooner gouge out my own heart than betray my lord!” the maid added, her tone still cheerful and energetic. Like the concept had been taught to her to be straightforward.

“The white tiger tribe will never betray us, and as beastfolk, they have weak magic resistance. If the worst comes to pass, she will be an ideal servant. Do you understand?”

Her magic resistance was weak. In short, I could easily use the **Transposition** curse on her. That explained why the Rage family kept them around as servants. They were extremely loyal, to the point of choosing suicide before submitting to threats or brainwashing. And during some kind of emergency, they could be used to take our wounds and illnesses. These beastfolk really were the perfect servants for them.

“You can use her however you wish. She will be valuable in teaching you how to deal with your subordinates. Garunya, if you feel your treatment is unpleasant, you may complain freely to Zilbagias. Your loyalty has earned you that privilege.”

“Understood! Thank you, my lady!”

“Now then, today has been a long day.” Prati gave a small sigh, her shoulders relaxing slightly. No kidding. I’d come back from the Abyss, barely gotten a break before flying back to the castle, and immediately started learning Bloodline Magic. Everything was going at a freakish pace.

“Someone will be sent to teach you the Bloodline Magic of the Orgi family in due time. For today, you may rest, Zilbagias.” After coming into the room like a storm, Prati left like one, leaving the maid from the white tiger tribe as a parting

gift.

“In any case, congratulations on receiving your Bloodline Magic, Lord Zilbagias,” Sophia called out from the corner of the room where she had been waiting.

“Congratulations!” Garunya quickly followed her up. It looked like things were going to get more lively around here. As my tutor, Sophia was also kind of like my servant. *I guess now I have two.*

“Thanks in advance, Garunya. I’ll treat you well.”

“Yes, my lord! Now then. Is there anything you would like me to do for you?” she asked, ears twitching.

“First, I could use something to eat. After that, a bath.”

“As you wish!” With a bright smile, she stepped out of the room to give instructions to the maids on standby. I was *really* hoping I could avoid ever having to use her as a literal shield someday. My goal to bring this kingdom to ruin by any means necessary remained, but...man, I was exhausted. Right now, my immediate goal was to eat and get some sleep.

“What, going to bed already? I’d like to explore the castle.”

Please, the castle will still be here tomorrow.

Though I got the feeling I’d never sleep easy again.

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The next day, I was good to go to start learning **Naming**.

“Count Owarg, former chief of the Orgi family, will be your instructor,” Prati explained, having arrived in my room not long after I woke up.

The titles of “chief” and “count” contrasted pretty drastically. I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of guy this instructor would turn out to be. Considering the friction between the different demon tribes, a chief teaching me came as quite the surprise. I can’t lie; the idea of the Demon King himself teaching me had crossed my mind.

“His Majesty has other matters to attend to,” Prati vented her frustrations as

we ate our waking meal. Sophia later filled me in that the other mothers had schemed together to keep him occupied, saying “they didn’t want him squandering his time with someone who may share no relation.”

I went to the parade ground. It seemed learning **Naming** required a lot more room to work with. The Demon King’s castle was carved out of a mountain made of marble, and the spacious clearing at its foot had been repurposed into a parade ground. Demons, beastfolk, night elves, even ogres trained endlessly here. Their mock battles rivaled the intensity of real bouts.

“Ah! You have arrived!”

But today, those warriors had been relegated to a small corner of the clearing, while a man waited for my arrival in the center. He was wearing frilly, extravagant clothing that reeked of aristocracy, though it was obvious at a glance the clothes didn’t fit him at all. He held a bone spear with an obsidian tip. Dark red paint drew a menacing design on his face. The shoulders of his armor were made from the skulls of two large carnivores. Completing the look was a necklace of withered ears, taken from a number of different races.

So this bearded, muscly old man was Count Owarg? The frilly clothing did little to hide the fact that he looked like a savage. No one in the entire castle came close to flawlessly pulling off the stereotypical savage look like this guy.

“Count Owarg is a well-established veteran, turning 280 years old this year. He takes a lot of pride in our ancient customs and traditions.” Prati’s eyes wandered, her voice sounding like she was talking around something stuck in her throat. It seemed the relatively young demons like her had some strong opinions about some of the older aspects of demon culture. Maybe they didn’t want to come to terms with the fact demons had been nothing but savages just a few generations ago.

“Oho ho ho! So you are Zilbagias!” Stomping up alongside us as we reeled in shock from his appearance, Owarg took a moment to observe me from head to toe. “I heard you were just five years old, yet you’re quite a big lad! It is no wonder your heritage has been called into question! Gah ha ha ha ha!”

If anything is big here it’s your voice, old man. It was like someone was throwing right hooks at my skull. That was the kind of voice made for booming

across battlefields.

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for us, Count Owarg,” Prati greeted him. I guess even Prati had to give due respect to a former family chief.

“Gah ha ha ha! Don’t be foolish, Archduchess Pratifya! With my services no longer needed on the front lines, I have nothing but free time! The fate of dying in battle seems a lot more comforting than dying of boredom here!” Owarg repeatedly struck the butt of his spear on the ground. Whether he was angry or jovial, it was hard to get a read on him. “Any excuse to kill time is a welcome change of pace! And there was no way I could disregard the request of my grandson’s wife!”

“Count Owarg’s grandson is married to my younger sister,” Prati explained as I looked at her with confusion written all over my face. *The family connection element actually makes all this.*

“My name is Zilbagias. Thank you for helping me today.”

“Very good! Being earnest is a great tool to have! Let us get right to it, then!” After signaling to someone outside the parade ground, he turned back to me. “First, Zilbagias, I will demonstrate **Naming**.”

As he took a deep breath, Prati quickly distanced herself. I had a bad feeling about what was about to happen, but Prati’s sudden movement caught me off guard, causing me to forget to initiate a defensive action in time.

“I AM THE FORMER CHIEF WARRIOR OF THE ORGI TRIBE, OWARG!!!”

As a result, I took the blast head-on. His thunderous voice caused the entire parade ground to quake. The soldiers belonging to the weaker magical races that were in the vicinity were all but thrown off their feet, while the demons and night elves just looked on in astonishment.

Owarg’s aura, meanwhile, had grown many times stronger. This pressure was familiar. It was just like when I’d fought the Demon King! But unlike back then, magical energy continued to swell endlessly from inside Owarg, causing his prim

and proper aristocratic clothing to be shredded, completely revealing the savage underneath.

“Gah ha ha ha! For how fancy these clothes look, they sure are feeble!”

All of a sudden, Owarg was half naked. The old savage gave a hearty laugh, slapping his now bare stomach. By some miracle, his armor and necklace were completely unscathed. But the only clothing to survive was his fur undergarments.

“This magic makes your clothes fly off?” I asked. Was this really the extent of the Bloodline Magic I was supposed to learn?

“This never happens to His Majesty,” Prati replied, the usual confidence in her tone noticeably absent.

“Fear not! Once your clothes get used to your power, this shouldn’t happen! You can rest easy!” With another laugh, Owarg glanced at the scraps of clothing now scattered all over the parade ground. “They look flashy and they certainly aren’t uncomfortable! But these outer clothes just can’t get used to me! Gah ha ha ha ha ha!”

After a good long laugh, the old man who’d returned to his primal warrior look gave a deep sigh. “Now then, Zilbagias. As you can see, **Naming** is a magic to be wielded by only the truest of warriors.”

True warriors, huh? Things had sure taken a philosophical turn.

“In short, as one who has inherited the blood of the Orgi family, you must walk the path of a warrior. Zilbagias, why do you fight? For what purpose?” the old warrior asked, looking deep into my eyes, searching for an answer. “Is the throne your mother’s goal or your own?” he asked, the disdainful question clearly meant to be a test. I didn’t know what kind of answer he sought, but there was only one true answer I would ever give.

“Becoming the Demon King is of little interest to me.” That answer brought a frown to the old man’s face, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Prati’s eyes go wide.

“But...” I shared my true feelings. “I *do* want to be stronger than my father.”

I wanted to surpass the current Demon King—no. I *had* to.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Fantastic! That’s the spirit!!!” Owarg gave an emphatic nod, slapping me on the shoulder. *Ow*. “Good, Zilbagias. Your true nature is clear to me now. King, duke, and earl are not marks of a true warrior! Those titles are merely decoration! A true warrior needs only strength! No need for trifling motivations when strength drives a true warrior’s ambition!”

He continued, looking to the edges of the parade ground. “Spirit alone isn’t enough to make you a warrior. To battle is to claim someone’s life. To call yourself a warrior, you must at least partake in the ritual. Archduchess Pratifya, is Zilbagias a virgin?”

“Yes,” Prati replied. “He doesn’t even have his own spear yet.”

“I see. Then this shall be a momentous occasion.”

I immediately felt that did not sound good at all as the sound of chains rattling came from behind me. Turning around slowly...

“Well, it seems you have approached this crossroads sooner than expected,” Ante whispered from inside me, breaking her long silence. *“This is a perfect opportunity to gain power for yourself, Alexander.”* I could feel the Devil God of Taboo licking her lips.

“As such, Zilbagias, I have prepared some prey for you.” Lined up behind me was a group of men in chains—humans. They were emaciated and covered in superficial wounds, but a fierce hatred still burned in their eyes. “These are human soldiers who were captured in battle. Just your regular rank and file types. If you wish to take the first step on the path to becoming a warrior, then you know what you must do, right, Zilbagias?” Owarg smiled at me like a nurturing grandpa, pushing me forward with a gentle hand.

“Kill them.”

So the day I had long feared had finally come. I’d thought the nerves would get to me, but I was frighteningly calm. Maybe I’d accepted this fate and solidified my resolve the moment I made my contract with Ante. But behind

that resolve, I could feel a fire burning inside me, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead.

The men glared at me. I could only imagine what treatment they had suffered since being captured. They were covered in countless scratches, and clearly hadn't been fed well. They were restrained, surrounded by demons, night elves, and beastfolk, and dragged out to the middle of the parade ground. It was clear that the tides of fate were not on their side. Despite everything, their fighting spirit still burned bright. The chains may have physically restrained them, but the chains did not restrain their resolve. If it weren't for the chains, the men probably would have lashed out and attacked at any moment. Rank and file? Like hell they were. If these weren't heroes, then that title was without meaning.

"We made sure to get some lively ones for you," Owarg said, tapping his shoulder with his spear.

"Take this, Zilbagias." Prati handed me a knife made from obsidian. There was strong magic coursing through it, making it sturdier and sharper than any metal.

"On my first hunt, my father also handed me a knife of stone," Owarg began to reminisce. "I made my first spear from the bones of my prey that day. Such are the old traditions of demonkind. Even to this very day, that spear still hangs in my room..."

I took the knife as everyone in the parade ground stopped to watch.

"A first bloodying ritual, huh?"

"That sure takes me back. I was about his age when I did mine."

"Looks can be deceiving. I heard he's actually five years old."

"Either that's a joke or he's one big five-year-old."

Demons, beastfolk, and night elves alike began exchanging whispers.

"My first was a forest elf."

"For real? Kinda jealous. Mine was some ogre deserter."

"I offed a member of an enemy family before I came to my senses."

“My first was a human, right?”

They were full of energy. The way they were conversing almost made you forget they were all of different races.

“Didn’t you get super serious about trying to behead the guy on your first?”

“Ah, I remember that! And you got super depressed when you couldn’t cut through the bone!”

“Stop it! Don’t bring up old stuff like that!”

“Makes me wonder, how will this prince kill them?”

Hundreds of curious gazes were focused on me, each and every one like a dagger.

“Okay,” I said, fighting through the dryness in my mouth. “I just have to kill these guys?”

“Yes, by any means you wish. Cut their throats, pierce their hearts, whatever. They are your prey. How you shed their blood is an expression of yourself.”

“Got it. If they’re my prey, then...” I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. “Remove their chains,” I ordered the night elves behind the captives.

“All of them? At once?”

“Yes.”

The elf made a face, clearly thinking I had gone mad, but did as he was told.

“Zilbagias! Humans can be formidable when they fight in packs!” Owarg warned me from behind, but I ignored him.

“Garunya.” Instead, I called my newly appointed maid.

“Yes, my lord?!”

“Don’t intervene. Spare the lives of any men who survive, and send them back to their homelands.”

“Yes, my lord! Um...my lord?”

“Surviving a battle with a demon prince is worthy of a reward, don’t you think?”

I stared at the newly freed men. If circumstances were different, I would have liked to send them all home unharmed. They were incredible soldiers, remaining firm and resolute even in the face of the greatest possible despair. To not beg for their lives was admirable. To kill them under these circumstances was a waste of such potent warriors. No matter how much I wished to avoid this, I could not spare them. With all these eyes on me, I had no choice but to play into the persona of the demon prince.

My own value, my own position, was painfully clear to me. Putting my own life in danger to save these five men would change nothing in the demonic kingdom. But if I were to raise my blade and fulfill my role as prince now, someday my blade would reach the Demon King, and I could bring this kingdom to its knees.

That left me with only one option: make this not a hunt, but a duel. And if fate decided I was to lose, I would prepare a reward for them. That was the best I could manage.

Of course, I had no intention of losing—

“If you are still going to kill them, then you are only satiating your own ego by handling things like this, are you not?” Ante’s voice was like cold water on my back. *“Rather, dangling false hope in front of their eyes before killing them is an even crueler fate.”*

Maybe.

“A swift, painless demise is a far greater mercy.”

That wasn’t true at all. If I were in their position, I would have spit on the suggestion of a painless death if I could fight for my freedom. A painless death would be merciful? Don’t be ridiculous. That kind of arrogant “mercy” can eat dirt.

“Don’t think ill of me, humans,” I called out to the men, shifting my knife into a reverse grip. “I may have a knife, but you outnumber me five to one. You can fight unarmed.”

Of course, it wasn’t like these were five novices. They were trained soldiers. With their martial arts skills, they could overwhelm me, and if they managed to

disarm me, I'd be cornered in no time.

"If we kill you..." one of the men growled, "...then we go home, no strings attached?"

"Probably." I dropped my stance for a moment, turning to face the crowd watching. "If these pathetic humans miraculously manage to take my life, then let us escort them home as honored guests! If they are capable of taking the head of a demon prince, that is enough proof that they are doubtless heroes. Am I wrong?" My sarcastic tone landed well with the onlookers, earning plenty of laughter and jeers.

Prati's face was composed, but I took notice of the firm grip she had on her fan. Owarg seemed a bit conflicted. He clearly thought I had crossed the line a bit. Garunya was at a total loss, caught between orders to protect my life at all costs and my own orders to not intervene.

"There you have it. You'll just have to rely on the pride of the demons."

"Heh. That's like putting trust in crap," one of the men spat.

"You said you were a demon prince?" one of the older men asked, glowering at me.

"Yes. Taking my head will be quite the feat. Listen closely. My name is..."

That's right. This was me now.

"My name is Zilbagias." The disgusting title I'd been granted at my rebirth.
"Son of Demon King Gordogias, the demon prince Zilbagias!"

The soldiers gathered into a tight formation.

"Gods of light, grant us protection."

"Let their abominable speech be cleansed by your purifying light."

"Shield us from the curses of the wicked."

After chanting their own incantations, they formed a line. A thin film of magical energy surrounded each man, overlapping with those of the men at

their sides to create a single firm shield.

I felt something catch in my chest. What the hell were they thinking? They called these men rank and file? Please. All of them were first-rate. Their coordination was impeccable. Seeing such incredible form almost brought a tear to my eye.

This was how humans fought. Normally with a sword in the right hand, a shield in the left, in a formation where each man protected his comrades. Their strength was not in their individual prowess, but rather in the perseverance built from a perfectly refined formation.

Deep down, I rooted for them to win. But losing wasn't an option for me either. No way was I dying here. I had zero intention of asking for their forgiveness.

"Feed my rise to glory!" The blood I shed here would lead to the blood I shed when I reached my goal. The sacrifice of these warriors would be used as a stepping stone to reach my goal of slaying the Demon King.

"Death to the dark!" the men shouted back in unison. Sharing any more words was meaningless. It was now kill or be killed. The ritual of battle, the ritual of claiming a life, had begun.

The soldiers charged forward, bloodlust all but dripping from them. I had no room to show them mercy, no composure to look down on them. The man in the middle kicked with his bare feet, throwing up a cloud of sand to blind me. Damn, these guys were incredible. It would've been an honor to fight alongside them.

Dodging the cloud of sand, I hurled myself sideways into a roll. Facing them head-on would leave me vulnerable and surrounded. They would be able to restrain and disarm me with ease and it would all be over. Not staying still was my only feasible option. I had to disrupt their formation.

But as I threw myself sideways, the soldiers naturally turned to pursue me, rotating around the man on the end of their formation in a clean arc. Their strategy was to force me to fight them head-on, to overwhelm me with their numbers. They were tough. Disrupting their guard would be difficult—

“Shall we forbid them from cooperation?” Ante suggested. That would be incredibly effective. The prohibition wouldn’t hinder me at all. Even if they resisted the curse, it would probably provide a critical opening for me to shift things in my favor.

But I didn’t want to use taboo magic here. There were too many witnesses. Revealing my trump card so soon would be a stupid risk. Also, I didn’t want to rely on underhanded tactics. If I was going to use any magic, it would just be the **Transposition** curse.

“Hiding your trump card will be for naught if you end up dead.”

Whenever we cross that bridge, we will deal with it then. I continued circling around the soldiers, and they continued wheeling to face me.

“Attack!”

“Be a man!”

“This isn’t a date!”

The audience began to holler. I was starting to feel like a dog in a dogfight. But the fact of the matter was this strategy wasn’t doing anything to give me the upper hand.

I observed the soldiers carefully. The man on the right end was older than the rest, meaning he was probably the strongest among them. The rest were all pretty similar except the second from the left. He looked to be a step slower than the rest. Was he dealing with a leg injury? If I was to break their formation, I needed to exploit their weakness, and that was it. That would be the standard approach...

With a quick, sharp breath, I shifted the knife to my left hand. And then, without a moment’s hesitation, I slashed at my own wrist.

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Amidst what had turned into a staring contest, the demon prince’s gaze turned dangerous, signaling he was about to shake up the stalemate. The soldiers steeled themselves to prepare for any attack, but instead were left dumbfounded. The prince had slashed his own right hand.

“What the...?!” They were immediately drowned in confusion.

But the oldest and most experienced of the soldiers knew something was suspicious about the prince’s actions. Whenever demons did something unexpected or nonsensical, that was typically a sign that they were about to use magic.

“Defensive formation! *Shield us from the curses of the wicked!*” The veteran stretched out his left hand as if it were a shield, repeating the curse-repelling incantation. Despite their confusion, the teachings that had been drilled into the other soldiers held true as they took the same stance.

Now, what’s he up to?!

“My turn.” The demon prince approached, swinging his right hand. The blood gathered in his fist sprayed forward.

Is he trying to blind us?

That instant, the prince started to give off a strong pressure. He was using magic!

A curse using his own blood?

The next thing he heard was the faint sound of a blade slicing through the air.

“Guh—” The soldier at his side gave a strange cry. A black blade glimmered in his throat; the obsidian knife was embedded deep in his neck.

Wounding himself to confuse them, pretending to use the spray of blood to blind them, and using the threat of magic to distract the most experienced among them—in the face of these tactics, they had failed to predict he was about to throw the knife. A shudder passed through the veteran as he was overwhelmed by what had just happened.

And this is a kid?!

It was eerie how skilled he was. The oppressive aura of the demon prince grew yet stronger.

But wait! We have the knife now!

Pulling the knife from his own neck, the fatally wounded soldier managed to

pass it to one of his comrades before collapsing, as if to say “I leave the rest to you.”

There are still four of us, and we have the knife now. On top of that, the prince was unable to use his right hand.

“You damn brat!” The newly armed soldier rushed forward in a rage, brandishing the knife.

“Wait!” The veteran tried to warn him. They were fighting a demon, endlessly crafty and cunning. With what the young prince had just accomplished, he surely had another trick up his sleeve. But there was no stopping the enraged young man.

“That’s *my* knife, thank you.” The demon prince looked at the charging soldier with pity. “I’ll be needing it back.”

There was a sudden tightening in the air, like a thread being pulled tight between the two of them.

“Wait—”

In his blind rage, the charging soldier had left the protection of the magic shield. By the time the veteran had realized it, it was too late.

“Me Ta Fesui.”

Reality warped.

“Ack?! Gaaaah!” The soldier suddenly dropped the knife, fresh blood spurting from his right hand. The veteran dashed forward, breaking their formation. But he had no other choice. He had to make it in time. He had to...!

But he didn’t. The small, pale shadow—the demon that should have been no more than a young boy—swept the feet out from under the now wounded soldier, retrieved his knife, and planted it into the soldier’s heart, all in one smooth motion.

The young man’s death was muted and absent of sound. The prince flicked his blade with his right hand, shaking off the blood into the pool forming in front of

him. His right hand, without a scratch on it.

“Humans are so feeble. It’s kinda gross,” he murmured, his expression shrouded. His deep red eyes held a fathomless emptiness.

“Go to hell!” the veteran screamed, crushing his own faltering heart under the weight of his rage. “You damn demons! Every single one of you, always pulling dirty tricks like this!”

The prince’s bloodred eyes shifted their gaze to the veteran. “No kidding.” He smiled, a bitter and self-deprecating smile.

What? What was that face for? It was like...

The expression was gone in a flash. The prince shifted his knife into a reverse grip again and attacked. The veteran prepared himself. He discarded the faint hope he had found of ever returning home. This prince. This demon. No matter what the cost, he had to be defeated here and now. If he was allowed to mature into an adult, countless lives would be lost to his carnage on the battlefield!

“Die!” The veteran lunged forward to grab him. He would kill the prince, even if he had to tear out his throat with his teeth.

But the prince didn’t so much as flinch. Instead, he just stood there. He must have known what the veteran was planning, so why? Did he not care if he was grabbed?

The knife flashed.

Here it comes!

As the thought crossed his mind, the prince disappeared. The veteran felt an impact, and then the world was upside down. Using the knife as a decoy, the prince had slid forward and tripped him; the veteran was too late to realize what had happened.

He keeps aiming for our feet!

Before he even had a chance to be angry at himself for falling into the demon’s trap, the obsidian knife sliced through the air again. Twisting his upper body, the veteran felt a hot flash of pain streak across his face. The attack had

been aimed at his throat, but he was able to narrowly avoid it.

The prince continued running.

He's after the younger soldiers?!

"Damn..." The blood pouring from his forehead filled his eyes, blinding him, but he could still follow the prince's footsteps. Wiping his eyes, he reclaimed his vision and grabbed the prince from behind. "Take him...!"

"...down with me." The order was too late. The remaining two soldiers were already on their backs in pools of their own blood. One had his throat cut open, the other had been stabbed in the heart. Their deaths had been more or less instant. They didn't even have time to suffer. The prince's skill was absurd. A cold sensation in the veteran's chest sent a wave of terror through him. The obsidian knife.

The demon prince had a peculiar expression on his face as he turned to look at the veteran. His face was like that of a man carrying the weight of the world, his eyes like those of a man ready to curse it.

"The deaths of you and your comrades won't be in vain." His words ran like blood. Was it anger? Sorrow? It was a mystery. Frustration and regret poured from the prince like blood from an open wound.

The veteran's vision suddenly grew dim. The prince lowered him slowly to the ground, bending down to whisper in his ear.

"Death to the dark."

The veteran's eyes widened.



He wanted to ask why, but time was not a luxury he had. His consciousness slipped away. All that remained was a face drenched in awe, frozen in death.

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Roars shook the parade ground. The young demon prince, with no more than an obsidian knife, had fought and killed five trained human soldiers. Every spectator knew those soldiers had not been weak, easy prey, and their boisterous cheering reflected that.

The prince accepted their acclamation without a word, lifting his bloodstained knife to the sky. His expression was unreadable, save for a lone tear trailing down his cheek.

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The full moon shone brilliantly on the kingdom of the demons. I sat beside the window of my bedroom, looking down at it. From up high in the castle, the entire city below was clearly visible. Like the castle itself, the buildings there were carved from marble. Basically, the leftover materials from building the castle had been used to build the city. The white walls all but shone in the moonlight, dotted here and there with the glimmer of torches. I almost felt like I could hear the voices of the people down there, carried up to me by the wind.

How ironic. Even the “denizens of the dark,” the demons and night elves, couldn’t bear to be in total darkness. They longed for the light of the stars, and even lit lamps when necessary.

Claiming I was tired, I had retired to my room early in the night. For demons, this time of day would be like what noon is to humans. Normally I’d have been busy studying, training, or caught up in something else. But really, I was exhausted. I wanted to be alone.

Five. Was that a lot? I didn’t really know. But the power I had drawn from their deaths was enormous. Some hero I was, killing five of my sinless comrades. Violating that taboo, crossing that line, had filled me with an incredible amount of magical energy. I could feel so much power flooding my very being, like I was about to burst. According to Ante, I *was* actually a few

times stronger than before, so much so that Ante had to take some of that power to keep it a secret from the others. At least for the time being.

I meant what I'd said; I refused to let their sacrifices be in vain. If I kept growing at this rate, I'd be able to take on the Demon King in no time. But...how many sacrifices, how much blood, would be on my hands to achieve that? How many people would I have to kill to use as stepping stones? That thought alone brought my heart to the edge of breaking.

"That was phenomenal!"

After it was all over, I'd received a cavalcade of unadulterated praise, a truly rare sight in the demonic kingdom. Night elves, beastfolk, even demons of other families all were unsparing in their applause. And I was standing at the center of it all.

"For a moment, I thought you were a goner. I made the mistake of underestimating you," Owarg had said with a full-faced smile. *"Wonderful! Normally, one must be acclimated to killing by taking the life of restrained prey, gradually being introduced to actual combat. But you went right to fighting five trained soldiers at once! It is remarkable!"*

Prati replied without the barest trace of surprise. *"He is my son. He should be held to a different standard compared to the others."*

*"Hm. You may be right about that. And to think he used **Naming** without even being taught!"*

Apparently, I had unintentionally used **Naming** during the fight.

"He is truly a born warrior! It was like he was born with talent! No, that isn't quite right. It's like he was skilled long before he was born! Incredible! Fantastic!" Owarg declared happily. *"Zilbagias! My teachings would be useless for you! You are without a doubt an inheritor of Orgi's blood!"*

And that was how the demon prince Zilbagias proved his lineage.

"If you weren't the Demon King's own son, I would have offered to adopt you myself."

"You can't have him. Even if he wasn't the son of the Demon King, he belongs

to the Rage family.”

“Gah ha ha! I suppose so!”

In the end, I was tasked with harvesting the bodies for materials, taking their sturdy thigh bones before leaving the parade ground. The remainder of the corpses were to be given to the liches for use in their necromancy. The idea of them serving demons against their will in death and unable to rest in peace was too much for me, though, so I asked to keep their skulls as trophies. They would be delivered to me after being processed.

“Zilbagias. Defeating five soldiers with no more than a knife is impressive. I am very proud of you. Even so, you realize how reckless that was, right?” After returning to my room, Prati had continued giving me a full helping of praise, though with a bit of scolding on the side. *“Things went smoothly this time, due to your own talent, of course. But do not mistake recklessness for courage. Showing off like that is uncharacteristic of you. I would like an explanation about what caused you to do so this time.”*

I couldn’t really blame her. It seemed like her nerves had been shot watching it go down. But I already had an answer prepared for this.

“I have a restraint placed on myself. I am sure you have noticed, but I have gained considerable power.” I’d decided to lean on my pact.

“True, your magic has grown considerably stronger. Enough to bring you to the level of a lower-ranked soldier.” Her fan snapped closed, a pensive expression on her face. *“By adhering to your restraint and taking on five opponents at once, you gained strength.”*

I hoped she’d take my neutral expression as confirmation.

“That devil seems to be one of great power. I have an acquaintance who has a contract with a devil of slaughter. It took killing countless human soldiers before you could see a noticeable difference in their power. Compared to them, your growth seems much more efficient.”

Thank goodness. Even with the power Ante had hidden, I still had a lot more in me.

“Very well, Zilbagias. I am relieved to learn that your behavior was rational,

and not just some attempt at carelessly showing off. You are truly mature for your age. I can hardly believe you are only five years old. I cannot even remember what I was like at your age..."

With an amused smile, Prati had dropped herself into a chair. *"There is no easy path to power. I understand that. But Zilbagias, if such a dangerous opportunity presents itself again, if at all possible, please discuss it with me first."*

"I will try."

Sometimes it was hard to believe this was the same Prati I'd known before going to the Abyss. Maybe the half a year spent with the dread of potentially losing her son had hit her really hard.

After all that, here I was. Considering that fight, no one had questioned if I was tired. Moving my bed over to the window, I laid down and looked up at the night sky. And suddenly, a dark-skinned girl appeared at my side.

"What do you want?"

"I figured you might be lonely sleeping by yourself." Lying down beside me, she started to stroke my hair.

Thanks, but no thanks. Just having you here is a waste of magic.

"You would think, but I am not actually out there."

Huh? Guess that explains why your voice is coming from inside me...

"I have simply modified your—ahem! I have simply created an illusion of myself that only you can perceive. Being accompanied by a disembodied voice would be unnerving, would it not?"

I felt like she was hinting at something a bit more dangerous, but whatever. This wasn't much different from the legends of succubi I had heard.

"Precisely. The method is exactly the same."

Huh. I thought you would have a fit being compared to a succubus.

Ante chuckled. *"Are you attempting to irritate me? Perhaps a bit of teasing?"*

Fear not, my heart is big enough to take anything you throw at it, especially the adorable tantrum of a human child."

She opened her arms wide—or at least, the illusion of her did. She had a bewitching aura about her, one that ill-suited her young appearance. This really was like a succubus. *What is going on here? I'm getting the creeps.*

"Hm. So this makes you retreat. The heart of a man is truly complicated." Ante's bewitching smile collapsed into a frown, like it had been merely for show. *"It is nothing so serious. I do not wish to see your heart crushed,"* she muttered, drawing her face closer to mine. Despite her being an illusion, I could still feel her breath. *"I am here with you. That is why I can understand. Your worm-eaten, tattered soul has broken open. Even now I see your tears of blood."* She then wrapped her arms around my head. *"I have never seen such a pitiful soul."*

Not even a devil god had seen worse than this, huh? What an honor.

"Do you know why taboos become taboo?"

Because they're things you shouldn't do?

"There's more to it. A line you can cross without much thought does not qualify. Its true nature lies in sin. After much hesitation, much suffering, brought to the edge with no other choice, you step across that final line—that is what makes a taboo." Her prismatic eyes were filled with sympathy. *"If it's power you desire, then the path of suffering has only just begun. If you grow accustomed to this sensation, the violation of taboo will be meaningless for you."*

So this feeling of wanting to vomit blood is where my power comes from?

"Precisely. But no mortal can bear to suffer like this forever. And if you break, you will be unable to fulfill your half of the contract."

Ah, now it was all coming together. *If I lose heart, that pretty much leaves you with nothing too. That's your actual motive here!*

Ante chuckled again. *"You're right again. You have seen right through me,"* she said with a mischievous smile.

Now I get it. You were so nice it creeped me out. But since I have the time,

then I'd like to take it easy for a while. Even I want to do that sometimes.

"Very well. No need to restrain yourself. Here, you may sleep on my lap."

You're really an illusion, right? This is incredible. You feel just like the real thing. Your legs are so smooth.

"You embarrass me. Such is the fair skin of a young woman. Enjoy it to your heart's content."

A young woman, huh? Eh, fine. Though now that I thought about it, this was the first time I'd ever experienced a lap pillow, wasn't it?

"I take it you didn't partake in any carnal pleasures in your previous life."

Shut up. It wasn't the time or place for that kind of stuff.

Ante went quiet, silently stroking my hair. For some reason, the sensation was making me sleepy. I guess even a devil god's fingers, even as an illusion, could feel pleasant.

"It's time for you to rest. For your soul," she bid me to relax.

No worries. I'm not so weak as to give up this easily. I'll hold on for quite a while to keep you entertained...devil god...

As I started dozing off, I thought I could see Ante smile. Something far too gentle, far too benign, for a devil god of corruption. I had to wonder if that was part of the illusion too.

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It was an illusion only her contractor could see. Now that he had fallen asleep, there was no need for her to maintain it, but even so, the devil god persisted. With his head resting on her lap, she gazed at the night sky, still stroking his head, combing her fingers through his silver hair. From time to time, she gently caressed the symbol of demonkind atop his head.

"I suppose," the devil god murmured, *"you will likely be my final contractor."*

She was a devil god who had grown too powerful. Back in her palace, she was merely a step away from ascending to become nothing more than a concept. If it hadn't been for this contractor, she doubted anyone else would have been

able to break the chains of her restraints, to forge a contract suitable for her, to draw her out into the material world.

Maintaining her place here slowly consumed her power, but at the same time her power was growing. Not because of the quality of her contractor, but because every day, somewhere in the world, someone was violating a taboo. Her main body back in that palace would continue to grow stronger, even now.

So this would be the last one. Whether the contract was fulfilled or her contractor's heart was crushed under the weight of taboo, she would never meet someone capable of forging a contract with her again. It was likely no one would be guided to her palace ever again and any attempts would be in vain.

If that happened, she would...

Her hand coming to a stop, the devil god looked into the face of her contractor, his slumber not erasing the grim expression still present on his face. He wasn't in the grips of a nightmare. Even without such things, he was already suffering. No devil god could ease that for him. She was powerless to do anything to ease his pain. She was all but helpless.

Instead, she leaned over and placed a kiss on his forehead, even though she knew the action was empty.

Once again, the devil god looked up at the endless night sky of the material realm and began stroking his hair.

Affectionately. Pityingly.

Chapter 3: Denizens of the Dark

My waking eyes were greeted by the sunlight streaming through my window.

“Finally awake?” Ante said, peering into my face.

Wait, have I been lying on your lap all night?

“It did the trick so you could sleep soundly, did it not?” She gave a mischievous grin.

Yeah, I guess. Thanks. Actually, I slept like a baby and felt completely recharged. Judging from the height of the sun it wasn't noon yet, making it effectively the middle of the night for demons.

After getting a quick bite to eat, I decided to give the eager Ante a tour of the castle.

“It's not like I have access to anywhere important, though,” I said. “So the best I can do is show you the gardens.”

“Well, that's no fun,” Ante complained.

Having her accompany me really made me realize just how tightly restricted my life had been since my rebirth. The central palace was off-limits to me, so all my “exploration” had been limited to wandering around the outskirts of the castle. I had accomplished virtually nothing. Despite being a muscle-brained kid, it had been drilled into me to be smarter than that by my education-obsessed mother and the knowledge-hungry devil she held in contract. The irony in that was pretty amusing.

“These are the inner gardens. Aside from the palace, more sunlight comes beaming through here than anywhere else in the castle. Makes it the perfect place to grow medicinal herbs.” Though now that I thought about it, I'd never gotten the chance to see this place during the day with my own eyes before. The garden really did get a lot of sunlight. “Oh, that one is poisonous, so be careful. Assuming poison means anything to you.”

“There’s no need for caution. Both poison and medicine are ineffective on me.” Ante was inspecting the plants intently, her apparent interest in them coming as a surprise to me. “Ah, this one is used for a truth serum. And this is used to make a paralyzing agent, I presume. This one would be a narcotic, and this one an anesthetic. Oh, red feather grass too? If you boil it, this can be a fantastic catalyst for a powerful mixture that causes hair loss. Even with the lack of space, there’s such incredible variety!”

Well, I’m glad you’re having a blast. For the record, the night elves were the ones growing poisons. As I sat on one of the benches in the garden to watch Ante, I couldn’t help but grow drowsy as I soaked in the warmth of the sun. My love for sunlight hadn’t disappeared even after becoming a demon.

As that thought crossed my mind, I spotted a figure in the corridor before me. They were wearing a heavy robe with a deep hood, making them look terribly suspicious. I was pretty sure they weren’t a maid or a devil. But what race were they? Their pale skin made me think maybe they were a night elf, but...

Approaching the perimeter of the sunlight, the figure slowly raised a hand into the garden. Bright sunlight washed over their waxlike skin.

“Uh...” I blurted out as the intruder’s hand ignited in flame.

“No good, huh?” The figure spoke, their otherwise neutral voice slightly tinged with disappointment. They didn’t seem to be concerned about their flaming hand, treating it as nothing more than a nuisance. Their hand burned and burned until there was nothing left but an ashy stump.

This was a familiar sight from my days as a hero.

“How vile.” At some point Ante had returned to my side, placing a hand on my shoulder to communicate wordlessly with me. *“Their magic has grown quite stagnant. Such an awful stench, like rotting flesh.”*

Retreating back into the safety of the shadows, the figure slowly drew back their hood with their remaining hand. “Yo. Sorry, did I surprise you?” they called out in a cheery voice. The smile on their face looked like it had been stitched on, their eyes like glass marbles. That made this person—

“A lich?” One of the leaders of the undead. What was a lich doing here?

“Demon children are a rare sight around here at this time of day,” the figure commented.

“Not as rare as seeing undead burning their own hands off in the sunlight,” I countered.

“Fair enough.” The lich gave a quiet laugh. “I can’t disagree with that.” Even upon a closer look, I couldn’t make heads or tails of whether the lich was male or female. Ante had said their magic had grown stagnant, but I couldn’t tell. All I sensed was something off about their presence. It felt thin. Almost like they were more of a doll than a person.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“An experiment in surviving the sunlight, of course,” the lich replied, lifting what remained of their right arm. Everything past the elbow had been burned away. *Is this lich an idiot or something?* Forget being burned to a crisp; everyone knew exposure to sunlight caused the undead to burn to ash.

As if they could read my mind, the lich’s artificial expression twisted in displeasure. “Hm. You think my actions were reckless, don’t you? Believe it or not, this is evidence of progress. Initially I would turn into ash in an instant, but with layers upon layers of protection, I can now survive in the sunlight for a few seconds.”

“I have to admit, that’s pretty impressive.” Thinking back, it had taken a few moments before their hand ignited. This discovery was enough to shatter my preconceptions when it came to the undead and sunlight. That was all the reason I needed to view this lich as quite a threat.

“Oh! You get it?! Most people laugh, and dismiss it because it’s a few seconds, but you get it!” The lich’s voice filled with glee at being recognized for their efforts. “Ah, my apologies. I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Enma. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

It took everything I had not to cry out in shock. Enma. Enma, the Dollmaker! What the hell?! He had been a wanted criminal in the Holy Land, heck the entire Panhuman Alliance, for over a hundred years! Long ago, undead were simply written off and classified as skeletons and decomposing zombies, but he had single-handedly overthrown that notion by mass-producing undead that

looked pretty much identical to their living counterparts. He was prideful when it came to his work, calling himself the Dollmaker after the doll-like appearance of his creations. About eighty years ago he had successfully turned an entire city into undead before straight up vanishing. Apparently, he had found his way to the Demon King's castle.

"You look awfully human to me," I said.

"Yes, this body was a human, wasn't it? I suppose I was human once upon a time. Do you have some distaste for them?"

"Not particularly. Can't say I have strong feelings either way. It was just an observation."

"I see, I see. So, uh, might I ask your name?"

"I'm Zilbagias."

As I introduced myself, Enma's eyes widened. "Aha! I've heard that name before! The prince who went toe-to-toe with some soldiers yesterday!"

You're being awfully buddy-buddy with someone you know is a prince!

"Aha ha ha, does my informal nature bother you? I have been honored to be granted the title of count by His Majesty himself. Once you have ascended above me in rank, I'll be more than happy to bow and scrape for you." *So that's how it is.* Regardless, he sounded pretty messed up in the head. He was pretty flippant for an infamous criminal.

"Then you must know I killed a bunch of human soldiers," I said. "Does that not bother you?"

"Not particularly. It's a bit late to be worried about things like that. Kinda comes with the territory of entering the Demon King's service!"

"I guess that's true. So, what brought you here?"

"I'm glad you asked!" the lich's glassy eyes started to shine. "You see, I have a dream of sorts."

I knew immediately whatever dream he had would be akin to a nightmare from my perspective.

“I think that all of humanity should be turned into undead!”

Okay, never mind being a nightmare, I couldn't even follow his logic. How had he even come to that conclusion?

“Life can be such a terrible drag at times, don't you think?” Despite his inquiring for confirmation, it wasn't like I could give a swift reply. I was still alive, after all. “People are pathetic and weak. It's as if they live merely to produce waste, shackled by the three great desires, in perpetual fear of their own inevitable deaths.”

Enma gave a grief-ridden sigh. “However! Undeath frees us of those chains! Hunger and bodily demands are things of the past! Undeath grants us a peace that living could never achieve. Undeath is clearly the next stage of humanity! And yet...” A manufactured look of sadness played over Enma's face.

“Humanity, in particular the ignoramuses of the Holy Church, seek to rid the world of us simply because we are undead. They're indifferent to the fact our newfound freedom should have allowed us to live in harmony.”

Of course they did! The Church purified undead because the vast majority of them lost their sense of self or went insane, making them a threat to the living around them! *The harmonious living you're yapping about is just a fantasy and has no room for those still alive!*

“After my beautiful masterpiece, a city of undead, was destroyed, I came to a realization. It would take more than my power to change this world, to truly make a difference. I needed to think of things within a greater scope and from a bigger perspective. The answer was clear: something had to be done about the Holy Church. Then eventually, my peaceful undead paradise would no longer be a dream and would become reality!”

That explained why he'd joined the Demon King's forces. All this talk was starting to give me a headache.

“Basically, you want to turn humans into undead to save them from the suffering of living.”

“Precisely! The ineptitude of living humans is such a pain to see.”

“By that logic, why stop at humans? Why not turn all living things into undead?” I asked.

“To tell you the truth, I agree with your sentiment. All things should become undead,” he said before giving a defeated shrug. “But alas, I’m only human. I can make that decision for my own people, but it isn’t my place to force those ideals on those of other races.”

You would be doing a lot of people a favor if you didn’t make that decision for your own people either! Take a few (thousand) steps back and start asking each individual for permission! But you draw the line when it comes to the other races? Who the hell made you a representative for humanity?!

I had so much I wanted to say, but I couldn’t manage to get any of it out.

“As far as I know, most undead either lose all sense of self or end up losing their minds. The only ones I’ve seen who have been capable of logical conversation are the most powerful of liches.” Though saying Enma’s little speech was “logical” was arguable at best. “Often, any remnants of their personality from life disappear. You implied they shouldn’t fear death, but that kind of erasure is no different than losing all sense of self, is it not? What are your thoughts on that?”

“My extensive research in that field has taken strides to combat those side effects. My experiments resulted in far too many people simply breaking, or turning into hollow dolls,” Enma replied seriously. “However, the severity of these side effects is mostly determined by the nature of the individual. The process of becoming undead invariably transforms the soul, so there is little that can be done. In conclusion, only the chosen few can become undead!”

The more he talked, the more Enma’s voice oozed with excitement, like he was an actor onstage. “Only the best of the best can conquer death, being reborn into immortality! Letting the riffraff live would allow them to be a disease to this world as they would amount to nothing more than factories for the production of fecal matter! Forcing them to live in such a state is just prolonging their suffering. Ending that suffering prematurely is simply an act of mercy!” His glassy eyes were now positively sparkling.

Okay, this guy was a lost cause. This wasn’t just surface-level crazy. No matter

what ideals they espoused, no matter how noble their intentions, undead always ended up like this. Coexisting with them was impossible.

That was why exterminating them was the only option. If their insanity had been limited to holing up somewhere and obsessing about perfecting their own bodies, we wouldn't have had a reason to bother them. But in eight or nine out of every ten cases, this was the end result. Though I guess those who *were* willing to shut themselves off from the rest of the world would probably go forever undiscovered. So pretty much all of them ended up just like Enma.

"Hm? Is something wrong? You have grown quiet." Enma tilted his head, that artificial smile still plastered to his face.

Part of me wanted to wring his neck and drag him out into the sunlight, but I knew that would likely accomplish nothing. Looking closely, I could see thin strands of magical energy stretching away from him. They seemed to be connected to something deep under the castle.

"Oh my, please don't look at me with such indecency." Enma exaggeratedly writhed his back in displeasure.

"I wasn't being indecent."

"It's not about what you think, it's about how it makes me feel."

"Oh...well, in that case, I'm sorry." Getting such a sound argument from someone who was literally insane kind of pissed me off, to be quite honest. Maybe I'd drag him by the neck out into the sun anyway, even if this wasn't his real body.

"Aha ha ha, how kind. I never would have guessed you were a demon. But I have to say, I quite like you. Talking to you feels familiar. Like I'm conversing with one of my own people. It would have been nice if we could have met face-to-face, rather than through this experimental body. I'll have to put a bit more effort into my appearance next time."

With a flutter, Enma's robes dropped to the ground, revealing he was entirely naked underneath. But all identifiable gendered features had been stripped away. It was like he was nothing more than a manufactured doll.

"Someday, I will conquer the sun. I will create a paradise of immortals. A

paradise free from hunger and conflict.” With dreamlike prose, he spread his arms wide and stepped forward into the light. The waxy body immediately started to smoke, and eventually ignited. “My journey has led me to find comrades in this kingdom to join me in my pursuit of my dream. I will never give up on this dream!”

Please give up.

“See you later, my prince. I hope the day will come where you will join me in my mission.” With one last wave, he turned to ash.

I had seen firsthand why the Holy Church couldn’t deal with him for so long.

“Humans are quite the interesting bunch, aren’t they?” Ante commented.

Please don’t lump humans in with freaks like that.

I made a silent oath to myself that, in the name of humanity, I would destroy Enma.

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A few days later I was finally granted my official rank of esquire. That meant I was permitted to enter the palace proper. I would finally be meeting the Demon King face-to-face once again.

“On Moon Day at the beginning of each week, His Majesty shares a meal with all of his heirs,” Prati explained as we climbed a staircase to the highest level of the castle.

So the first thing I would do each week was break bread with my father and my half-siblings, the heirs that I would almost certainly end up fighting to the death one day. Sophia had given me a brief overview of their names and backgrounds, but this would be the first time I met them face-to-face.

Due to the occasion, I was wearing more formal attire than usual. Formal by demon standards meant I had a lot more furs and accessories made from teeth and the like. Instead of being more formal, it felt like I was becoming more primal.

The stairs leading up to the palace were posted with guards at regular

intervals, giving the place a heavy atmosphere. Even though the Demon King was stronger than his entire royal guard, I guess that didn't stop him from maintaining a display of his authority like this. At the top of the stairs was a wide-open space, containing what must have been the most extravagant palace in the entire kingdom. Demon culture typically frowned upon aesthetic sensibilities, viewing them as a sign of weakness. Such gaudy construction like this was pretty rare.

Built from the same marble as the rest of the palace, the entrance was engraved with such fine detail it made me wonder if dwarves had a hand in it. The entire thing was an enormous relief carving depicting the armies of the Demon King. Devils, dragons, night elves, beastfolk, and of course countless demons trampled over humans and forest elves alike. The only real way to distinguish between the night elves and the forest elves was the latter's garments; they were all wearing flower crowns and accessories made from leaves and branches. It was hard not to laugh imagining the painstaking work a craftsman must've gone through to make that distinctive detail. Aside from the color of their eyes and skin, all elves looked pretty alike.

Across the walls, golden engravings of what were likely family crests of each of the major demonic families had been worked into the craftsmanship. Accompanying the work was a number of spears planted into the ground, each flying the flag that had become symbolic of the demonic kingdom: a pitch-black square.

Finally, above the entrance of the palace stood an enormous statue. The figure stood glaring down at anyone who would dare approach the palace, obsidian lance in hand.

"That is the first Demon King Raogias," Prati explained.

It was pretty obvious just by looking at it. So he was the one who brought so much evil into our world!

Devil butlers opened the doors to the palace, ushering us inside. We walked in, entering a corridor adorned with lush red carpet and all manners of decoration. But there was something more; I could feel it. There was someone here with immense magical power.

“Archduchess Pratifya and Prince Zilbagias have arrived,” one of the butlers announced as the door to the throne room swung open.

The flames, the agony of the failed assault—so many memories flooded my head, but only for an instant. As I blinked, the scars and bloodstains of my previous life vanished just as quickly as they had come, replaced with a pristine throne room. And the Demon King, sitting in wait for us.

He had a large and muscular frame, sporting two sinister horns curling backward from his head. His mane-like hair was blond, a rarity among the demons, and his eyes red as blood. The second Demon King, Gordogias Orgi. He was sitting on an obsidian throne that looked like it was way more uncomfortable than even the seat of reflection. In his hand was a spear, so black it could have been darkness itself condensed into a weapon.

Since I was a demon now, thanks to my horns, I could get a read on just how bizarre his magical energy was. Prati was like a boulder, Sophia like a tornado, but he was something else entirely. What was this? He was like a massive whirlpool. No, that didn’t do it justice. It was closer to something like the Dark Portal, more of a phenomenon than a person.

“I see,” Ante murmured. “He is rather impressive.”

I straightened my posture. At least I wasn’t walking into this alone. Ante gave a quiet chuckle.

“It has been quite some time, Zilbagias.” The Demon King examined me with his gaze.

“For being so feeble, you humans did well.”

“Hmm? Even for a baby, he has quite the daring look to him.”

His expression wasn’t much different from our previous encounters.

“You have grown considerably since I last saw you.” I doubted it was my imagination putting the slight hint of irony in his voice.

“It has been a long time, father. As you can see, my horns have finally come in.” *It’s really been too long, Demon King. I’m glad you’re doing so, so well!*

“Your Majesty!” a woman’s voice called out, calling my attention to the women standing on either side of the throne. One, with blue hair tied up in a complex weave, was familiar to me.

“What is it, Laz?” The Demon King looked at her as a look of boredom crept onto his face. She was Lazriel, mother of the first demon prince, and the woman who had seen us off when we left for the Dark Portal.

“You and Pratifya are not the only members of the Orgi and Rage families to wed,” she spoke with a voice as smooth as syrup while glaring at me.

“Exhibiting Bloodline Magic of both families is insufficient evidence that he is truly your son.”

The sound of something creaking caught my attention. I turned to see Prati was grinding her teeth behind an otherwise placid expression.

“Zilbagias.” The Demon King turned back to me with a small sigh. “**Name** yourself.”

“*My name is Zilbagias,*” I replied, drawing the obsidian knife from the other day from my belt. “*Gordogias is my father, Pratifya my mother.*”

“There you have it, Laz.”

“But Your Majesty...”

“False names are useless when **Naming.**” The Demon King laughed as he slowly rose to his feet. “And there’s only one demon with the name Zilbagias, and that’s him. End of discussion.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I apologize for my impertinence.” Lazriel retreated with a meek bow.

“Allow me to welcome you once again, Zilbagias. I am glad you will be joining us.” With a gesture indicating I should follow him, he glanced over at Prati.

“You’ve done well, Prati.”

His voice was actually surprisingly gentle... Hold on a second! He had actually used the nickname! Even Lazriel had one! I had to do a double take, quickly

glancing at my own mother.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. I have long awaited this day, and I’m quite moved to see it finally arrive.” As Prati replied, her expression was akin to a lovestruck little girl. I had to look away to keep myself from cringing considering how gross it was. It certainly wasn’t for the faint of heart, or at least my heart.

“Now, Zilbagias, enjoy your meal with your father.” Her usual face returned in no time, turning to me with a smile. Huh. That was a rather dangerous-looking smile.

“Yes, mother.” My expression was probably not all that different from hers as I replied.

Leaving the mothers behind, I followed the Demon King out of the throne room.

“What’s wrong? Uneasy without your mother?” the Demon King teased me as we walked. The distance between us felt strange, somewhere between friendliness and cold formality.

“Not at all. I was only curious what would happen back in the throne room without your presence.” After a bit of deliberation, I decided to just approach him normally.

“Ha. Even as Demon King, I’d think twice before getting in the middle of that mess. Hopefully they can restrain themselves and just leave peacefully.” He grinned. Damn. It was tough to get a read on him. I didn’t really know which angle to approach this guy from. The best I could manage was a strained smile in reply.

The depths of the palace were a more private space. Unlike the entrance, the halls here were virtually devoid of decoration, giving it a much calmer atmosphere.

“This is a story I tell all my children on their first day in the palace,” the Demon King suddenly began to speak. “I am the second son of the previous Demon King.”

Oh?

“To be frank, my elder brother was nothing more than a troublemaker. Arrogant in his position as first prince, he wasted his days in the depths of depravity. From the day he was born, he assumed the heavens would gift wrap the throne and drop it in his lap one day. He was rotten to the core. So naturally, I killed him,” he spat. “With his foolish thinking he lacked the effort to train, so he couldn’t survive two rounds of combat with me. My sister wasn’t much different. She poured all of her passion into decorating herself with treasures, the throne simply another piece of jewelry she wanted for her collection. She also lasted only two rounds.”

Slowly, he turned to look me in the eye, his gaze nailing me to the floor. “The mantle of king is a heavy duty. Only those strong enough can bear such a weighty responsibility, Zilbagias,” he declared. “It’s not my intention to stir up conflict between you and your siblings. To be clear, I feel fighting amongst your own family to be the pinnacle of idiocy. But if you look upon your siblings and find any of them unworthy, if you find any of them incapable to carry the mantle of king, do not hesitate for a moment.”

“Yes, father.”

Don’t worry your pretty little head. Even if they are the most suitable candidate for demon king in the whole wide world, I’m not gonna hesitate for a second.

“Well, never mind all that for now. This is a place for you to unwind and take it easy. All of this is simply hypothetical. You understand?” He laughed, putting a hand on the door before him. “Are you nervous, Zilbagias?”

So my brothers and sisters were beyond this door? I shrugged, giving my honest feelings. “Honestly, not much. At least when compared to meeting with you.”

The Demon King barked a laugh, giving me a playful slap on the head.

The door opened, revealing a round table. The king’s seat was obvious. Large and black like his throne, but unlike said throne, it looked a lot more comfortable. The other seats were filled with lounging demons.

“So you finally decided to grace us with your presence? I was getting sick of waiting.” The first to speak was seated beside the king’s chair, a man with blue

hair aiming a fearless smile in my direction. He struck me as the archetypical “dandy,” his good looks not a hair behind mine. But underneath the handsome exterior was the solid build of a tempered warrior. I could see small traces of Lazriel in him. Though to be fair, the blue hair was a dead giveaway.

The first demon prince, Aiogias, the Frozen Hell.

“Huh, it’s just some punk.” Opposite Aiogias, on the other side of the Demon King’s seat, was a woman with sharp features and burning red hair, propping her head up with a hand. Her gaze was like that of a ferocious predator, like a wolf sizing up its prey.

The second princess, Rubifya, the Pyroclast.

“Dang. There goes my hope for another girl.” Beside Rubifya was a young man with platinum blond hair and soft features, whose interest in me vanished upon his first glance. His features were so delicate, it may cause many to doubt he was a demon at all. He looked like your typical womanizer. But the intense swirl of magic about him crushed any speculation that he was just some average pretty boy.

The third demon prince, Daiagias, the All-Loving. Or the Lustful, depending on who you asked.

Beside him was an empty seat. Uh, I guess the fourth prince wasn’t here?

“Come on.” The next voice barely escaped from a mouth filled to the brim with food. “Hurry up, I’m starving.” I guess we were skipping right to number five, this girl stuffing her face with food. She had reddish-purple hair, and was wasting no time devouring the fruit and ham on the table. There was something charming about her, but the bits of food stuck to her face completely ruined it.

The fifth demon princess, Spinezia, the Glutton.

Opposite of her was another girl, snoring away without a care in the world as she reclined in her chair. She was probably the plainest looking of everyone here with her brown hair. That was if you could ignore the fact she had no issue falling asleep despite her current company. She was the youngest of the lot, and in terms of appearance, she looked to be about my age.

The sixth demon princess, Topazia, the Sleeping Beauty.

“Ah, sorry, sorry! I’m back!” A rough voice came from behind me. I guess that was the guy who was missing? Turning around to look...

I felt like I had taken a hammer to the gut.

Visions of darkness, fire, and smoke flooded my mind like a torrent, every single nightmare vividly coming to life. Behind us was a demon with vibrant green hair. His face was exuding arrogance. The demon’s eyes glimmered like a snake’s, filled with malice. He scratched at his curly hair, a rarity among the demons, as his snakelike gaze looked down at me dubiously.

“So this is the new little brother, is it?”

That voice! That hair! I remember you! No matter how mangled my memories became, I could never forget your face! The face illuminated by the fires of our homes! You’re the one who reduced my village to ash! You’re the one who killed my father!

“We all done with introductions? I’m Lord Emergias. Don’t forget it.”

The fourth demon prince, Emergias, the Envious. If I accomplished nothing else in this life, I was going to kill this guy! No way in hell anything would get in the way of that!



I hated the Demon King. I hated his army. But more than any of that, I hated this guy! Fourth demon prince Emergias... I was here because of him! There wasn't a chance in hell that I could ever forgive him. I had relived that dream over and over in my head. *Strangling you and strangling you until your last gasp of air. How many times?! How many times did I go back in time and strangle you with my own hands?! Now I'd get revenge for my father, my mother, my whole village!*

"My my, what an incredible tantrum. Not some violent storm, more like a quaking eruption." I felt a hand on mine. So caught up in my blind rage, I hadn't noticed Ante appearing beside me. Or wait, was this just an illusion of her? She was holding my hand back, preventing it from reaching the obsidian knife on my belt. *"This is an aching you must bear for now, Alexander. Your mask is in jeopardy of slipping."*

Her vividly shimmering eyes caught mine. Color slowly seeped back into my bloodred vision. After stroking my cheek, Ante vanished. As she did, Emergias's towering gaze, now marred by confusion, snapped back into focus.

"What's with you?"

"Sorry." I took a deep breath, standing up straight. "I was just caught off guard hearing someone from my rear."

"Ha. Did I scare you?" Emergias ruffled my hair with a grin. "I'm sure your nerves are a wreck because you're without your beloved mother. No need to worry, little guy. We're not going to eat you. Not right away at least."

You're the one who killed my beloved mother and father. Look down on me all you want. Soon enough it will be me looking down on you while I beat you to death.

Heedless of my rage boiling just beneath the surface, the others began introducing themselves. "I'm sure you already know all about us, but the least we could do is tell you our names. I am the eldest son of the king, Aiogias." Folding his hands on the table in front of him, the first demon prince Aiogias smiled. The friendliness of his greeting did nothing to hide the cold light in his eyes. It was like they were saying, "If you couldn't figure that much out on your own, you're useless to us."

“One day I will be the Demon King. If you afford me the proper respect, I will honor it in turn.”

Getting started already, are we? The atmosphere turned frigid.

“Am I just invisible to you or something?” Second Princess Rubifya snorted, making no attempt to hide her disdain. Her brilliant red hair and eyes wavered as they were saturated with magic. She looked like a dragon who had just caught someone red-handed with her favorite piece of treasure.

“Of course not,” Aiogias replied calmly. “My comments were not made carelessly. I took you into consideration.” His icy smile didn’t falter in the slightest as he shifted his gaze to his sister.

Based on everything I had learned, Rubifya was sixty years old, and Aiogias seventy. Despite the ten-year gap, Rubifya’s behavior showed she was quite powerful in her own right. Her well tempered magic swirled slowly around her, but no doubt hid an explosive power. It was like she was boiling lava, steady but deadly.

On the other side was Aiogias who showed no openings at all. He was youthful for a demon, but carried himself like a seasoned veteran. His subdued composure was like a predator waiting to ambush their prey. He struck me as a man who meticulously sharpened every aspect of himself to perfection, someone who expected only the best out of himself and others.

His gaze returned to me. “As you can see, we are divided into two camps. Take this seating arrangement for example. It’s a microcosm of our situation.”

So with the Demon King in the middle, Aiogias’s faction sat on one side, and Rubifya’s on the other? On Aiogias’s side were Emergias, arms crossed and clearly irritated by the whole situation, and Spinezia, fifth demon princess, still gobbling down food despite the icy atmosphere. It looked like she was listening, but with so much food crammed in her gullet, it wasn’t like she could add anything to the conversation.

On Rubifya’s side were the third prince Daiagias, fixing his hair using a hand mirror as if to say he couldn’t care less about everything that was going on. *In that case, what are you even doing here, man?* And the sixth princess Topazia, still snoozing away. *You too. If you’re just going to sit there and catch some z’s,*

what are you even doing here? What's your deal?

And the newest addition, an eighth seat directly across the table from the Demon King, was the seventh demon prince Zilbagias, sandwiched between both sides. *Well...huh.*

“What?” Rubifya glared at me, crossing her arms beneath her ample chest. “If you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

“Ah, it’s nothing,” I replied. “I was just thinking you’re all quite...unique.”

The Demon King, Aiogias, and Rubifya all frowned in unison. There was no denying they were all blood-related.

“Zilbagias, think long and hard about your future here from this day onward. There’s only one proper choice, and it’s plainly evident.” The first to recover was Aiogias, flashing another smile. Never mind the green-haired piece of shit beside him, it was pretty bold to call his faction the “proper choice” with that food-obsessed wacko Spinezia over there on their side.

“We’re no weaker when it comes to ability,” Rubifya growled, but her declaration fell flat with the hair stylist and snoring princess at her side. Well, I’m sure there were various familial connections and subordinates that needed to be accounted for when it came to their capability.

But when it came to these factions, Prati and I were on the same page.

“By all means, don’t let my presence intrude upon your dispute.” My curt response was basically to say, “Go nuts and have fun.”

“I think you misunderstood, that was not a request for your permission.” Aiogias’s eyes narrowed. “We’re telling you to pick a side. Fence-sitting isn’t an option here.”

Rubifya stared at me wordlessly, tacitly agreeing.

Come on, is that really how you talk to your five-year-old brother? Granted, when looking at the situation from its entire scope, the bigger problem was those who had dragged a five-year-old into this mess. Rationally speaking, two people over sixty years old talking to someone my age like this was crossing the line quite a bit. It was laughable. So laughable that I found myself unconsciously

chuckling.

“Did I say something strange?” Aiogias frowned.

“No, not at all. Just crossed my mind how desperate both of you must be to pressure a five-year-old into joining your cause.”

Aiogias and Rubifya shared a glance.

“Huh.”

“I guess he has a point.”

Though the Demon King’s face had been stoic and expressionless thus far, I noticed the corners of his mouth start to twitch as he looked away. *Don’t you start laughing now.*

“Five. Five, huh? I suppose I did hear that you were that young.” Aiogias gave a troubled look.

“Must’ve completely slipped my mind given your appearance and demeanor. You don’t look like a baby at all.” Rubifya slumped back with an exasperated sigh. “I’m not desperate enough to depend on a five-year-old. Not yet.”

“For once, I agree with you. At least for the time being.” Leaning back in his chair, Aiogias gave a soft laugh. “But let me be clear. Converse with those close to you, and decide on the trajectory of your future before you reach adulthood. There’s no easy way to truly live. You can’t just pick the winning side and be done with it. The day will come where you will have to pick a side.”

“Life or death, it’s your choice,” Rubifya added. “We’re cutting you some slack for now, but weakness is not permitted at this table. If you fear getting in harm’s way, don’t come back. Go live as some ordinary demon.”

The two of you can coexist pretty well, huh? You’re perfectly in sync.

And even those who seemed lost in their own little worlds, and showed no interest in these games, had clearly picked a side. I guess you could say that was a display of their own resolve.

“Fence-sitting isn’t an option. I will have to choose. I understand,” I answered quietly. There was no middle ground. The day would come where I’d have to settle on my friends and enemies.

That said, the answer was easy. Everyone at this table was my enemy. Though there wasn't any reason to make an open declaration like that anytime soon. I didn't need to draw that much attention at this early stage. That was the decision I had made long ago, and it was one Prati agreed with. *A choice between life or death? You really understand the situation quite well, Rubifya. Because if you choose to be my enemy, only one fate awaits you.* A deep darkness started to spread within my heart. Though I had no clue if any of the other heirs picked up on it.

Rubifya started licking her lips while Aiogias's smile deepened.

"Shall we go ahead and eat? I'm feeling famished," seaweed head started to complain.

"My girls are awaiting my return. I need to head back to them soon so we can continue," Daiagias said, snapping his mirror shut. *Continue what, exactly?*

"Hurry up," Spinezia said, somehow managing to speak with a mouthful of food. "I really want to get to the main dish already." *Does she ever stop eating?*

Topazia continued snoring, showing no sign that she was going to wake up anytime soon to partake in the meal before her.

Everyone here was my enemy. Or at least they were supposed to be. Maintaining any sort of tension around them was kind of difficult.

"I have to say, the only redeeming thing about these meals is that the food is superb. Oh, I'm sorry, maybe the little wittle baby only wants some milk from mommy?" the piece of living garbage mocked me from across the table. Whatever. Wasn't like there was anything I could do about him now, so I just ignored him.

But someday I'd come for him. *You, your mommy, and your daddy are all as good as dead.*

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I had very few pleasures in life, but one was food. And man, I really did love food.

It was no different in my previous life. With the war and everything else going

on, pretty much all the human nations were on the brink of poverty. But when it came to soldiers on the front lines, they were able to satisfy their appetite pretty well. To be frank, they needed to. Without food, morale would plummet, and without morale there was no way they could keep fighting. Since heroes like me were usually thrown into the thick of things on precarious battlefields, they would let us eat like kings whenever possible. Countless times I thought each meal would be my last. And for some reason, those who couldn't stomach those feasts or who were in perpetual despair never lasted long.

So I made sure not to take it for granted, and to enjoy all that food as much as possible. Each bite could help me survive just a little longer. Maybe even give me the strength to kill one last demon before I took my final breath. And so I learned to savor each and every meal, no matter the circumstances.

That entire spiel was a preface to say one thing: the food presented to the Demon King's family was insanely good. Here I was, sitting across the table from the man responsible for killing my parents, and all I could think about was food. Some things never change. If anything, my burning hatred for him fueled my taste buds and made everything taste ten times better. Was that kinda shameless? Sure. But to be *that* shameless was even a shock to me.

The hors d'oeuvres were served on transparent crystal dishes—a collection of sliced ham and seasonal fruit and vegetables arranged to make a miniature garden before us. This entire meal was nothing short of a work of art. It was clear that this chef was the real deal. The green mousse served alongside everything was to die for. Each bite submerged my tongue in pleasure, sending waves of an ecstatic tingling sensation over my tongue. The pleasure was so great I couldn't help but moan. It made me wonder if it was laced with something.

The towering Demon King stooping down to lift tiny spoonfuls of mousse to his mouth was downright comical. The way Aiogias handled his knife and fork with elegance and skill came off as pretty obnoxious.

The fifth demon princess? Well, she continued where she'd left off: stuffing herself to her heart's content. It turned out the food she had been devouring before was the same hors d'oeuvres we were eating now. I could feel the chef's

silent protests from here as she piled food onto her plate with not a care in the world regarding its artistic presentation.

Before that first course had a chance to put a dent in our appetites, a white potage was wheeled out. Mashed vegetables and an abundance of butter had been used to give the soup a weighty flavor. The flavor was thick and strong, but it didn't linger for long. Before I knew it, spoonful after spoonful had left the bowl in front of me completely bare. The small portion size was perfect for acting as a phenomenal seasoning for the meal.

Rubifya finished her soup swiftly, and proceeded to lean back and fold her arms, staring daggers across the table. It was like she was sizing up her prey, trying to find chinks in their armor to determine how to finish them off. It was also possible that maybe she just had a naturally sharp and stern look to her eyes.

At this point, Sleeping Beauty had finally awoken from her slumber and started digging into her appetizers. She'd been passed out for so long I had started to wonder if all the food they put in front of her would go to waste. Even the green-haired asshole took envious glances at her plate every now and then.

By the way, I managed to catch her gaze at one point, so I nodded at her as a sort of greeting. She completely ignored me, though. Or rather, her gaze slid over me, like I didn't exist at all. I couldn't help but wonder if she was still half asleep, and just somehow managing to eat while sleeping with her eyes open.

Soon it was time for the main course, roast duck. The unabashedly fatty breast meat had been cooked gently enough that it retained a faint pinkish hue, then adorned with a rich fig sauce. The placement of the sauce was simply incredible. In terms of seasoning, it was so faintly salted, the naked eye was almost completely unaware of its presence. But the constantly shifting gradient of flavor was all the evidence anyone needed. Pretty much all the dishes up to that point had been masterpieces in my eyes, but having the same dish present a gradually shifting flavor, with each flavor being phenomenal in its own right, was like an otherworldly experience.

The Demon King seemed quite fond of this dish, every bite eliciting a satisfied grunt. He ate at a slow and meticulous pace, as if he never wanted the meal to come to an end. The third prince mumbled something about “needing more vigor” as he took a second helping. Not wanting to be outdone, the green-haired clown did the same.

The gutsy gorger? She was just doing her usual thing. You know, perpetually asking for seconds. The amount of meat on her plate should’ve been more than enough, but it seemed all that extra food just made her crave even more.

Though I hesitated for a bit, I decided to follow my head instead of my stomach, considering my body was still growing, so I refrained from a second plate. That turned out to be the right choice. The fatty meat I had already eaten took a short while until it finally hit me, like a right hook. To be fair, when the enormous Demon King was content with a single plate, it should’ve been obvious. Daiagias happily polished off his second helping, but the green piece of garbage clearly had second thoughts halfway through his.

As I basked in the satisfaction brought on by the main course, dessert and hot drinks were served. Ice cream topped with whipped cream. I probably should’ve expected a magical race like the demons to serve frozen desserts. The sweetness of the dessert was perfectly offset by the bitterness of the “tea,” a black drink they called “coffee,” both working cohesively to dissolve the greasy aftertaste of the duck.

It was simply incredible. I was completely in awe. This was easily the most culturally refined meal I’d had since being reborn. It was no contest. Up until now, I had been served pretty good food given I was a prince and all, but this was on a whole different level. It wasn’t until later that I would learn the chef was a human cook who once served royalty but had been taken prisoner. That explained everything.

Everyone else at the table was enjoying their coffee, relishing in the aftermath of the meal. Well, everyone aside from the gutsy gorger, of course. She was still digging into ice cream from the bucket in front of her. Just watching her was giving me a brain freeze.

“Ah, your manners were so good it slipped my mind that there’s something I need to warn you about, Zilbagias,” the Demon King broke the silence. “While at this table, you must abide by one single rule.”

Though the Demon King’s face was dead serious, Aiogias and Rubifya followed him up with grins on their faces. “No politics while we’re eating,” they said in unison.

“Anyone who breaks this rule will be kicked out immediately. Keep that in mind,” the king added, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Understood.”

So when at this table, we were like a normal family. Or as normal as we could possibly get.

The illusion quickly shattered once we finished our coffee. Even the gutsy gorger was satisfied with a single cup. Surprising, I know.

“It pleases me that this first meeting went without incident.” The Demon King’s expression reverted to the cold and rigid one he’d had on the throne. “Anything to report?”

Complete and utter silence. Well, aside from Topazia. She went right back to quietly snoring. *Sleeping right after a meal like that is going to give your stomach a beating, kid.*

“Very well. Dismissed.”

With that, Daiagias jumped to his feet and bolted from the room. He had said something about his girls waiting for him.

“See you next week, then,” Rubifya said, picking up Sleeping Beauty and carrying her out. Making the boss of your faction carry you home? That took some balls, doubly so.

“Have a good night, everyone,” Aiogias stood, making a graceful departure, followed by a lazy green smear. I guess the members of the opposing factions left at separate times. Otherwise, it would probably have been pretty awkward while descending the stairs.

The gutsy gorger was off in her own little world while sitting in her chair, rubbing her freshly swollen stomach. Granted, given how much she'd eaten, one would think she would be inflated like a balloon.

"Excuse me, father," I called out to the Demon King as he was getting ready to leave through the back door of the room.

"What is it?"

"Would it be possible for me to observe you at work sometime?"

The Demon King's eyebrows rose. It was a spur-of-the-moment thought, but I couldn't pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this. Just imagine the kind of juicy inside info I could get on the Demon King's life.

"Maybe some other time. Today I have to meet with the leadership."

"The leadership?"

"Myself, the commander of the royal guard, the commander of the devil corps, the chief of the dragons, the liches, the vampire lords, the night elf king, and the beastfolk king."

Hold up, all the leaders of the Demon King's army were going to be gathering in one place?! That's exactly where I wanna be! I have to see that with my own eyes!

"Naturally, simply being my son isn't enough to earn you a spot at that table." He turned to leave, leaving me to slump in disappointment. "There shouldn't be an issue with you observing my normal duties, but I cannot promise it will be anything interesting."

"I want to understand the kind of work you do," I responded.

"As Demon King?" The question was surprisingly serious.

After a moment of hesitation, I responded. "Yes."

"Very well. I'll keep that in mind for next week." With a small grin, the Demon King made his departure.

That had gone pretty well. This was my first chance to see if I could find any weakness he may have had. Satisfied with my steps toward progress, I turned

around to find the gutsy gorger staring at me.

“Can I help you with something?”

“I was just thinking back to when I was a kid.” I was kinda stunned hearing her speak without her mouth being stuffed with food for the first time. “Back then, I had lofty dreams of being anything I wanted to be.” A distant look appeared in Spinezia’s eyes, but only for a moment. Then, she slowly stood up from her seat, her swollen belly having already returned to its normal shape.

“Man, I’m starving,” she muttered, shuffling out of the room as if she’d completely forgotten about me. If she was sent to the front lines, she would devour all of their provisions in the snap of a finger. Literally. The devil pact she’d made likely gave her power the more she ate, but I couldn’t help but question its efficiency.

I stepped out of the room.

“Father always does take a liking to those who are so prim and proper.” I was immediately confronted by a rough voice. Just outside the door, the broccoli-headed Emergias was reclining against the wall. “That was quite the move back there. Did mommy teach you that?”

His gaze felt sticky as it probed every inch of me. What was his angle? Investigating me under orders from Aiogias seemed possible.

There were a few potential options. I could respond seriously, or wave him off and keep things brief. Or, I could leave him empty-handed. I chose the last option, ignoring him entirely as I left. Having a serious conversation with that monster might take a turn for the worse. I also wasn’t positive I could restrain myself.

“What a brat.” Fourth Prince Emergias clicked his tongue as he glared at my back.

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“Welcome back, Lord Zilbagias.”

Upon stepping out of the palace, I came across a bored-looking Sophia, whose face lit up at the sight of me. No way was she happy I’d come out safe and

sound. Her delight was probably more about the fact she didn't have to sit around and twiddle her thumbs anymore. My initial instinct was to ask where Prati was, but I hesitated. Asking about her right after exiting the palace seemed a bit childish, and reeked of being raised by an overprotective parent.

"Where is mother?" Despite my hesitation, I ended up asking anyway. It wasn't like I had any better conversation starters.

"My lady had some urgent business to attend to."

"An emergency, huh?"

"Yes. The wounded have returned from the front lines. Even among the Rage family, very few are capable of healing wounds inflicted by holy weapons."

I nodded along as Sophia and I began walking. The holy property was humanity's, and particularly the Holy Church's, trump card. It was a special magic gifted to us by the gods of light. So special in fact that only a select few chosen by ritual could wield it. That light was a beacon of hope for humanity, and a signal of demise for our enemies. Warriors who displayed a talent for using it were known as heroes. That holy magic was the sole reason humanity had a fighting chance against the demons and devils.

"Quite the clever little curse," Ante commented from inside me.

What curse would that be?

"This 'holy magic' you speak of."

What exactly do you mean, Ante? That power is a blessing bestowed upon humanity by the gods of light.

"Blessings and curses are two sides of the same coin. When you say it was gifted to you by the gods of light, when exactly was that?"

It's not like I have an exact timetable or something. Apparently, even the forest elves with their long life spans don't have a clue. The one piece of evidence we have is old records passed down by the ancient heroes and holy warriors. Those date back to like four or five thousand years ago, I think?

"Pretty slim evidence it comes from the gods, then, is it not?"

Ante chuckled, though it came across as more of a sarcastic laugh.

“Don’t forget what I told you back in the Abyss. There’s a point where beings become so powerful that they eventually lose their sense of self, sublimating into the realm of concepts.”

You did say something like that. And you also said you were so powerful that you were on the brink of reaching a similar fate.

“That I did. There’s no reason to doubt these gods of light existed at one point. The responsibility for giving birth to this world is on their shoulders. Considering that, a dizzying amount of time has passed since they became mere concepts. The purpose of their current existence is to keep the world functioning.”

The gods of light haven’t intervened in our world in quite some time. No matter how much humanity suffers, no matter how strong the powers of darkness grow, they have faith that humanity has the power to overcome any adversity. The gifts of their blessings are proof of that, and now they observe our continued struggle. At least, that’s what the pope told us.

“Well, I suppose there’s truth in that. As long as you can accept those observing eyes aren’t exactly processing anything they see.”

I looked up at the night sky. So what about the gods of darkness, then?

“They are in a similar boat, I imagine. Though they will lay their veil of darkness over this world every night, they will offer no aid to the demons now.”

As shocking as this all seemed, it wasn’t exactly unbelievable.

“You seem remarkably calm.”

Even though I was a hero, I wasn’t very devout in the teachings. After the atrocities I had witnessed that came upon my village, it was kind of hard to fathom how such cruel things were allowed to happen in this world. There were many days where I cursed the gods. When I’d awakened my ability to use holy magic, do you know how I’d reacted? I had been pissed. “You were too late,” I’d ranted and raved at them. I wasn’t thankful, not one bit.

That’s the thing that had always baffled me. Why had someone like me, who was so irreverent, been chosen by the gods? But now it made sense. Choosing me was far from the actual truth. So what is the holy property, then?

“You can think of it as a particular breed of curse. All of humanity believes in this holy magic, yes?”

Believing in it isn't really an issue. It just exists.

“Yes, that alone is the general foundation for magic of that sort. Wielding such a belief so strongly causes such a belief to blossom, enough so it changes the world. Normally, that would only be applicable to those who possess tremendous will and magical power, but humanity is plentiful, and quite adept at uniting their powers.”

Kinda like how those soldiers from the other day had layered their weak magic shields to create a single, stronger one.

“If I had to guess, the ones responsible are probably human sages. Noticing this penchant of humanity's, they gathered the will and faith of the people together to create this form. It was placed into the hands of a chosen few, selected by ritual. If they carelessly gave the power to everyone, it would spread thin to the point of uselessness. But if it could be concentrated into the hands of a few...”

Even the weakest of races would be able to combat their superiors.

“The ritual involved likely selects candidates based on certain parameters. For example, people of a certain lineage...”

Now that I thought about it, it was quite common for royalty and the pope's family to manifest it.

“Or perhaps those with a powerful will, or an extreme hatred for the enemies of humanity.”

That would be me. So that's the source of all of this. That's why I was chosen.

“Did that rattle you a bit?”

You flip my view of the world on its head, and here you are being all casual. But everything you said makes sense.

“I expected you to be a bit more, how should I put this, despondent?”

It didn't matter if it was ancient sages or whatever, whoever put this system into place had my respect. It was the only reason we weren't wiped out ages

ago. I could understand why they weren't completely transparent with everyone. *An air of mystery makes magic stronger, right?*

There was one more question on my mind, though. *When it comes to the actual ability to use holy magic, is it more about the body or the soul? Being reborn as a denizen of the dark, I kind of assumed that meant the gods of light abandoned me, meaning I couldn't use it anymore.*

"Only one way to know for sure. Later, of course. In secret."

I glanced over at Sophia.

"Is something wrong?" the devil asked.

"I'd like to ask for a favor."

Noticing I was keeping my voice low, Sophia immediately deployed her magic with a snap of her fingers. The air around us went tight, signaling we were now enclosed in a soundproof barrier. Considering its convenience, figuring out how to do that was on my to-do list.

"I want to be educated on the military histories of the other heirs, down to the tiniest of details."

"All of them?" Sophia's eyes began to sparkle.

"Yes, all of them. Even down to the last minor scuffles." For example, say, even the destruction of some tiny village on the edge of a small human kingdom.

I had a sliver of hope. Maybe this could help me remember the name of my village which had been lost to my moth-eaten memories.

"The amount of information required would be quite immense," Sophia warned.

"Is such a request too difficult?" I asked.

The devil gave me a daring grin. "That was a warning for *you*, Lord Zilbagias. All of those records—at least, all that have been put to paper—are right here." She tapped a finger to her forehead. "Except for the most recent ones, of course."

So she didn't have to look them up in an archive or something?

"But sharing that much information verbally would be quite complicated. Would you mind if I went to get some paper?"

"Of course not." That was my actual objective. I just needed to get rid of her for a bit.

Returning to our living space in the castle, I met up with Garunya. As Sophia left to search for some paper, I retreated to my personal room.

"Garunya, I need to discuss something with my devil in private. Could you step out for a moment?"

"Understood!"

It was times like this that made me grateful for her unconditional loyalty. Even so, it wasn't like the door was enough to stop her from hearing.

"So we will have to be silent?"

Exactly. Whispering an incantation inside my head should be sufficient, even if just resulting in a minor effect.

I raised my right...no, just to be safe, my left hand, focusing magic into the tip of my finger. It felt kind of late to be getting nervous, but my heart was racing.

But that was just it. There was nothing to be afraid of. No matter what anyone said, I was a hero. The hero Alexander.

Gods of light, turn your gaze onto me.

The incantation I recited in my head somehow felt hollow, but I wasn't lying or saying it half-heartedly. Even if the gods saw nothing, I still wanted them to witness this. I'd burn this image into their unseeing eyes.

Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo.

May your holy light shine in my hands.

With a flash, a tiny light popped into existence at my fingertip. Effortlessly. A bright, silver light. And in the next moment, searing pain assaulted my hand.

“Agh!” I tried to stifle the cry of pain to avoid causing Garunya to rush into the room. I immediately dispersed my magical energy, erasing the holy glow.

“Ah, so that is how it is...” Ante murmured thoughtfully.

The soul is the source for the aptitude of holy magic, meaning I was still capable of calling upon those abilities. But my body was now at conflict with my soul—my soul’s vessel no longer being human, but now that of a demon, the sworn enemies of humanity.

As a result, my finger had been charred.

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It wasn’t long before Sophia returned. So I went ahead and started reading the documents she was preparing. While putting on my best poker face, of course. Honestly, it had been smart thinking on my part to use my nondominant hand for my little experiment. If I had used my right hand, there was no way I could have hidden my wound while studying or training.

Speaking of smart thinking, thank goodness I’d used a silent incantation, leaving me with only a minor injury. Otherwise, my injury would’ve been anything but minor. A wound like this would have no issue healing naturally over time. If I had been wounded so badly that I needed to rely on **Transposition**, things would’ve gotten really bad, really fast. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that a skilled healer like Prati would be able to instantly tell the difference between a normal burn and one caused by holy magic. No matter the amount of excuses, the assumed threat of someone with holy magic hiding within the castle walls would have thrown the whole place into an uproar. That experiment had been dangerous in a multitude of ways.

“I know it’s a bit late to be asking this, but why the sudden interest in their military records?” Sophia asked as she stared intently at the first sheet of paper in front of her.

“Mostly curiosity. Now that I have met them, I want to compare how strong they look to how strong they actually are.”

“Interesting. That’s not a bad idea.” Waves of magical energy poured from Sophia’s eyes, and with a sound like paper burning, letters began to appear on the surface of the page. Apparently, that was the kind of magic she could use as a devil of knowledge. She could transfer her own knowledge onto other objects.

“That’s pretty convenient. You don’t even need a pen.”

“Convenient, yes, but that doesn’t mean I never require the use of a pen.” Passing me the finished paper, she took another sheet. “I can create large blocks of text like this from memory, but if it’s text that I just think up myself, I can only print it one word at a time. In that case, it would be faster to just use a pen.”

For the record, she was ridiculously fast at writing. Her penmanship still looked beautiful no matter how fast she went, in contrast to how sloppy shorthand writing could be for ordinary people.

“And it’s not like I can sign official documents like this, now can I?”

Nodding with a hum, I set aside the page I had finished reading, and took the next one. Right now, we were going through the history of the third demon prince. I was mainly interested in the emerald shit stain, but Sophia had no way of knowing that. So naturally, she had started with Aiogias, him being the oldest of them. Unfortunately, I had to suck it up and read them in order.

It was a remarkable record; that was probably the best way I could describe it. Aiogias had already attained the rank of archduke, qualifying him for succession to the throne. Rubifya was the same. In terms of enemies slain in battle, each of them was in the four-digit range. Judging by the brief look over their records, they didn’t seem to be exaggerated either. Four digits...even in my previous life as a human where every day had felt like a war, I wasn’t sure I’d even made it to three.

Rubifya apparently could use powerful fire magic. The words “hot pursuit” frequently came up in her record. It was like she was on Aiogias’s heels, trying desperately to catch up to him and eventually overtake him. There were a few cases where she’d engulfed entire fortresses in flames. Among the victims of her attacks, the names of a few locations sounded faintly familiar.

Next was Daiagias. As his behavior earlier had indicated, it seemed he had

dozens of demon, devil, night elf, and even beastfolk girls waiting for him. He even brought them with him to the front lines, something the author of this report tried to criticize by beating around the bush.

As much as that made me laugh, his results spoke for themselves. He had the rank of duke. Despite being on the younger side of fifty, he was already higher in rank than Count Owarg, the former chief of the Orgi family.

“And here are the records of the fourth prince.”

Finally, the good stuff. I accepted the page from her, keeping my expression masked.

The fourth demon prince, Emergias. His first battle had been at age fourteen—so before he was recognized as an adult. It had to have been an attack on a small border kingdom... The Duchy of Wiliken. The campaign had toppled the city of Guarnelli and its surrounding villages. Ekrunde, Lindval, Turin...Tancrette.

With a snap, it was like the pieces of a puzzle in my head fell into place.

That was it. I remembered. Tancrette was the village chief's last name. Our village had been founded a few generations before him; at least that's what I had been told. This was my home. Tancrette. Houses built from stacking logs. The sound of woodsmen's axes. The scent of earth and trees... It was a nostalgic rush, all at once.

“Um...Master? Are you all right?” Garunya spoke hesitantly with worry in her voice.

At some point, tears had started pouring from my eyes.

“Nothing to worry about. Think I just got something in my eye.” Closing my eyes, I wiped away my tears and my feelings of nostalgia all at once.

One thing had been made perfectly clear. *There was no doubt it was you, Emergias. You were the one who destroyed my village, and killed all those innocent people.* I'd been pretty sure of it even before seeing these documents, but now it was an irrefutable fact. The rest of his record was of little interest to me, but I skimmed it anyway. He fought hard on the front lines, had many

victories, was injured, healed and recovered, then went right back to the fighting, where he was injured again. His record was no less commendable than that of his siblings.

As I read, the familiar sound of footsteps echoed from outside the door.

“How was your meal with His Majesty, Zilbagias?” Prati stepped into the room.

“It was a valuable experience, mother,” I replied, putting the report I was reading under my arm. “It seems like I may be able to accompany father and observe him while he attends to his work next week.”

“Really?! That is fantastic,” she replied, drawing out her fan to hide her beaming smile. It was the closest thing to saying “well done.” “His Majesty is quite fond of those who work diligently.”

“The other heirs told me as much.”

Prati’s eyes narrowed. “And what about them? The other heirs?”

“Aiogias and Rubifya were quite insistent I join their cliques,” I answered with a shrug. “Though both of them backed down when I questioned their desperation to seek the help of a five-year-old.”

Prati’s eyes widened, one of the night elf maids behind her failing to contain a guffaw. That was quite the rare sight. Normally those maids were all silent and expressionless, like moving statues.

“M-My apologies!” the maid said, dropping her head. Despite her dejected posture, her shoulders were still shaking. It seemed she was doing everything in her power to contain her laughter. Looking at the other maids, I could see they were all struggling to keep their composure. It seemed I had hit the bull’s-eye on that one.

“I couldn’t have given a better response myself.” Prati was clearly impressed. “In one fell swoop you managed to avoid making enemies of them directly while forcing them to withdraw of their own accord. Phenomenal.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you pick up on anything else?”

“They are a rather eccentric group. Aside from the oldest two.” Also, everything went so smoothly I almost forgot we were sharing a meal as the family of the Demon King.

But I couldn't lose focus on the fact that dinner table had been built on top of countless corpses, and unthinkable bloodshed. That was something I could never forget, nor did I have any intentions of forgiving such heinous actions.

“I was just now taking the chance to review their records to compare their apparent strength with their actual ability. After all, if I am going to aim to become Demon King...” I asked once again, “...fighting them will be unavoidable...and the same goes for killing them. Right?”

“Correct. Conflict will be inevitable.” Prati's gaze turned sharp. “Does that definite future frighten you?”

“No. I had no intentions of becoming Demon King before. My only interest was to get stronger.” I intentionally put a daring smile on my face. “But even after saying that...now that I've seen the real thing face-to-face, I have a sudden rush of motivation.” Motivated to do what, I wouldn't say.

Prati chuckled, snapping her fan shut to reveal a vicious smile to match mine. “I'm counting on you, Zilbagias.”

I'm counting on you too, Prati. I'll need your help every step of the way.

At least until that inevitable, final day.

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A few days later, I touched the crystal ball offered to me, which responded with a black light.

“Pure dark attribute.” Prati nodded, as if this was exactly what she had expected.

“Dark, huh?” I could only imagine what kind of expression I was making upon hearing that.

We were gearing up for my real magic training, so she'd decided to look into my magical affinity, only for the crystal to revert back to a nice, clean black. The crystal ball was a magical tool used to determine a person's affinity.

By the way, though we called it the “holy property,” according to Ante’s explanation it was actually more like a curse, not one of the fundamental elements that made up the world. So my holy affinity was safely kept under wraps.

By the way again, in my previous life my magical attribute had been fire. That was how I’d gotten the nickname Alexander of the Indomitable Sacred Flame.

“What is wrong, Zilbagias? Are you unsatisfied with this result?” Prati asked, crossing her arms. Her demeanor was possibly due to the fact she also possessed the dark attribute.

“I’m not unsatisfied, but if I had a choice, I would have picked fire.” The Demon King Gordogias possessed the twin attributes of fire and dark, so I’d been hoping to get the fire attribute I was familiar with from him. In terms of combat, it was pretty straightforward. Plus, it complemented holy magic and gave you resistance to your enemies’ fire magic. Considering my goal of eventually fighting the Demon King, fire would have been the best result.

“By that logic, why didn’t you hope for water?” Ante quipped.

I guess water magic had its fair share of antifire spells. But water was more for rear guards. *That’s not really my style.*

“How very like you.”

Fire matches my personality the best. That was without a doubt. I’d be a fire that consumed the demons, the devils, and the undead alike, reducing them all to ash. It was an attribute capable of displaying the burning rage in my heart.

“His Majesty also possesses the fire attribute, so I cannot fault you for thinking that way, but the dark attribute is more suitable for **Transposition**,” Prati explained with a shrug. I guess there may have been some truth in that.

*“That **Transposition** curse is like a crystallization of dark curses in itself,”* Ante commented.

Would you believe me if I told you it’s all based on love?

“In addition, you may be the first among the heirs to have the pure dark attribute,” Prati said.

“Really?”

According to her explanation, Aiogias the “Frozen Hell” had water. “The Pyroclast” Rubifya had fire. “The Lustful” Daiagias was lightning, while “The Envious” Emergias was wind. “The Glutton” Spinezia was a special case, able to wield all attributes equally, aside from holy, of course. “The Sleeping Beauty” Topazia was earth. Apparently she was quite talented when it came to handling stone. As to be expected of the princess of the Corvut family, those responsible for building the castle.

“There is no need to be worried, Zilbagias. Being someone who possesses powerful magic, your attribute makes little difference,” Prati said bluntly. “The most critical defensive wards can be used regardless of your attribute, and the next most important one for you is the **Transposition** curse, which meshes well with dark. I’m certain you will develop into a peerless warrior.”

The demons didn’t call their soldiers “battlemages” like we did. It was just assumed that all of them could use magic.

My knowledge of magic grew quite a bit that day. Most of the lesson was focused on defensive spells, as well as magic to create and transform bone. Apparently, that was something they’d intended to teach me when I got older, but Prati decided I was ready right now. It helped a lot.

I decided to take the bones of the soldiers I had killed and fuse them together to make the shaft of a spear. The head of the spear would be my obsidian knife. With that, my weapon was complete. It was one and a half meters long, just a bit taller than I was now. In terms of material quality, it was passable at best. On the upside, it being the first weapon I’d created using the bones of my first prey made it very suitable for using curses.

It was the perfect weapon to act as an extension of my magic. I felt like I could pour so much magic into it without worrying about breaking it—like the regret, the rage, the bottomless hatred of those five men lived on within the weapon, trying to suck the life from my body like some parasite. Even the best quality steel weapons humans used wouldn’t be able to even scratch it. This was truly a weapon of pure power. So lightweight, and sturdy. Even if it were to break, all it would take was a bit of magic to fix it right up. In a way, you could say it was the

ideal weapon.

At least, for starting my training for real combat.

On the parade ground, with my spear in hand, I felt my face grow stiff.

“The favored weapon of our people is the spear,” Prati said, brandishing a small metal rod, her own magic spear. The clothes she was wearing were not like her usual attire. These seemed more suited for physical activities. With a snap of magical energy, the rod extended into an elegant yet vicious weapon.

Each race had its own favored weapon. It was the weapon they were most skilled with, but more than that, it also acted as a way to draw out even more power in some sort of magical sense. Beastfolk used teeth and claws. Elves used bows and arrows. Dwarves used hammers and axes. Demons, spears. And humans, of course, used swords.

For the record, devils and dragons didn’t have any particular racial weapons. Devils didn’t come from this world in the first place, and dragons had the ultimate trump card, their own breath.

But all that aside.

“I shouldn’t have to explain what makes the spear ideal for demons. If you were wielding a spear instead of a knife against those five human soldiers, I would’ve had no reason to be worried about you,” Prati said, stroking her weapon.

I guess so. And if they had swords, let’s just say I wouldn’t be hearing this lecture at all.

Racial weapons gave their wielders special blessings. Simply having the right weapon in hand gave you an unexplainable power. If you took two human soldiers of equal strength and gave one a spear and the other a sword, despite the spear having a natural range advantage, for some reason, the one using a sword tended to be stronger.

“Spearmanship is at the heart of our culture.” Prati slowly took a stance. “We will sharpen your spearmanship to perfection. Up until now, your combat training has consisted of unarmed combat and knife fighting, but that is only for

your physical development. Just something to lean on as a last resort. Think back to all of your previous training; think of those as merely childish games.”

She gave off tremendous pressure. Undoubtedly, she was a strong warrior in her own right.

“I will personally oversee your training, by means of practical combat. To start off, I will rely solely on my spear. Once you grow more accustomed, I will utilize magic and other underhanded tactics. Every modicum of skill I have I intend to pass down to you. Fight back with all your might,” she said. “Considering your age, we are starting a bit earlier than usual, but I’m sure you will do just fine. Besides, not everyone can afford the luxury of training like this.”

Prati’s smile grew wider as her gaze drifted to the area behind me. Turning around, I saw a row of humans chained up. They were nothing like the soldiers I had fought. Most of them were barely young men, hardly more than boys, along with a few elderly guys. They seemed healthy enough, and it didn’t seem any of them were hurt, but they hung their heads despairingly, like they were being marched to the guillotine.

Well, in a way they were. Their lives would be sacrificed for my **Transposition** magic. It seemed like they knew what was to come, and had long since accepted their fate.

“The Rage family possesses more human livestock than any other family in the kingdom. We also ensure their health above all else. As such, we have luxuries like this.”

She had said this training would be practical combat, meaning injuring each other was an inevitability, and not a possibility. Pretty much anything barring instant death was on the table.

“That being said, there’s a limit to the number of humans you can expend per day. The longer you can maintain your might, the longer you will be able to train. Do keep in mind, in a real battle even the slightest of injuries can decide the fight. This is not an exercise in learning to endure pain. Consider avoiding injury to be your top priority.”

“Yes, mother,” I replied, a little surprised blood didn’t spurt out with my words. If I failed, if I got hurt, those innocent people would be the ones to pay

the price for it.

I would never let that happen!

Honestly speaking, Prati was very strong. I had defensive magic, but with her magical energy, that spear of hers would shred it apart as if it were merely a cloth. The only appropriate option was to use my spear, a weapon I was unfamiliar with, and a body that wasn't yet fully mature. If I didn't... I turned, looking at the row of terrified prisoners.

"Here I come, Zilbagias." She wasted no time signaling to me that we were getting started, slowly closing the distance between us. As if to say it didn't matter whether I was ready or not. In a real battle, the enemy would pursue me regardless.

She'd told me to fight back with all my might, right?

"My name is Zilbagias," I shouted, hoping it would help me endure the bout, even if just a little bit longer. *"I will resist, with my own life at stake!"*

A chilling smile lit Prati's face. "That's exactly the right attitude, Zilbagias."

The gentleness in those words was violently contrasted by the tip of her spear ruthlessly rushing forward.

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This boy never ceases to fascinate me, Archduchess Pratifya Rage thought as she charged with her spear. Her admiration was for none other than her son, Zilbagias. The way he stood his ground was like the last soldier standing who clung to his orders to defend his hill until his last breath.

Even though this was practical training, it was far from a real battle. But the boy's fighting spirit didn't waver. It was so intense! Pratifya knew that was just how her son always was.



Even when he was a baby, Zilbagias had displayed a remarkably strong will. At the same time, he was reserved and possessed steady composure, traits rare for a demon. However, when he was in battle, it brought out a completely different side of him. This side of him had also come out during his martial arts training with Sophia. And in his fight to the death with the human soldiers. And, of course, his training right now. *This* much intensity surpassed that of even the most bloodthirsty demon children. Writing this intensity off as nothing more than a competitive spirit would be a pathetic excuse. This was the boy who had declared that his dream was to surpass his father, Gordogias. The source of his fighting spirit was still a total mystery. What could've possibly motivated him to this extent?

Certainly, he had been raised with special care and consideration. He was only allowed to interact with those Pratifya had the utmost trust in. This was a proactive measure to ensure he didn't develop a particularly odd sense of character. The cost of that was robbing him of any chance to interact with children his own age, to cultivate that character through natural conflict with others. Getting bossed around by older children could've been a valuable experience to teach him emotional control. Even her own relatives disagreed, saying she should've raised him as a normal child. She was well aware her methods were quite unorthodox, and had enough cons to match the pros.

They weren't entirely wrong. But Pratifya had decided there was no need for Zilbagias to have those experiences. This child was special. It was as if from the moment he was born, he had been destined to become the Demon King.

He is truly a born warrior! It was like he was born with talent! No, that isn't quite right. It's like he was skilled long before he was born!

That was the appraisal of Owarg, former chief of the Orgi family.

He was clearly different from other children his age. His attitude toward combat, his readiness to fight, was on a different level. No amount of competitive spirit could prevent most children from being taken down a notch by being thrown into the middle of training. No matter how seriously they

intended to take it, their frail intensity would be worn down. They had no concept of *desperation*. The extent of their true abilities wouldn't be met by such futile efforts.

Why? Because they couldn't comprehend the meaning of true defeat. The concept of loss, how cruel and wretched it could be, was entirely beyond them. And yet, Zilbagias carried himself like it was something he knew all too well.

What a mysterious child.

For example: Pratifya's spear tore into his side. Had the wound been any deeper, he surely would've lost some organs. The pain must have been incredible. This was practical training. Any normal child would have collapsed in tears at this treatment, yet if it weren't for his face twisting in pain, an onlooker may not think Zilbagias had been wounded. He continued to move without slowing down, without hesitation. Instead, he threw himself desperately to the side, lashing out with the butt of his spear to intercept Pratifya's follow-up attack.

It was an incredible move. In battle, no matter how many tears you shed or what cries you gave, the enemy would never back down. Zilbagias understood that. Possessing the will to fight through intense pain and the fighting spirit to launch an immediate counterattack was worthy of praise. But there was still room for improvement.

"Still too soft." His movements lacked weight. As the butt of the spear swung for her face, Pratifya grabbed it with one hand and yanked hard. Zilbagias's face reflected his shock as his posture crumbled. With her other hand, she swung her spear to sweep Zilbagias's feet out from under him.

And then, before he even struck the ground, she drove its shimmering point into him.

Eyes wide, Zilbagias threw himself hard into the fall, dodging out of the way before the spear could make contact. It was a spectacular maneuver. Taking an attack like that head-on surely would've been fatal. But he hadn't been able to dodge it entirely, as the spear's blade still carved a path through his back.

Zilbagias cried out in pain. Pratifya could hear Garunya gulp a small distance away.

It seemed the wound had reached his spine. No matter how much he struggled, he would be completely immobile. While the wound itself wasn't fatal, taking that kind of injury on a real battlefield would certainly mean death. But this wasn't a battlefield, and this was her son. As a mother, she couldn't bear to see his suffering needlessly prolonged. She dropped her stance, and moved closer to rid him of his pain. That was until he turned to face her with daring, bloodshot eyes. Intense magical energy erupted from inside the boy. Strands like a spider's web shot out and wrapped around her.

"Me Ta Fesui."

His injuries had not caused his will to fight to falter in the slightest. Pratifya was astonished. Though his effort displayed incredible fighting spirit, it would prove to be ineffective. With a leathery snap, the **Curse of Transposition** was negated as Pratifya shielded herself with a shell of magical energy. The bond of a mother and son, the wound she had inflicted on him herself to enhance the curse, these factors did nothing to make up for Zilbagias's current strength against her defenses.

"I expected nothing less, Zilbagias." It was only right she would applaud the attempt. After all, it was her who had instructed him to fight back with all his might. If he had been a bit older and possessed more magical strength, or had an opponent other than Pratifya herself, his efforts would've been rewarded. His opponent would be forced to suffer for every wound they inflicted onto him, and he would be good as new. "While useful, the curse has its limits. Such as, rarely being effective against those who possess similar or greater strength than yourself. Enclosing yourself in a shell of magic and shutting away your heart is more than enough to ward off almost any curse."

Zilbagias's head dropped in frustration upon hearing the explanation, blood pouring from his mouth. "You must be in incredible pain. Allow me to ease your suffering. *Me Ta Fesui.*"

And yet another snapping sound emerged, like leather reaching its breaking

point.

“Zilbagias...” Pratifya sighed. He had resisted the curse. The boy was in quite the state. Gasping for breath, bloodshot eyes, heaving shoulders, covered in superficial cuts and scrapes, a deep wound in his side still freely bleeding, and, his newest addition, a wound on his back causing the bone underneath to be exposed. To top it all off, judging by the way his legs were splayed, he likely had no feeling in his lower body at all. Despite all of this, he still resisted?

“Zilbagias, allow me to treat your injuries. If not, they will continue to hinder you further in life,” Pratifya said gently, trying to soothe him. “They will be constant obstacles in your future. You don’t want that, do you? It’s time to concede. You’ve been bested in this fight. Any hope of reversing this situation is long gone. Or would you prefer if we wait for you to fall into unconsciousness due to blood loss?”

She could practically hear his teeth grinding. His face darkened as if he had been taken by a deep rage, more blood gushing from his wounds. Just as Pratifya began to worry things might take a turn for the worse, Zilbagias finally relented, shoulders slumping as the magical shell around him dissipated.

“*Me Ta Fesui.*” This time there was no resistance. The wounds that were the source of his suffering were then transposed onto one of the elderly humans behind him.

“Ack?! Gaaaaaah!” The chained old man flinched and gave a pathetic cry as blood gushed from almost every crevice on his body. Even more blood frothed from his mouth, his eyes rolling back in his head, and in mere moments he had gone silent. Either the sudden pain had resulted in enough shock to cause him to pass out, or the intensity of the injuries had taken his life. With the lack of breathing, it seemed like it was likely the latter. The gory sight caused the rest of the human slaves to start wailing. They were all quite young, but their voices were rather grating.

“Silence them.”

At her orders, Pratifya’s servants bound the remaining slaves with gags. It was at that point she decided it would be more proactive to do that from the start

next time.

“The old are certainly lacking in reliability, aren’t they?” she snorted. She had initially hoped the old man would be able to last longer than just a single round before succumbing. The Rage family kept numerous human slaves of all ages. The young women were used for reproduction, the young men for physical labor. The old and the frail were ordinarily culled, but the Rage family alone permitted them to survive. As long as they were healthy, they could serve their purpose as vessels for the **Curse of Transposition**. However, sparing the old meant they must be fed, and transporting them around to be used was time-consuming.

Was there any value in old men who could only serve their use a single time? Reserving them only for critical or fatal injuries was one thing, but wouldn’t it be more efficient to just slaughter them and raise more children in their place? She made another note to have Sophia run the numbers again.

When it came to demon culture, Pratifya was of a new generation. Unlike most who had come before her, she wasn’t only trained in the art of combat. She had been given a formidable education. Looking at her son, she saw Zilbagias standing completely still, his eyes fixated on the expired old man. Those eyes glimmered with fury. It was like that bloody corpse was a symbol of his failure. His expression was rife with frustration, regret, and so much more.

“Zilbagias.” As she called his name, those eyes filled with fury were now glaring at her. It was a hatred unlike anything she had ever witnessed, and certainly not something she’d expected from her own son. And that hatred was now washing over her. It was nothing short of terrifying, causing a chill to run down her spine.

But more than that, it was promising. It would’ve been a major setback if he’d just backed down and timidly averted his gaze. His fighting spirit was sublime. Without this, he wouldn’t be able to stand on the same ground as the other heirs, let alone vie for the Demon King’s throne. And she needed him to claim that throne. She needed him to reclaim the honor wrongfully stripped from the Rage family. She needed him to help enact her revenge against the Demon King’s other wives who were the source of her long-standing harassment.

“Do you hate me?” Pratifya spoke ahead of her thoughts. Zilbagias didn’t answer, his face slowly regaining a sense of placid calmness as he struggled to bottle up his anger. “Hate me if you wish. Curse me all you like. Hold a grudge, if it pleases you.” The wilting face of her adorable son raised with a look of surprise. “The purpose of all of this is to make you stronger. If your hatred of me fuels that strength, then so be it.”

So.

“Let’s resume. Your movements before weren’t half bad, but they were too soft. Try something like this.” Pratifya mimicked his earlier movement, twisting her body and lashing out with the butt of her spear, but correcting the errors in his posture. “Try twisting your hips more to give your movements more weight. Go ahead, try it.”

A dumb expression played over his face, as if he was in a trance and it had finally dawned on him all of this was supposed to be training. Despite his initial confusion, it took him no time at all to replicate her movements. As if desperate to make it his own, as if desperate to become stronger, he devoured her instruction like a starving wolf.

“Precisely, exactly like that. Remember that feeling well. Now, let’s commence with another round.”

“Yes, mother,” he replied after a considerable pause.

The training continued. Given the intensity, some may have mistaken it for a fight to the death. She had every intention of squeezing every last ounce of strength from him. The parade ground was draped in silence due to the intensity of their training, but then suddenly it began to stir. Looking around, she found none other than His Majesty King Gordogias standing among the crowd.

“Your Majesty!” Pratifya immediately stopped, straightening her posture. Zilbagias, once again covered in wounds, dropped to his knees.

“What are you doing here?” Pratifya couldn’t help but grow self-conscious of the thick layer of dirt and sweat all over her, before flashing a wry smile. It seemed the venomous spit of those other wives was starting to work its way

into her. At this moment, she was a warrior. There was no reason to have even a hint of shame in her appearance. Wiping the sweat from her forehead, she stood up straight with pride, returning the king's gaze. It could have been her imagination, but she thought she saw a smile almost form on his otherwise stolid expression.

"I heard you were doing some rather intense training down here, so I decided to see it for myself."

"It is an honor, Your Majesty."

The king's gaze then shifted to his son. "I can see you are sparing no effort for this training, Zilbagias. Good work." With a flourish of his cloak, Gordogias turned and left the parade ground.

"Thank you, father." Still on his knees, Zilbagias responded with a deep grumble, like his words had echoed up from the depths of the earth.

"Let's continue, Zilbagias." Pratifya once again took a battle-ready stance. They still had plenty of slaves left.

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With our training finished, I retired to my room, lying on Ante's lap once again. Without a scratch on me, it was almost hard to believe the vigorous training I had gone through.

In the end, I couldn't save them. Not a single one. The old man's resentful look, completely aware of his inevitable fate, was still seared into my mind. The sounds of the wailing children, completely in denial as they awaited their turn, still wracked my brain. All of them, dead. And their blood was on my hands. Today, I had no choice but to bear that pain myself. No matter the usefulness of the **Curse of Transposition**, no matter how much Ante tried to console me, the pain in my heart wouldn't abate. It would continue to linger.

Really, I understood. No matter how well I'd performed today, all that would have done was prolong the inevitable for the few who got to see another day. But using that as an excuse would be pathetic. There was no way I would just give up. There was no reason for me not to do everything in my power to save

them. Even with all of this conflict, the hardest part to bear was the immense amount of magical power I'd gained every time one of them was sacrificed.

A hero leaving innocent people to die was taboo.

Sacrificing children for your own self-preservation was taboo.

Depending on the amount, Ante took the power I gained for me. It wasn't like I would have a good excuse as to why sacrificing humans to protect myself would give me power from a devil of constraint. *On that note, how much stronger have I grown today? What do you think, Ante?*

"Let's see..." Her illusionary hand stopped stroking my hair as she pondered the question. *"Using the other heirs as a baseline for comparison, you have reached about a third of the strength of the one with green hair. Until today, you had only been at one-fourth."*

Was that a lot?

"I imagine so. He has been alive for half a century, but at this rate, that difference in power will shrink in a matter of days. Of course, your growth will begin to slow before reaching that point."

A few days, huh? It all sounded a bit too easy considering the sins I would be committing, considering the lives that would be lost.

The most terrifying part? Today wasn't some one-off special case. Prati was dead serious when it came to my training. As long as slaves were available, she had every intention of continuing without altering her plans.

No matter how much I tried, even when relying solely on spearmanship, Prati was a force to be reckoned with. If I'd at least had a sword and shield, I wouldn't have gotten injured as much as I had.

To be honest, even I understood that was just wishful thinking. It was imperative that I learned the ways of the spear like it was the back of my hand. But once I perfected the use of the spear, she would start adding magic and other tactics. The fighting would grow in intensity so much it would make today seem like child's play. And the most screwed up part? Even if I became stronger than Prati, she'd just use the slaves to cure her own injuries. *Dammit! What the hell am I supposed to do?!*

"I suppose the only option is to reach such a level of strength that training becomes futile."

Yeah, that honestly seems like the only option. Along that line of thinking, we may have to consider using some of the power you've been holding on to for me. If it comes to that, we can probably make something up about using a restraint that makes sense.

"That is also an option."

I needed to learn everything I physically could from Prati. The faster I learned, the more lives would be saved! But my attempts at grasping for even a drop of optimism about the future only made the pain in my chest grow fiercer.

"Suffering now is fine. Let these events trouble you. Harness that pain now, and turn it into strength for later," Ante declared, the solemnity in her voice a sharp contrast to her gentle touch on my hair and the caring expression on her face.

I know, I get it. This suffering is the source of our power, right?

"Precisely. There's no need to hold back. Shed tears, wail, curse your fate to your heart's content. I will bear all of it for you."

She was acting weirdly kind, very much unlike her. But given the day I'd had, I didn't have the energy to come up with a snappy, snarky remark. Not with how much vulgar language I'd used to curse my life's misfortune deep down in my heart.

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A random onlooker may have suspected nothing dubious as their eyes looked upon the young demon lying on his bed. They would have been completely unaware of the invisible, imperceptible devil god listening to the lamentations of his heart.

Except... the devil god thought quietly to herself, when the day comes that you reach that pinnacle of strength, when you learn all there is to learn, when even training becomes meaningless...

His head on her lap, her adorable little contractor's mouth was drawn tight as

he glared up at the ceiling.

...you will then be faced with real battles.

But she kept her mouth sealed, thinking it wasn't the best time to broach the topic. At least, not until he came to that conclusion himself. Not while he was still clinging to the hope that his suffering would come to an end one day.

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Those hellish days continued for a while. Honestly, in a way, they were very fulfilling. I would wake up, have a rich and nutritious meal, and after some light exercise, I would spend some time studying magic. After that, it was combat practice with Prati.

I picked up on the spearmanship techniques of the demons pretty quickly. So quickly in fact, it took me by surprise. Given the punishment for every mistake I made was the death of one of the people behind me, there was a tremendous weight on my shoulders. But it was that sense of peril that forced my talents to awaken. Despite my distaste for the racial weapon of the demons, and the fact the weapon had been fashioned from the bones of those soldiers, using it really came naturally to me. It honestly started to shift my whole perspective on the weapon. I came to appreciate the reach and power of the spear, and how the capabilities could surpass those of a sword.

But no matter how much I became accustomed to the spear, I still pined for the long, straight edge of a sword. Thrusts and strikes were the foundation of demon spearmanship. Of course, the weight behind a strike from someone as physically robust as a demon was more than enough—Prati breaking a few of my bones was enough proof of that—but as a former hero, I instinctively wanted to be able to cut things. Was there really no recourse to accomplish that?

Once there were no more human slaves prepared to use for the curse, that signaled combat training for the day was over. After I got cleaned up, I could basically spend the rest of the day doing whatever I pleased. Sometimes I would read, go for walks, or just laze around in my room. Speaking of which, since Sophia now had hands in both my education and my magic training, my martial arts training had fallen to Garunya, something she kept up with so her own skills

wouldn't grow rusty. Compared to training with Prati, sparring with her was a lot more delightful. Exchanging blows with the fluffy white beastfolk, without any intent of hurting each other, was quite fun. Obviously I wasn't trying to hurt her, and she avoided using the signature features of her people, her claws and fangs. Sometimes when we tried a bit of grappling, my clothes would end up completely covered in white fur, and then we'd call it a day.

"By the way, I read in a human book that stroking an animal's fur or feeling its warmth could help with healing. Why don't you give it a try sometime, Lord Zilbagias?"

While I was spending my free time reading, Sophia suddenly piped up from the other side of the room. Her eyes focused entirely on Garunya.

Treating beastfolk like animals was exceptionally insulting, but this *was* the Demon King's castle, and she *was* a devil. *Pretty much comes with the territory, I suppose.*

"Really?" Putting my book down, I beckoned Garunya over. Reluctantly, she approached me and then took a seat in front of me.

"Excuse me," I said before giving her a squeeze. To be honest, I had no idea what I was doing, so I tried rubbing her cheeks. And you know what? If Sophia had really read that in a book, maybe the author was onto something. Meanwhile, an unsettled spark lit up Garunya's bright-blue eyes.

"Please let me know if you don't like it. Don't worry about how I might feel."

"Um, well. It's not...that I don't like it..."

Really now? Are you sure about that? I tried looking into her eyes to search for her true feelings, but she didn't look like she was upset. Maybe a little embarrassed if nothing else. In that case, I had no worries about continuing. Even I had to admit, just touching her fur was quite pleasant.

"*What, tired of me already?*" Ante grumbled from inside of me.

Not at all. Giving and receiving are completely different. Sometimes I like doing the stroking. Or what, are you saying you want me to stroke your hair?

"*Gah! You're five million years too young to be trying to smooth-talk me like*

that!”

Cut it out! You thrashing around like that makes me feel like I have to hiccup!

“I-Is something wrong, Lord Zilbagias?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.” *I shall resume the petting.*

It was hard to explain, but this was making me feel kind of nostalgic. Back in my previous life, when I was a kid living in Tancrette, I feel like the village chief had a pet cat. It would go around hunting rats for us, so everyone in the village showered it with love. Unlike Garunya, it was pretty defiant and had an attitude. I couldn’t remember what color it was, but I was pretty certain it wasn’t white like Garunya.

But sometimes when it was really nice out, it would let us pet it. It would especially like it on the back of its head, like this.

Garunya let out a pleasant, catlike moan.

Or under the chin, like this...

And the maid started purring.

This really took me back. It was almost like I was back home, lazing away on a bright sunny day. I wasn’t hanging out by myself, was I? Who was I with? A friend? Maybe family?

“Anyway, do I really look that worn out to you, Sophia?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Extremely so.” She didn’t even so much as flash the smallest smile. “Considering your training regimen, it’s to be expected...but I was still a little bit worried.”

That was no good. I’d been focusing on my body so much, but maybe I needed to put in some work on my spirit. Building muscle at the expense of everything else would just leave me leagues behind the Demon King and the other heirs. There was only one thing that would help right now. I needed more of this “healing”!

Garunya gave another satisfied moan as my therapy continued.

“Besides, you will be eating with His Majesty tomorrow, right? And

supposedly you will be shadowing him while he carries out his duties. I think it would probably be best to ensure you are in good shape.”

Sophia’s words finally brought my hands to a stop. “Tomorrow already?”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

A week went by just like that, huh? Or maybe I should say, it had *only* been a week. The food was great, but the atmosphere was somehow oppressive. I guess I’d be seeing all of my siblings again.

“Guess I’ll call it early today,” I said with a tired sigh, before lifting Garunya up and burrowing my face into her fur.

Whatever the reason, I wanted to turn my brain off. Even if just for a while.

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Beginning a new week, I was once again to rise to the challenge of a meal with my father and older siblings. Just like last week, I was wearing my fancy (from the perspective of a savage) clothes as I approached the palace. My obsidian knife was at my hip, along with ornaments made from the bones of the soldiers I had killed, fashioned into something akin to a whip. It wasn’t as convenient as Prati’s, but if push came to shove, I could find a way to make them work as a spear. Hard to imagine anyone being suicidal enough to try something inside the palace, but better safe than sorry.

Arriving on time, I found the gutsy gorger Spinezia already seated and wolfing down a mountain of appetizers.

“Ah, hello.” Among the heirs, she was one of the least hostile—number one on that front being Sleeping Beauty, of course—so it seemed appropriate to greet her. It was hard to get a read on her, but I was fairly sure she wouldn’t be a threat while she was stuffing her face. There was no need to turn her into my enemy, at least not yet.

“You’re pretty early,” she managed to say with a mouthful of food.

She explained that, apparently, the others liked to show up one at a time. It was kind of their way of being fashionably late. They hated waiting for others, but seemingly had no problem having others wait for them. That, naturally,

resulted in a competition to see who would arrive last. It seemed that was actually something that had happened before. The meal got pushed back so much that the king had to put his foot down after being furious at how much their little contest put stress on his schedule. After that, the king decided to arrive ten minutes late, and any stragglers after that were barred from entry regardless of the reason. The plan was well-calculated since if any of them were loitering to wait for his arrival, they would have to enter with him. Thus, all of them would have to go in together which is exactly what they were trying to avoid. So an unspoken agreement had been reached where they would each show up at slightly different times.

I say this from the absolute bottom of my heart: that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

"Why don't you," swallow, "ask for something to eat?" Munch. "Pays to be this early." Slurp.

"I'm fine, thanks." All the food served here was clearly exquisitely calculated in its presentation. That nameless man produced quite the piece of art, and I didn't want to tarnish it.

As we waited, Daiagias dragged himself into the room. My attempt to greet him was thoroughly ignored, much how Spinezia and Daiagias acted as if the other didn't exist. I guess they *were* on opposite sides of the table, in more ways than one. His disinterested, bored expression took on a very different light now that I was privy to the countless heroes and elven mages he had personally slain. Maybe his lusty, languid persona was all a cover to lure his opponents into a false sense of security.

Next up, the talking green toilet stain arrived. "You're awfully early. Maybe we should award your punctuality," he said to me with a hint of sarcasm, so I greeted him with a quiet nod in response. If I'd opened my mouth, I may not have been able to stop my hands from doing the real talking. But now wasn't the time for that. Not yet.

Quite some time after that, Rubifya showed up with Sleeping Beauty draped over her shoulders. *Am I the only one who thinks it's kind of odd this princess is using the leader of her faction as her personal chauffeur?*

“What? If you have something to say, just spit it out.” After setting Topazia down in her seat like a doll, Rubifya turned to me with a glare.

“I was just wondering if there was any particular reasoning in bringing her here.” Last week she’d eaten a bit of food, and been pretty much silent the entire time.

Rubifya chuckled. “This kid is my secret anti-Aiogias weapon,” she gave a smug grin as she poked at Sleeping Beauty’s cheeks. “Keeping her around means he is no more dangerous than an insect.”

Are you being serious right now? I didn’t even want to glance in his direction, but just to be sure, I looked over at Emergias, who seemed to be wearing a sarcastic smile. It seemed like he wasn’t denying her statement at all. There must have been some truth behind Rubifya’s claim.

“Ask him yourself if you’re curious,” she said with another meaningful look before taking her seat. *Well, now I’m curious.* Granted, I was pretty sure whatever the answer was, there was a good eighty or ninety percent chance it would just embarrass him. Maybe it would be a good idea to try getting the answer from the king later on.

“Ah, looks like everyone is here.” Speaking of the demon, the man in question entered the room. In unison, everyone turned—aside from those of us who were asleep—to watch the blue prince take his place.

“Hm? Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Rubifya said, stifling a laugh as she shot me a sidelong glance which I promptly ignored.

Instead, I decided to occupy myself by taking one of the bones I had and holding it under the table while changing its shape using magic, all while putting on my best poker face. In a way it was magic practice, but it was also kind of like a game. Those soldiers had been captured, dragged all the way to the Demon King’s castle, and murdered, and here I was playing with their remains. Such a cruel fate was indescribable. *Sorry. Really, I’m so sorry.*

“You allow remorse to weigh you down even for things as simple as keeping your hands busy. Makes me wish I could join in on the fun.” Ante gave an

exasperated sigh.

“Everyone’s here? Good.” And last but certainly not least, the Demon King arrived. As usual, his aura was tough and severe. “Let us begin.”

As the king took his seat, drinks were served.

While the meal was fantastic, the conversation that accompanied it was anything but. That is to say, there was hardly any speaking at all. Every once in a while the king would suddenly think up a topic and ask one of us a question, but all the answers were straight and to the point. It was a pretty short-lived affair. Upon the conclusion of the meal, everyone soon departed, so I turned my attention to the Demon King as there was something on my mind.

“No one seems to be really talkative during these meals. Given that, why do you want us to get together and eat like this?”

“I suppose there wasn’t much to talk about this week or last.” He shrugged in reply.

“Sometimes—not very often, but sometimes—there are matters beyond factional differences that require discussion. In particular, words not meant to reach the ears of the rest of their families.”

This was basically his roundabout way of saying, “You get what I’m saying, right?”

Ah, I get it now. He must have meant the mothers. It was probably reassuring to be able to speak freely without their meddling.

“On top of that, think of this as a sort of experiment using humanity as a basis. Apparently, sharing a meal with your family can help strengthen your bonds with them.”

I kept my mouth shut.

“Our heritage may have doomed us to a fate of internal quarreling, but I would much rather any conflict that arises be fueled by honor and pride than driven by hatred. That’s probably a bit too optimistic of me.” He laughed. A bitter laugh to match the coffee served after our meals.

“Now, you said you wished to observe me while I work, yes? Follow me.”

I stood up without uttering a single word.

“Remember, you asked for this. Any complaints rooted in boredom will fall on deaf ears, and will not be entertained,” he warned me before opening the door at the rear of the room.

“Anything that involves watching you will be quite interesting to me.” That was an honest statement. *I’m watching you, oh so carefully.*

“Let’s hope so.” He snorted another laugh before leading me to his office deeper in the palace.

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You could quite literally call this place the center of the demonic kingdom. In contrast to the gaudiness of the throne room, everything seemed purely practical. As such, it sported virtually nothing in the way of decoration. The closets were packed to the brim with documents, a huge elongated map was on display, a stout blackboard stood tall, formidable magical wards were erected, and the list goes on and on. The only activity going on in the room was from elite night elf and devil bureaucrats, and a handful of demon officials, all doing paperwork.

“I expected there to be more demons here,” I commented.

So even when it came to high-level business matters, those were just delegated to the night elves and devils? I had thought since the demons were so gung ho about establishing their own kingdom, they would have been the ones to run the show down to the last detail. But after getting a peek behind the scenes, there were way fewer here than I’d expected.

“The situation is quite grave.” The Demon King frowned. “On that note, Zilbagias. Do you enjoy studying?”

“Excuse me?” I replied, caught completely off guard by the seriousness of the question. “When it comes to just cramming information, I can’t say I enjoy it much, if at all. What I do enjoy is looking into things of personal interest.” In my past life the thought of reading a book would have given me a seizure. It seemed like I had changed somewhat.

“What exactly are these things you find personally interesting?”

“Military affairs and tactics for starters. I like to check out illustrated references and encyclopedias in my free time. Besides that, sometimes I like to dabble in things like elven poetry... Does that make me sound weak?”

“Quite the opposite. That’s great,” he replied, ruffling my hair. “We demons tend to be narrow-minded, and put so much focus on all aspects of warfare. It would be one thing if it was just an attribute of the older generation, but even demons born in the last few decades have adopted a similar ideology. Actually, there is a book I’d like to recommend to you.” He stared into my eyes with a strange enthusiasm.

“A book you recommend? I can’t say I’m not curious.”

“It’s called *Founding of the Demon Kingdom*. It was written by my father, the first Demon King.”

Ah, that one. I guess you planned on inheriting his will, huh?

“Actually, I’ve already read it. The first king’s feelings were quite...expressive, weren’t they?”

“Really?! You’ve already read it?! That makes all of this so much easier. Someone with your smarts must have a good understanding about the root of the distortion at the heart of our kingdom.”

He went on and on from there. He expressed his belief that demons should stop obsessing over combat, and expand their cultural horizons into other areas of interest. That given our advanced intellects and magical abilities, there was no reason not to explore other more fruitful avenues than just simple violence.

“It’s impossible to live forever by continuing to snatch what belongs to others.” This lifestyle required limitations; lacking restraint would just cause issues later. However, when the king himself began collecting works of art, it was written off as just some trivial hobby befitting a king. When others tried to follow in his footsteps, they were scorned for being weak and useless. And when the king tried to condemn such behavior, the old generation was up in arms about the king attempting to pollute his own kingdom by spreading a sense of weakness. The geriatrics stuck in their old ways seemed to be quite the

problem here.

“My hands are tied, and I have no idea what to do...” he said while applying pressure to his forehead with his hand. The fact he couldn’t think of a solution showed he was a demon through and through.

A potential solution seemed simple to me. For example, you could start by making ornamental spears or flags, and awarding them to the most accomplished soldiers. By merging aspects of art and combat, the art would no longer be seen as superfluous, but now as a mark of honor coming from the Demon King himself. There was no way anyone would speak out against that. Gradually introducing art in this manner would go a long way in acclimating the people to the idea of broadening their culture. Of course, there was no way I was going to share my ideas. I was more than happy for the demons to remain a gaggle of muscle-brained idiots.

“Ah, I got a bit distracted. Sorry, sorry.” Returning to his senses, the Demon King approached his office. The room was rather small, and not what one would expect given the massive weight his title carried. A single desk submerged by paperwork and parchments took up more than half the room. The king let out a conspicuous sigh as we entered the small room.

“Look closely, Zilbagias. See with your own eyes the work of the Demon King.”

I found a nice corner, sat down in a small chair, and watched. The back of his chair, modeled after his throne, looked like it had seen better days.

“Your Majesty! Please read these documents!”

“Your Majesty! I have a report from the front lines!”

“Your Majesty! The night elf and hobgoblin officials are bickering again!”

A steady stream of officials flowed into the room. I noticed the king softly say, “*I am Demon King Gordogias,*” under his breath, activating his **Naming** magic.

“Everyone, quiet! Line up! One at a time!”

One by one he slew the documents before him, with a stamp and signature. Any business with the officials he took one at a time and settled their issues.

And he’d said this would be boring? Hardly. I couldn’t take my eyes off of

what I was seeing. Every issue that entered through that door was so important only the Demon King himself could resolve it. Forget being interesting. This was like a parade of the demonic kingdom's problems all wrapped up and served on a silver platter. Because of that, I needed to pay close attention to everything. There was bound to be some juicy info amongst everything going on. I dedicated every ounce of my being to this very moment, to memorizing every single word that came from the mouths of the officials.

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The stream of officials and petitioners seemed to have no end in sight.

At such and such a place, the front lines had advanced farther than initially expected. This had depleted their resources. So they were in need of more supplies plus reinforcements. So the king sacked the officer in charge of that battlefield, and approved the paperwork for his demotion.

A representative from the ogre tribes presented a rebuttal to the "Argument Against Including Goblins and Ogres in the Demon King's Army." The argument against what exactly? That was something I may have to look into later.

The squabbling between the night elf and hobgoblin officials nearly reached its boiling point. Reps from both sides hurled criticism at the other. The night elves declared the hobgoblins should be removed from service due to their incompetence which made them practically useless. The hobgoblins demanded workplace separation due to all of the malicious harassment they received from the night elves. Refusing to come down on either side, the king replied that he would "look into it" and moved on to the next issue.

A family of demons were at odds with their neighbors regarding who had the rights over the water in their territory. This one had the king groaning with his head buried in his hands. After reading over each side's complaints, he decided they both had a legitimate claim. His solution was to order them to settle the dispute through a duel. An official wrote down the message he dictated, then presented it back to him for a seal and signature.

So this was what it meant to be the Demon King, huh? In comparison to human kingdoms, their administrative and legal capabilities were incredibly underdeveloped. It was kind of absurd, like telling the chief of a small village to

run an entire kingdom. He seemed overwhelmed, focusing on too much at once. Demons having a penchant to endure stress under extreme circumstances was actually not working in their favor in this case. No way things would improve unless they made structural changes. Heck, the library was filled with books on how they could improve things.

“So...what do you think, Zilbagias? This is a Demon King’s work...”

That had continued for a good two or three hours. During brief breaks, the king turned to me with a clearly disheartened voice while nursing a sugar-filled cup of tea.

I was having a blast! *Your suffering is my entertainment!*

“It has been quite an enlightening experience. Your work comes with various difficulties.” Careful to keep my true feelings under lock and key, I chose the polite route instead. It wasn’t like I was lying. Getting a look at some of the deep-rooted issues that plagued the demonic kingdom was in fact quite enlightening.

“You seem to be enjoying this...” the king said, looking at me like I was some otherworldly being. “Once you’ve got a bit more studying under your belt, how about you come here and lend me a hand from time to time?”

“My goal is to become a warrior that can surpass you. Becoming a government official doesn’t exactly align with that, so it is of no interest to me.” I said through an averted gaze. Plus, I despised paperwork.

“That’s too bad,” he murmured, taking another sip of tea. He then proceeded to repeat himself with a depressed sigh. *Are you seriously getting depressed over crap like this? Get it together, Mr. Demon King.*

“Was this also how the first Demon King handled things?” His book had given me the impression he was more focused on broader issues. Sitting behind a desk doing paperwork seemed like the opposite of his nature.

“It was. However, during his time, our territory was much smaller, and he was willing to delegate even the most important of work to his subordinates,” he replied with a sour look. “Thanks to him, everything was in a pretty sorry state

once I took the reins. Corruption, truancy, deceit...I can't even remember how many people I had to fire. And it wasn't just the lesser races either. There were plenty of demons sullyng themselves with that foolishness," he growled, teeth bared. It seemed he was still quite angry about that. Wait a second, *that* was why there were so few demons in government? They would become corrupt so easily?

"Do Aiogias and Rubifya know how intense this work is?" The king's aura was starting to turn quite dark, so I tried to change the subject.

"Of course. Though neither of them can last here just watching me work for more than an hour." Despite being so diligent about his work, the line outside didn't reflect that at all. It didn't seem like it would be exhausted anytime soon. Draining his cup, he asked his butler for a second one. If people saw what the Demon King actually had to go through, how many of them would still want to bear that title? "Aiogias was certain he could handle this work himself. Rubifya said some nonsense like 'if this kind of work is inevitable, I'll make sure to set aside time for pleasure afterward.' They both treat this like it's just someone else's problem!" The king snorted, turning to me once again with an expectant look, one I desperately avoided. *A former hero helping the Demon King with his paperwork?! That's ridiculous!*

"Speaking of my brother, I heard some rumor that Topazia was some sort of 'ultimate weapon' against him or something. Do you know anything about that?"

"Ah, that story. Yes, I know of it," he replied as the second cup of tea was handed to him. "From the moment Topazia was permitted to set foot in the palace, Aiogias repeatedly asked her to join his faction. However, Topazia herself chose to side with Rubifya, shunning him entirely. A few days after her trip to the Abyss to make a contract with a devil, he went to offer her another invitation. Lazriel then came wailing to me, saying that she'd been waiting forever but neither Aiogias nor any of his attendants were to be found. She feared they may never return. It became a bit of a stir in the castle. After searching all over the castle, we found Aiogias and Topazia napping together in the inner courtyard."

"Uh...napping?"

“Yes. The two of them were lying side by side...along with Aiogias’s entire retinue.” The king chuckled. “You probably already put two and two together, but Topazia made a contract with a mara.”

“A mara? Is that a devil of sleep?”

“According to her, unlike a devil of sleep, their existence is more pure. I’ve never seen one myself, so I cannot say for sure.”

Do you know anything about them, Ante?

“Think of them like a succubus for slumber. I have come across very few in my life, though. They spend the vast majority of their time asleep, so it’s not like they impact the world in any significant way. I have never spoken with one myself. This is the first time I’ve heard of one making a contract. I always assumed they lacked the self-awareness to do so.”

So, they’re stupidly rare?

“Is this mara the reason why Topazia is always asleep?”

“Indeed. In exchange, she has been granted a magic powerful enough to overcome any resistance, no matter how great. Even someone powerful like Aiogias is vulnerable to its effects.”

The power to put anyone in your vicinity to sleep, but it also affects yourself...

“Aiogias and his retainers were exceptionally ashamed. Getting overpowered by his youngest sister, of all people. He took it pretty hard considering that was the first setback he’d ever had to face. He and his retinue were brimming with arrogance back then. It was a nice wake-up call,” he said with evident satisfaction.

That explained things. So Topazia joining Rubifya served as both a symbol of a bitter memory, and a warning to Aiogias.

“We have rested long enough. You may do as you please, Zilbagias. There’s no need for you to waste your day observing me.” The king grinned as he handed his empty cup to his butler. “Although, if you’ve changed your mind and want to lend me a hand, that changes things.”

“I think I will excuse myself for today. There’s still some studying and training I have to do.” I quickly rose from my seat. “But...aside from the issue of helping you, would you mind if I observed you working again in the future?”

“What a curious boy. Was today that enjoyable?”

“I feel like today gave me a good glimpse at the current state of our kingdom.”

“If that’s what you want, I don’t mind,” he answered, once again looking at me like I was an alien. “On that note, here. Take this.” As if suddenly remembering something, he started rummaging through his desk. “A night elf presented this to me as a gift, but I have no need for it. It may be valuable in your studies.”

He handed me a small notebook. The leather cover had a whitish hue, feeling quite strange to the touch.

“What is this? Just touching it feels...extremely pleasant.”

“High elf skin.”

I almost choked at his answer.

“High elf?!”

High elves, a group of high-ranking forest elves. They were nobility of a holy bloodline. Their magic was incredibly powerful. The gods of light had blessed them with life spans over a thousand years, far outstripping that of any of the other forest elves. Being a hero meant I had frequently met with members of the other races, but I’d only ever crossed paths with two high elves. They were even rarer than human royalty.

“Yes. A short time before you were born, the Alliance led an attack on our castle. Have you heard of it?”

The assassination attempt at the Demon King’s castle.

“I am aware of it.” Very, *very* aware.

“Good. There was a forest elf saint in their ranks.”

There was *what*?! A forest elf saint?! The title of “saint” was only given to

young high elf women who were especially blessed by the gods. For the record, them being “saints” had nothing to do with the “holy” magic that humans used.

“Why would a saint participate in such a reckless attack?”

“As far as I heard, she had sneaked her way into their little operation, hoping to defeat me.”

You’ve got to be joking. Wait... I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. One of the two high elves I knew *was* a saint...

Her. She was pretty hyperactive, way more than you’d expect for a race with such a long life span. Her recklessness and extremely competitive edge were unlike any other forest elf. Sneaking her way into an assault on the Demon King’s castle had her written all over it...

“The Alliance’s assault group was wiped out, but somehow, they managed to capture the saint alive. The night elves were quite ecstatic to offer her as a gift to me.”

That was...horrible. It was hard not to get lost in my memories for a moment, but what snapped me out of it was the realization of a cruel reality. Night elves were cruel and merciless, loved torture, and absolutely hated the forest elves. If they got their hands on a saint...I didn’t even want to begin to imagine how horrific her final moments must have been. After all, in my hands was a book whose cover was made from her skin.

“So, one thing led to another, and now we have a machine that produces high elf skin.”

“A machine...?”

“Yes. The saint remains in the care of the night elves.”

“She’s still alive?!”

I was hit with another shock. *Night elves let a forest elf captive live?!*

Chapter 4: The Elven Saint

After leaving the Demon King's office, I returned to my room. I took a seat by the window, and while pretending to be absorbed in a book, I was instead absorbed in my own thoughts.

What now? The last thing I'd expected was someone I knew from my previous life as a hero being here in the castle as a prisoner.

"I suppose the first question is: how do you wish to proceed?"

Of course I want to save her. From the start, that's what I've always wanted. The human soldiers, the slaves sacrificed for **Transposition**, I had wanted to save them all. But given the situations I was put in, my hands were always tied. This mess didn't seem any different. And that's why if saving her was not an option, the least I could do was put an end to her suffering. Maybe I could make it look like an accident, or pretend to lose my cool and go overboard. Either way, it all ended the same way—killing her.

"So now you believe death is a suitable alternative? Quite surprising coming from you."

Back when you said killing people swiftly would be some act of mercy, it did piss me off. But this situation is different. Dying is definitely better than the alternative. If I was in her shoes, say I was reborn as a forest elf instead of a demon, and feared being taken captive by night elves, I would immediately take my own life.

My time as a hero had led me to witnessing the aftermath of the atrocities brought upon the forest elves. I'd seen the bodies of countless forest elves left lifeless after being slaughtered. And what did most of them have in common? They had been taken captive by the night elves.

I recalled the gruesome images which were all too familiar on those battlefields, hoping they would help Ante truly understand what I meant. *You see? Dying is a much better alternative compared to that.*

“Hmm...this is indeed terrible.” Those horrors were so bad they even gave the Devil God of Taboo pause. Even the self-centered egoism of the demons was far outmatched by the passionate obsession the night elves had when it came to tormenting and humiliating forest elves. *“Considering much of my power likely comes from them, I may soon grow to loathe these night elves.”*

Wait, what reason would you have for hating them? You get power from them, right? Doesn't that just benefit you?

“It's quantity versus quality. Hmm, what is a good example?” Ante stopped to think for a moment. *“To put it in terms which may make more sense for a mortal, think of it like someone forcing a tube down your throat and pouring oil directly into your stomach to fatten you.”*

That sounds pretty gross. Kind of made me wonder what Ante would look like all swollen and fat.

“Stop that.” An illusionary hand popped out of my chest, and delivered a swift poke to my eyes.

“Gah!”

“No need to exaggerate. There's no permanent physical damage, but that sensation will be a lingering reminder!”

“Master? Is something wrong?”

“N-No, it's nothing. I think I got something in my eye.” *Stop being so reckless or you're going to make Garunya even more worried!*

I'm being serious, what should I do?

“Even if it feels like you're putting off the main issue at hand, I imagine it makes the most sense to investigate all angles of the situation before committing to a course of action.”

The only realistic options were to save her or to put her out of her misery. At any rate, asking a night elf for some more info would be the best place to start.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Of course. How may I be of service?”

I asked one of the night elf maids about the captive high elf.

“Yes, I am aware of her...” The normally placid and unchanging expression of the maid suddenly took on a sticky, unpleasant smile.

“That may be sufficient enough to surmise her fate.”

No kidding.

“I’ve never seen a high elf before. Recently, I heard something about one being a member of that stupid assault on the castle years ago. Now that they are receiving their deserved punishment, I figured it was the perfect time to see their face for myself.”

I specifically tried to word my request in a way that would resonate with a night elf.

“To be truthful, my lord, the one responsible for the captive is a member of my family,” the maid declared with pride, pointy ears twitching. “If you would allow, it would be my greatest honor to guide you there myself, Lord Zilbagias. I will speak with the captive’s holder this morning, so please look forward to it.” The maid gave a courteous bow.

Things are moving fast, huh? Night elves being so quick when it comes to humiliating forest elves seems to be working in my favor.

The next day, I was granted permission to visit. Apparently the maid’s name from the day before was Veene, and she led me to the night elves’ living quarters. Things were moving at such a quick pace that I didn’t have time to really wrap my mind around the situation. I was going into this not entirely equipped for what may come.

The night elves lived on the northern outskirts of the castle. This was basically an entire area sectioned off for them to act as their own territory. My previous adventures around the castle had involved me being physically turned away from this place—many times, in fact.

Now that I was being accompanied by one of their own, my presence was not being questioned. Not even the mere uttering of a single word of protest. Two night elf guards, wielding their traditional bows, opened the doors and

beckoned us inside.

Walking through that door was like being transported to an entirely different world. When it came to the core design of most of the Demon King's castle, it was a muted display of pure power, austere in its simplicity. On the other hand, the night elf quarters glittered like the night sky. A sense of dusk enveloped the area due to the walls and ceilings being painted pitch-black. Lamps and mirrors were hanging throughout to provide indirect light to the whole space, giving everything a glittery feeling. The ceiling seemed to be embedded with pearls here and there, enhancing the night sky motif. Even for demons this place was quite dark. The lighting was probably perfect for night elves given their incredible eyesight in the dark. Wooden geometric designs acting as strange mystical wards adorned the walls. With all these people walking around it felt less like a section of the castle, and more like a bustling shopping district. A shopping district where every single resident was a night elf.

"My sincerest apologies for the presentation, my lord. I am aware your people often find our realm to be rather unsightly," Veene said, bowing her head deeply.

With all these decorations, most if not all demons likely saw this display as a sign of weakness.

"Hm. I don't think it looks that bad." I decided to go with a safe answer. It seemed appropriate considering Prati's servants saw me as the weirdo with an abnormal interest in the cultures of other races. "Maybe a bit too dark for my liking." I couldn't forget to add that little finishing touch. It was expected that demons would be quick to express their displeasure, no matter how insignificant. No matter if she understood my line of thinking or not, I could see a faint smile tug at the sides of Veene's lips.

Having an outsider in their midst, the other night elves had also grown quiet and were paying careful attention, even though things had been energetic and lively when the door opened.

The night elf children on the other hand were indifferent to my presence as they continued to happily run around.

"Ah! Look, it's Veene! Welcome back!"

“Welcome home!”

Two children paused their game of tag upon seeing the maid and immediately scurried over.

“I’m still on the clock! Go play somewhere else!” The maid’s usual steely demeanor quickly collapsed as Veene tried to shoo away the children. This resulted in the opposite effect; the inquisitive children turned their attention to me.

“What’s with that guy’s skin? Why is it so weird?”

“He’s got horns too!”

Two pairs of innocent red eyes gave me a thorough inspection.

“Among the demons this man is a prince!” Veene all but squealed. “Get going now! Come on! You’ll be punished if you disobey! Being rude to him will be punished by you being fed to the devils! They’ll start gnawing at your feet, and then they will slowly munch their way up to your head!”

Those threats instilled enough fear into the children to send them scattering. I stood silent as Veene timidly turned to me, face flushed with shame.

“Um...my sincerest apologies. It appears word that Your Highness would be visiting today spread rather quickly.”

“No need to worry. I’m not going to get upset about something like this.” I gave a strained smile. Even if they are of a race of ruthless torturers, children will be children. That wasn’t the kind of thing that would bother me. Those children still possessed their innocence, for the time being.

“Besides, kids will be kids. No matter how much adults try to direct them in one direction, they’ll still go where the wind takes them.”

“I am most grateful for your great forbearance. Those children could learn something from you. They’re almost ten years old. They should know better by now...”

Ten years old, huh? They only looked to be three or four in human terms. Even further proof of the slower aging of the elves.

Now that I think about it...I’m five years old. It looked like Veene had come to

the same realization as she tried to maintain her stone-cold expression, and tried to stop herself from bursting into laughter.

“Maybe I should’ve played tag with them,” I murmured in as serious a tone as I could muster, prompting Veene to turn away, her shoulders starting to shake.

“Please, follow me. The prison is this way.”

Oh, right. I’d almost forgotten why we were here. Now was as good a time as any to prepare myself.

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We continued through the living quarters for quite a while until we passed through a heavy iron door. From there, we descended the staircase which took us underground, resulting in the atmosphere becoming much less pleasant.

“This prison is our pride and joy,” a night elf man said. He had joined us along the way. His name was Sidar. He was the relative Veene had mentioned earlier. Apparently, he was in charge of the prison. His handsome features were typical of an elf, but the smile he plastered onto his face and his frivolous attitude seemed like a thin facade. My initial impression was that he wasn’t very trustworthy.

“This place has been around since this castle was first built. And in that time, not a single prisoner has escaped under our watch,” he declared proudly, pointing to the gate before us. It was another heavy metal door, blocking the stairs heading farther down. There was more to the door than its sturdy metal frame. It was wrapped in all sorts of magic. This gate was the last straw I needed to quietly let go of any hope I had of rescuing the saint.

“It’s Sidar. Open the gate.” After Sidar announced himself through a small window in the door, multiple heavy locks clicked as they came undone. Then the gate started slowly grinding open. As that was happening, faint screams reached my ears, seemingly coming from below. This gate likely also served as a soundproof barrier. Beyond the gate, lamplight illuminated multiple iron doors. Beyond those illuminated depths were the sounds of numerous screams. Screams so prevalent it was like they heralded the end of the world.

“Oh, my apologies. It seems they’re still at work.” Sidar bowed his head

slightly, a sly smile on his face.

“That’s fine. I do have to say, it doesn’t seem like the best place to be situated near children.” It was kind of mind-boggling to think not too far above us was where the children were playing tag...

“Exactly the opposite, my lord. This place is very educational for the young ones,” Sidar replied, looking quite taken aback. “The art of autopsy and torture are taught to them here. Plus, the castle’s ventilation and drainage systems are exceedingly convenient.”

I almost forgot you were one of those people.

We proceeded to walk into the depths of the prison, now accompanied by the screams and groans from within. Being in this situation just felt off in some way; I couldn’t shake it. I was certainly nervous, but it wasn’t just some bad feeling. It was the fact I knew I wouldn’t like what I was about to see.

“This is the royal suite, provided for our high elf visitor.” We were now in the deepest part of the prison. The fancy name he gave it wasn’t at all reflected in the appearance of the door. A plain, iron door just like every other room.

The door swung open, revealing what seemed like a typical torture room. Axes, saws, knives, and plenty of other malicious metal implements that were too unpleasant to describe crowded the walls. The dark, stained floor and the plain, stone-cold walls set the tone.

In the middle was the main attraction, the night elves’ prize: a high elf woman, hanging from the ceiling with her arms and legs stretched to form an X shape, without a thread of clothing on her body.

Her arms and legs were amputated at her elbows and knees. At the end of each of her limbs were metal shackles, fused to said limbs, and chained to the floor and ceiling to keep her suspended in the air. A noose-like rope was wrapped around her neck. Her blonde hair was unkempt, and her neck was stretched between the pull of the rope and the weight of her own body.

The high elf was entirely motionless. She was...dead?

“This,” Sidar said, like a fervent curator introducing the masterpiece of his museum, while he donned a pair of leather gloves, “is the high elf saint, Liliana.”

Grabbing a fistful of hair, he pulled her head back and lifted her face into view.

Yeah...there was something vaguely familiar about that face.



It was her. Liliana. Energetic and reckless, unique traits for someone from a race with a long life span. But that once beautiful face was stained dark by asphyxiation, those eyes once brimming with curiosity now staring lifelessly at nothing. She was now reduced to nothing more than that stream of bubbly drool dripping from her mouth.

Somehow, she was still alive. Or more accurately, was forced to cling to the thread of life.

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The first time we met was on the battlefield. I will never forget that battle, the battle to defend the territory of the forest elves. We were able to repel a vanguard consisting of goblins, ogres, and beastfolk. So during the brief respite we had won, I grabbed a bite to eat.

There I was, sitting on some open ground in the middle of my meal when this pleasant aroma appeared out of nowhere. At some point a woman wearing a low hood took a seat beside me.

“Hey, you’re a hero, right? Can you show me your holy magic?” Beneath her hood, two glittering sapphires stared directly at me, shining with curiosity. From her aura alone, I knew she was a forest elf. By this point, I was used to them behaving like this.

Forest elves were entirely self-sufficient in the forest, having little reason to leave. This was why, even with their long life spans, it wasn’t uncommon for some to never cross paths with members of other races.

But over time, that became a thing of the past. For better or for worse, the lengthy war with the demons had forced them to change their way of life. The formation of the Panhuman Alliance stimulated a great cultural exchange with them. Young, curious forest elves often sneaked out of their villages to see the soldiers of the Alliance with their very own eyes.

The previous battle had left me so exhausted that I just wanted to brush her off. So I just gave her what she wanted, and created a small light at the tip of my finger. Slowly I spun my finger through the air, drawing a simple flower out

of white flames.

“There you go. Now go home. Young ladies like yourself shouldn’t be hanging around here,” I told her. Of course, I knew she just looked young and was likely much older than I was.

“No can do. I’m one of your allies.”

I looked at her with a great deal of suspicion. Her fingers danced through the air, like she was playing an invisible harp. It was hard for me to get an exact read on what she was doing, but I knew there was some pretty powerful magic being used here. She sang softly, the words like a prayer, putting a finger to her lips and blowing gently toward me.

Her breath carried a torrent of magical, life-giving energy. The power caressed my worn out body, filling it with incredible strength.

“My name’s Liliana,” she said, drawing back her hood. *“The Sacred Tree Alliance sent me here. I guess I’m what you would call a saint,”* she introduced herself with a shy smile. Her ears were a little bit longer than the average elf’s. Her face was full of beauty like a field of flowers, her skin a healthy, dark tan.

“So, what’s your name?”

That was how I met the saint, Liliana.

+++

“That was such a glorious day. The sound of her squealing like a pig—man, it was like it was only yesterday!”

And this was her now. I chose to ignore the ramblings from the shady night elf.

Our assault had taken place seven years ago. How much had she suffered in that time? No matter how much I tried to tune them out, the ramblings continued. I’ll do you a solid and leave out the details. Let’s just say that being thrown to a horde of goblins, or having her skin stripped off while she was still alive, probably barely stuck in her memory in comparison to everything else she had gone through.

“I have to say, I’m quite surprised.” Since there wasn’t much hope of me

getting useful information, I cut Sidar off from his monologue. “This place is locked down pretty tight considering there’s only a single woman here. Why did you...” How should I word this? “What is with this elaborate setup? What is it all for?”

As I spoke, I glanced over at the silent maid. A cold smile lit her face as she stared quietly at the saint before her. Veene truly was a night elf, through and through. It wasn’t like I’d forgotten that, but this was a clear reminder.

“I’m glad you asked!” Sidar clapped his hands together, seemingly not caring that he’d been interrupted. Or maybe his excitement made up for that. “So many indescribable sacrifices were made to get to this day, but here we are.” He gave Liliana a vicious glare. “Of course, she has been made to regret the trouble she’s caused us.”

“Oh?”

“First of all, the removal of her limbs serves as a precaution to prevent her from escaping, and to take away her ability to use magic.” Sidar slowly picked up a knife off the wall. “As you can see,” he said, casually burying the point of the blade in her side. It took every ounce of my being to hold back the cries stuck in my throat. Liliana on the other hand merely let out a soft groan as the blade tore into her.

“A simple knife is insufficient to kill a saint. Please, watch closely.”

As he withdrew the knife, blood gushed to the floor like the opening of a dam. Such a wound should have been fatal, but not in this case. In no time at all, the bleeding ceased, and the wound started to close.

“The healing properties of light magic are truly incredible. Veene, the lights.”

“Understood.”

Veene put a shade over the lamp. The room was cast in complete darkness...save for Liliana and her blood, giving off a faint glow. In one way it looked like something out of an ethereal dream; in another way it looked like a crude painting from the mind of a sadistic artist.

“With these monstrous healing abilities, removing her skin or severing her limbs means very little. They will just heal up or grow back. We had to weld

these metal caps to her joints, otherwise her limbs would just sprout back. Think of it like a lizard regrowing its tail.” Light returned to the room. Wiping his blade with a scrap of fabric, Sidar explained all this with a mixture of awe and scorn.

I was of course already privy to her healing abilities. One of her strengths was the ability to share it with others. But in this situation it was not working to her benefit—rather, it was her greatest enemy.

Being locked underground for so long and having her skin torn off and regrown so many times had caused her complexion to now take on a sickly paleness instead of its previous healthy tan. She almost looked like a night elf.

“The blessings of the sun have been taken from her,” Sidar scoffed. “Forest elves weave magic like thread. Restraining their arms and legs makes them effectively powerless. Early into her captivity, she still had a bit of fighting spirit left in her. She was sneaky. Suppressing her healing capabilities, and pretending she had permanently lost her hands and feet, she was just biding her time until we let our guards down.” Sidar’s expression was a mixture of disgust and rage. “Five... Five promising younglings were lost that day. This bitch incinerated them with her light magic!”

Despite having just cleaned the knife, in a fit of rage he soiled it again by slashing her gut. The bright red line that was drawn on her skin immediately sealed itself.

“So, we’ve had to restrain her like this. You never know what kind of dirty tactics a high elf will resort to. That’s why we have this rope,” he said, motioning to the noose around her neck. “The chains on her arms and legs have been adjusted to only carry half of her weight, the other half resting on her neck. This pressure on the carotid artery leaves her thoughts constantly scrambled. Even if we let our guard down now, she doesn’t have the presence of mind to keep from soiling herself, let alone to use magic. Of course, ordinary people would die within a few hours of this kind of torture,” he explained.

And she was anything but ordinary. These were the measures necessary to keep someone with incredible regenerative abilities restrained.

“Drugs are useless since she develops immunity to them so quickly. So this

was the best torturing method. Of course, even without measures this extensive, torturing her around the clock would be enough to ensure she doesn't use magic..." Apparently something occurred to him, as his tone turned a bit bashful. "As shameful as it is, she has been here for seven years now. Torturing her has become a bit...routine."

"Torturing her is routine," I echoed. I had never heard those words paired together like that before, and given the situation, I didn't really want to hear them now.

"At first, everyone had this rush of enthusiasm. Finding ways to deliver and inflict pain onto her. As you can see, our efforts paid great dividends, breaking and stripping her of that fighting spirit she once had. But over time, things have become quite monotonous," he said, as if revealing his greatest shame. "When it comes to our torture methods, they are all about inflicting the most excruciating pain possible in the shortest amount of time. That of course is because you are working on the assumption the victim will die pretty quickly. But in this pig's case, she has endured so much torture beyond any of our expectations. It's not like we have given up or anything, but..."

Stop trying! Cut your losses!

"Our well of imagination has run dry. Ah yes, I have already explained the various methods we attempted, haven't I?"

Yeah, you went on and on about every agonizing detail. But somehow now you're at your limit?

"But when I heard you wished to see her for yourself, Lord Zilbagias, I thought this must be fate at work! A demon may be able to bring a new and fresh perspective."

His eyes, brimming with anticipation, were fixated on me.

Hey, wait a minute. When I glanced over at Veene, I saw the exact same look on her face. What the heck is going on here? Give me a break.

I should've known something was up when I was given such easy access to her. This was all a ploy so I would assist with her torture?! What had Liliana and I done to deserve these cruel fates?!

“Your misfortune is incredible.”

This isn't the time for your snarky play-by-play!

Sidar and Veene both stared at me with unveiled excitement. Liliana's strained breaths as she hung from the ceiling were the only sounds breaking up the eerie silence of the cold prison. Her life was in my hands. Messing around with a new torture method would be the perfect cover to pretend to make a mistake. My chance to end it all—to finally kill her.

But was that the only option? Was there really nothing else I could do for her? If there wasn't even a sliver of hope for anything else, I had to do it. Just like with the human soldiers. Just like with the slaves during my training. But if I walked out of here with her blood on my hands, that regret would weigh me down for the rest of my life. This situation was different from the others. I was not being forced to take her life or to just watch her die.

This time it was my decision. Her fate was in my hands.

Think. Think. Think!

“Out of curiosity,” wetting my lips, I started to speak, “if we come to a creative dead-end, how will you proceed?”

“Nothing in particular comes to mind,” Sidar replied, no sign of disappointment in his cheery tone. “We will probably continue with the routine. I guess we'll keep researching her.”

“Researching?”

“Yes. Her torture is not just for our own amusement. We are always brainstorming ways for her to be useful for us. For example, looking for further applications for this,” he said, pointing to the pool of blood on the floor beneath her. “For a high elf, the incredible healing properties of light magic can be used to their full extent. But for us denizens of the dark, they act as a powerful poison. Even just touching this blood causes a night elf's skin to break out in a rash.” He waved his leather gloves.

“Ah, so that's what the gloves are for.”

“Precisely. Protective equipment like gloves and masks are necessary when it comes to torturing her. We must be mindful, even of the smallest splatters of blood.”

You have to go that far, huh?

“The power of this blood is unlike any magic or curse. It’s more akin to a miracle. There may be a way for us to benefit from its properties against the saint’s will while avoiding those nasty side effects.” Sidar shifted his glittering gaze back to Liliana. “To that end, we have been trying **Domination** on her.”

Domination. In other words, brainwashing. It was one of the traditional arts of the night elves. Using drugs and magic, they tried to bend the will of the victim, turning them into a puppet. It was one thing to try such methods on races with weaker magical affinities such as humans or beastfolk. But to try those kinds of methods on a high elf? Much more difficult.

“All the frequent torture wore her down until it eventually broke her spirit. But even with her completely under our thumb, we still have some work to do until the miracle can become beneficial to us.” Sidar’s face twisted into a grimace. “Didn’t matter if we used drugs to make her subservient or knocked her unconscious, her blood was still poisonous to us,” he said through gritted teeth.

Of course it was, I thought with a cold look. Her healing power was only effective for those she trusted, her friends. No matter how broken her spirit was, no matter how many drugs you used to twist her will, no way would she see you monsters as her friends. The very people who put her through this hell.

“There have been recent talks about splitting her head open and messing around with her head manually. She will regenerate anyways, so we questioned the possibility of rewriting her memories by force,” he suggested. And what a vile suggestion it was.

“There is the possibility she could die while we perform the procedure, or that messing with her thought processes could rob her of her abilities as a saint. So it’s more of a last resort.”

Regardless, it was clear that Liliana’s future was pretty dim.

“I get it now,” I said, suppressing the urge to vomit, attempting to sound as casual as possible. “That’s why you haven’t violated her directly.” That was something I’d expected to come up in Sidar’s ramblings about their torture methods, but it never had. They must’ve left all the more dirty work to the goblins.

“Absolutely not! Even without her poisonous light, we have enough dignity to never stoop to such a disgusting low,” Sidar replied, seeming to be struggling with a bit of nausea himself. “So many of our people were against our research, even if it meant using her blood as a potential source of medicine. But laying with a saint? That’s just repulsive! I’d rather sleep with a dog.” The artificial smile finally faded, a look of sheer disgust taking its place. That gave me an interesting peek into their perspective.

“I see...” I took a moment to gather my thoughts. “I have to say, I have taken quite a liking to this one.”

Sidar and Veene were both aghast as they looked at me. Ignoring them, I continued.

“I’m sure you’ve heard, but I’ve gone through a bit of a growth spurt recently.”

“Y-Yes, I have been informed...”

“Even though I’m only five years old, I’m starting to get ‘those urges,’ if you catch my drift.” I contorted my face into as disgusting an expression as I could muster, making a show of ogling Liliana. Just watching her suffer like this was enough to make my legs start to buckle, but I had to stand strong. I just had to play the part and get through this. *Right now, I’m Daiagias...Daiagias the Lustful!*

“It has been frustrating not having an outlet for those urges. Which is why I have a small request, Sidar.”

“Y-You couldn’t possibly mean...”

“That’s exactly what I mean. It shouldn’t be an issue if I hurt her in my own way, right?”

As repulsed as he clearly was by my suggestion, his artificial smile quickly

found its way back to his face.

“O-Of course, there’s no issue whatsoever.”

“Absolutely not! I cannot allow it! For your first experience to be like...like this, my lord! I could never face your mother again!” Veene all but shrieked.

Mind your own business, dammit! “Veene, what my mother doesn’t know won’t hurt her. It will be our little secret.”

“But—”

“My actions are my decision, and mine alone. Or what? Do I need my mother’s permission every time I wish to sleep with a girl?”

The slight hint of anger in my voice was enough to get Veene to cower, uttering a soft “no.”

Exactly. It isn’t so easy to display your will in this kind of situation, now is it? Would be such a waste of energy to earn my dissatisfaction over something as trivial as this.

“So, that’s how it’s going to be. Of course, I would prefer to not have an audience. Or is that a bit too much?” I flashed the kind of smile that could only come from a young boy coming to grips with puberty, a mixture of desire with at least a show of propriety. My smile was met by Sidar’s look of unrelenting regret.

“A-As you say, Your Highness...but um...you must realize, even like this, that *thing* is still quite dangerous...”

Without a word, I stepped forward and dipped a finger into the pool of blood under Liliana’s feet. Swish swish swish. Yep, that’s definitely light magic. “Don’t underestimate my magic resistance.”

“N-No, that is not what I mean...if by some chance those ropes come even a bit loose, she could regain consciousness and attack you. While you are...in the act, you are at your most vulnerable. It would be best to have someone accompany you—”

I let a flash of anger pass over my face at Sidar’s flustered rambling. This was more to keep myself from bursting into a laughing fit than anything.

Come on out, Ante. I know you've been laughing up a storm in there.

"Must I? This front-row seat is to die for."

Just do it.

"Ah, fine."

The dark-skinned devil god gently touched down on the ground beside me. Sidar reeled back like he had been punched in the gut.

"That shouldn't be an issue. I won't be alone, after all."

"You are okay with me watching?" Ante said.

"Either way, you would be a witness to my actions. So there's no point worrying about you."

I placed a hand on my belt, shooting an impatient gaze at the two night elves as if to ask what they were still doing here.

"We will be waiting outside. Please don't hesitate to loudly call us if anything happens." Slumping his shoulders in defeat, Sidar finally nodded. Veene looked like she was about to faint. Me losing my virginity to a high elf was one thing, but if something actually happened to me here, it would be the end of their whole family. And not in a metaphorical sense. It was Sidar's responsibility to supervise the prisoner, after all.

"No need to look so worried. I apologize in advance, this might take a while," I called out as they left.

"Your Highness, please remember to act with caution! The rope around her neck must stay tight! Do not loosen it under any circumstances!" Sidar called out a final warning; the look on his face as he disappeared behind the closing iron doors was one for the history books.

Without a word, Ante slipped back inside me...and immediately burst into an uncontrollable laughing fit. A laughing fit so intense that even without a material body, she started choking. It felt good to mess with those night elves, but that feeling quickly faded when I turned back to look at Liliana.

At least I'd gotten them out of the room, so the easy part was over.

"So, what will you do now?" Ante murmured. "I could give you some privacy. I promise to sit in the corner facing the wall while covering my eyes and ears."

I'm not doing that, you idiot!

"As the Devil God of Taboo, it is my duty to inform you that performing such an act would give you incredible power."

Not happening.

Within Sidar's ramblings and explanations, I had gotten a few ideas. Of course, they were not without risks. Besides, I needed to take a moment to resolve myself.

Would I take her life here? Or would I take the ultimate risk... Would I reveal myself?

Would I end her suffering swiftly or give her another chance at life?

"The fact you still believe you can save her is quite amusing. Surprising, of course, but still amusing," Ante joked, but the coldness in her voice was palpable. "But how will you accomplish that? Sneaking her out of here isn't exactly an option."

*I know. So I'll leave here with her in a grand public display, using **Domination**. I'll just say I took a liking to her, and I was able to bend her to my will using brute force via magic. And because of that, I want to take her home. If I handle things like that, no way the night elves would stop me.*

Ante was silent for a moment. *"So you will reveal your true self to her?"* A quiet, serious question. It was almost like I was being questioned by the pope.

That's the only thing I can think of. If I tell her my real name, I'm sure she will cooperate. And trust me, I don't need to hear from you how dangerous this is. If something happens and someone finds out who I am through Liliana, it'll all be over.

"That is a possibility," Ante said, her voice devoid of all emotion. "My fear is

the wild card in this situation: we have no idea what kind of state she is in. The night elves claimed they broke the saint's spirit. Even if they could not completely subjugate her soul, they can likely manipulate her consciousness at a surface level."

For example, forcing her to obey any command after giving a certain keyword. They could monitor our interactions even against her will.

"If she speaks, you will have no choice but to silence any loose ends. It would cause a chain reaction of destruction."

Of course, we were talking about the scrupulous night elves. I almost expected they had put at least a few curses on her for their own protection upon capturing her. *But surely any curse they could try would be outmatched by our own, right?*

"What do you mean?"

*I mean the power of **Constraint**. Or if that's not good enough, **Taboo**. Any curse that tries to make her obey using a keyword would certainly be targeted at Liliana herself. So what if I sealed her thoughts and personality? To start, I'd influence her using my words and magic. I could tell her "you're not Liliana." In her place...well, creating a whole new person might be a bit too much, but maybe making her something like a dog or cat may be possible. Then I would need to put a restriction on her to prevent her from remembering who she really was. At that point she would be my pet, free to accompany me anywhere. Having her act like a dog would be pretty humiliating, but that sounds a heck of a lot better than this hell. If she finds out who I am, her heart should open. With my full power and her being so weakened, it might just be possible.*

"Hmm...I guess the only question is if it's actually possible. I must admit, it very well might be," Ante said before adding another warning. "But you must remember, using the magic of taboo will affect you as well."

Right. But it won't affect you, right? You should be fine as long as you stay inside me. I'll forbid myself from remembering my true self. I would just be Zilbagias. Without any memories of my mission as a hero, I will need your guidance. The price for this will be big, so the magic should be quite powerful. In some ways, a disconnect from my true nature could also work to my advantage.

Once we're out of here and all alone, I just need you to tell me it's okay to remember my true self. That should be enough to release the magic.

"That method could work. The one concern is there's no telling how you will act once you are just Zilbagias, completely severed from Alexander."

I'll just leave that in your hands. Even if I become a true demon, I'd like to believe I wouldn't lose sight of my goal to save Liliana. I... I just hope I don't become that cruel...

"Fine, we can set that problem aside for now. But I believe you are missing an important factor in all this."

Am I?

"Yes." Ante paused for a moment. "Once you get her out of here, what will you do with her?"

I didn't exactly have an answer to that.

"If she becomes your pet, your plaything, she will be permitted to stay. Then what? You will just let her rot away in your room until she dies of old age? Do you call that saving her?"

It beats being tortured.

"Perhaps. But if she regains her sense of self, there will forever be that lingering fear that she could reveal who you are. Even if you have the magic of taboo as insurance, you must account for the night elves in the vicinity."

So it'll be like I'm always looking over my shoulder, and sleeping on a bed of nails. Not much different from my current situation.

"Then she will be your pet indefinitely. What salvation is that? Chances of her getting out of the castle are slim to none. Even if you claim to be tired of her and choose to discard her, the night elves would simply swoop in and reclaim her."

And the saint, now turned into a pet, would then be victim to a new slate of torture, all in the name of "research." So what am I supposed to do? Is killing her really the only option?

"It would certainly be the merciful option," Ante muttered. "First of all, remember your real objective here. To defeat the Demon King, destroy the

demonic kingdom, and rescue humanity from its plight. You established those goals while understanding you would have to make some measure of sacrifice, did you not? If your identity is revealed, everything will be for naught. To ensure your survival and in order to preserve the most advantageous position possible, you could leave her here to her fate. Leaving her to die at the hands of the night elves. Doing so would avoid any potential for worsening your relations with the night elves. But I know this option was one you were so desperately trying to avoid.”

Without realizing it, my hands had balled into fists. Ante was right. Frustratingly right.

“Do not mistake my intent. I am not accusing you of anything,” she said gently, “but I wish for you to keep a broader perspective. Your desire to save her seems desperate. I hope any decision you make is after carefully weighing all potential options along with their risks and merits. If that is possible, I couldn’t care less how you choose to proceed. When all is said and done, I do not want you to be saddled with regret,” she said, the last part seeming like she was also talking to herself. “Luckily, you have time to think. Ten, maybe twenty minutes.”

In other words, Liliana’s fate must be decided in a short amount of time. My stomach was heavy, like I had just swallowed a millstone. I had said I’d do whatever it took to destroy the Demon King. This was the path I’d chosen, and I was resolute in that decision.

“After all that, you’re just going to save her?”

I felt like I’d heard a voice behind me. It wasn’t Ante. It was the voices of those I had walked over to continue on this path. The voices of those I had left to die. All their hate and resentment following me like my own shadow.

Ever since killing those soldiers in my training to learn **Naming**, I had left dozens of people to die. Each time I made excuses. How my hands were tied. How it would be unnatural for a demon prince to protect a human. In contrast, taking someone as rare as a high elf as a pet seemed like the kind of thing a savage race like the demons would do.

But was that really it? She was someone I knew from my past life, a high elf saint. I had just learned about the hellish torture she’d endured for the past

seven years. Could I really say I wasn't playing favorites? Was trying to save her, and only her, really the right thing to do?

Having a high elf at my beck and call had plenty of benefits. Maybe I could figure out a way for her healing to work on me. Heck, if I managed to do that, maybe I could use it during my practical training to avoid harming the slaves. But if my true identity was revealed, it would throw everything I had worked for into jeopardy. Did the merits really match the risks?

Getting to this point meant I'd already had to leave many people to die. Why should I move away from that strategy? If I did, how was I supposed to face everyone that came before her?

"Kill her." I felt like I'd heard a voice again.

"Your mission is to kill the Demon King by sacrificing everything."

If I just listened to that voice...

"That is the easiest route for you."

...then I would have nothing left to worry about.

No, it's good that I'm still worrying about stuff like that. It's my duty as a hero. My pride as a hero rang in my head, sharp like an alarm bell.

The easy path was not the one I wished to take. So many people had died for me to get this far already, but that didn't mean I should use that as an excuse to keep letting people die. No matter what, I needed to do everything in my power to save as many people as possible. I couldn't forget that. Defeating the Demon King, destroying his kingdom—it was all for the sake of saving humanity. I was not foolish enough to deny the fact that my motivation had sprouted from a desire for revenge, but the foundation of that desire was humanity. That's what was important here.

I reached for my belt, taking the bones of the soldiers I had slain from it. They melded together into the form of a spear, so smoothly and naturally.

Will you forgive me?

Closing my eyes, I squeezed the spear tightly.

I let you all die. Even so...will you forgive me for saving someone else?

"Oh my..." Ante gulped.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself at a similar loss for words.

The bones in my hand had transformed again, causing the haft of my spear to take on a completely new shape. A sword, the symbol of humanity's strength. The bone-forged blade trembled.

"If you've got the time to waste with all this chitchat," I felt like I could hear that veteran soldier's voice, *"then save as many as you can, even if it's only a single person."*

That's right. No matter what anyone said, I was a hero.

The blade of bone flashed, slicing through the rope around Liliana's neck. The chains holding her rattled as they were suddenly forced to support the rest of her body weight. I could see her face retaking a healthy color; as expected of a saint.

With a quiet groan, Liliana's consciousness returned. She slowly lifted her head, but when her unsteady gaze caught sight of me, she started to shake with a small cry. The chains holding her began to rattle again.

She was being crushed by the fear of what torture awaited her next. It was like the energetic girl I once knew had been lost long ago. I almost broke down crying right there.

Putting a finger to my lips, I urged her to be quiet. I wanted to account for the very real possibility that the night elves had their ears pressed up against the door. Likely in a desperate attempt to stay vigilant about what was going on inside. I couldn't make a sound. So instead...I concentrated magical energy into my fingertip. *Do you remember, Liliana? Even with my faded, moth-eaten memories, I haven't forgotten.*

Gods of light, turn your gaze onto me.

Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo.

May your holy light shine in my hands.

A spark of silver fire ignited on my fingertip. All the while burning my fingertips, I drew a white flower into the air in front of her very eyes.

Liliana's eyes went wide with shock. With the same light, I drew letters in the elven script. As a high elf, she should be able to read this, right?

It's me. The hero, Alexander.

I'm here to save you.

Tears immediately began pouring from her brilliant blue eyes.



Within the deepest depths of the Demon King's castle in the night elf territory, two anxious night elves waited outside the innermost prison. One of them was Sidar to Vasanisti, his nerves nearly shot as he nervously chewed at his fingernails. The reason for his agitation? He was the man in charge of managing the prison.

Sidar was about middle-aged for a night elf, being 130 years old. Night elves as a race had a life expectancy of about 250 years. He had managed to avoid many pitfalls throughout his life, notable considering how severely night elves measured each other based on their failures. Instead, he had managed to gradually secure greater and greater positions for himself. Today, however, he feared that his renowned cunning may not be enough to overcome this obstacle as it may spell the end of his career. All because a single demon prince wanted to mess around with the high elf saint in Sidar's royal suite.

The seventh demon prince, Zilbagias. Apparently, the high elf had awoken some animalistic instincts within him.

He's only five years old! What five-year-old gets those kinds of urges?! Sidar cursed, glaring at the iron prison door. Hurry up and finish! No way a virgin can last that long!

Just the mere thought of it brought an image to Sidar's mind which made him want to vomit.

To the night elves, forest elves were merely objects of contempt. They viewed them in a similar light to how they viewed slugs. The night elves took plenty of pleasure in torturing them, but it wasn't much different than sprinkling salt on the slugs in the garden. Racially, culturally, religiously, the forest elves were no more than pests. They were in an entirely different plane of existence outside of the sexual realm. The thought probably did cross the minds of some degenerates, but they were smart enough not to reveal themselves. It was for that reason Sidar had never expected a demon prince of all people to make such a request. Sidar even started to second-guess if maybe he should've put some clothing on her so she wasn't entirely naked.

But that lingering thought was ridiculous.

No five-year-old is that mature!

Demons had limitations, no matter how quickly they developed. The situation was kind of like a member of royalty flaunting their pet tiger, and the guest taking such a liking to its fur that they ask to copulate with it. There was just no way he could have foreseen such an event occurring.

What made matters worse was that he was a member of the Rage family, one of the few bearing a healing curse in the demonic kingdom. The importance that gave him meant Sidar couldn't just brush off his presence. If he had stood in the way of the prince's desires, the prince's inevitable tantrum would certainly have brought about an unimaginable wrath.

But the most terrifying thought of all...

If, by some one-in-a-million chance, the saint hurts the prince...!

Imagining the punishment that would await him had Sidar feeling light-headed.

Even with his excellent knack for sensing danger and incredible foresight, skills that had ensured he went unscathed through countless kinds of battlefields, this predicament made him want to throw in the towel. First, the demons would surely concoct some fault with him. If the prince was somehow seriously wounded or killed, his mother would let her anger be known throughout the entire castle. What would she do? Demand more from the night elf troops while reducing both their budgets and their **Transposition** quota. These would be all of the consequences for his singular failure. All of that would undoubtedly culminate in Sidar's head bidding a tearful goodbye to his body.

All of this...!

He turned his glare to his niece. In his outburst, he wanted to pin all the blame on her.

Veene to Vasanisti, one of Archduchess Pratifya's maids. She pretended to not notice Sidar's gaze while sitting with her eyes closed as if she was praying. Instead, she was focusing all of her attention on her ears. If the situation inside the royal suite was to take a turn for the worse, she would rush in to do whatever she could.

She was not simply a maid, as she also had extensive training as a hunter. When it came to magic abilities in their family, she was second to none. Her abilities were truly elite. Despite this, the saint would make quick work of her in a matter of seconds. Especially considering the saint would be out for blood. Saving the prince was out of the question. Even so, she wouldn't hesitate to leap into action no matter how perilous.

This entire situation was a result of her telling Sidar of the prince's interest in the high elf.

I'm the one who allowed it, but still!

Though he knew he was just lashing out in his anger, he couldn't help but be as frustrated with Veene as he was with himself. According to her, Zilbagias had taken an extreme interest in high elf skin. Since he was a member of the Rage family, Sidar had thought by inviting the prince to see the high elf and maybe gifting him some high elf skin, it would help build a connection to be used in the future.

The contributions the night elves brought to the demonic kingdom were not only limited to battle, but also extended to areas of intelligence, administration, and mundane tasks in areas the demons themselves were considerably lacking. Even though the night elves were treated as first-class citizens, it was still very much apparent they were below the demons. Specific blessings like the contracts with the devils and the Bloodline Magics like the healing curse of the Rage family were jealously guarded, and rarely if ever used to the benefit of the night elves.

In particular, they were assigned a quota when it came to using the Rage family's healing curse, and that was becoming a critical issue. Countless soldiers lost their lives waiting to be healed only for the opportunity to come far too late. Sidar had hoped that by assisting Zilbagias it would mean expanding the night elves' access to their healing ability in the future. Even if it only meant a minor improvement, it would certainly be worth it. But now...

Please...!

Sidar glared at the closed iron door while praying to the gods of darkness, and cursing the gods of light.

Being a first-rate soldier in his own right, Sidar listened for any sign of potential struggle, but was unable to pick up anything. That also meant there was no reason to believe the prince was in danger. And that begged the question: what exactly was he doing in there?

Suddenly, there was a sound of rattling chains. Sidar reached into his jacket's pocket, while Veene dropped into a combat stance, eyes wide. They shared a look. Was it safe for them to open the door now?

What do you think? Sidar mouthed silently.

No, she answered in kind. *I can hear his voice. He's talking.*

Talking to the saint? What is he saying?

I think I heard him say... "dog"?

Veene abruptly flinched back from the door. Sidar felt his hair immediately stand on end. This feeling...it was magic! Some kind of powerful magic was being used inside!

"No!" With that, there was no room left for propriety. Sidar quickly swung the door open. "Your Highness! Are you all right?!"

But that prince was standing in the middle of the room, entirely unharmed. His pants were still around his waist. Had he not even started yet...?

"Huh. Quite bold of you to barge in without even knocking."

As Zilbagias slowly turned to face him, something felt quite off. That daring smile on his face...was it a smile characteristic of Zilbagias?

The sound of metal striking the floor snatched Sidar's attention, pulling his gaze to the area behind the prince. What he saw filled his eyes with astonishment. Liliana! The high elf saint wasn't chained up! She was lying on the floor! Never mind the rope around her neck, the chains binding her in place had been severed. And slowly, she started standing up.

"What?!"

He had released her restraints?! The prince being so foolish was something Sidar hadn't anticipated at all. Sidar cursed his lack of judgment, and drew a

folded metal weapon from his jacket. With a snap, it extended into a small bow. Drawing a poisoned arrow from his sleeve, he readied himself to shoot.

Veene followed him into the room, and despite a shocked exclamation of her own, she wasted no time in flipping up her skirt to brandish the throwing knives that were strapped to her thighs. The large, heavy arrowheads were sturdy enough to function as knives if needed.

“Veene! Get His Highness out of here!” He would be unable to get a clear shot on the saint as long as the prince was in the way. Sidar knew the most efficient approach would be to ask her to move him rather than asking the prince himself to move.

“No need.” But the prince raised a hand, stopping Veene in her tracks. “I’ve **Dominated** this woman.”

What nonsense was he spouting now? Was he naive enough to think a five-year-old could so easily bend the saint’s will on his first try? Sidar’s assessment of the prince plummeted.

But the prince was the least of his concerns. While they were conversing, the saint was getting back to her feet. They needed to use this chance to inflict as much pain as possible on the saint. That would open a window of opportunity to restrain her and knock her unconscious. Veene rushed to the prince’s side, while Sidar attempted to maneuver around the prince to get a clear shot. But Zilbagias just clicked his tongue.

“You guys really don’t get it, do you? Here, watch.” He then turned and lifted the saint up.

“No—”

Before Sidar could say “way!” and unleash his arrow, the look on the saint’s face stopped him in his tracks.

She was...confused?

After the prince placed her down on her backside, she looked up at him. Her expression was like one giant question mark.

“There there, good girl. Y’know I’m your master, right?” Leaning over her, the

prince was smiling from ear to ear as he massaged the saint's face with both hands.

She replied...with a bark. Though her head had initially been tilted in confusion, the physical contact caused her to respond energetically.

"What...?" Both Sidar and Veene didn't move an inch. With all their experience, they were unable to completely comprehend what they were witnessing. "Your Highness...?"

"Just like I said, I've **Dominated** her. As you can see, she's merely a dog now."

A look of pure joy took the saint's face as Zilbagias started petting her. There was an innocent happiness to her bright smile, as if she had never experienced even the slightest pain in her life.

The prince's explanation was insufficient for Sidar, who figured this must all be an act.

"Kriinos Narkins."

Bite your tongue, drown in your own blood.

Sidar threw words of magic at the saint, an attempt to activate the last resort curse placed on her. While the saint was clearly cowed by his words, her only response was a quiet whine. She swiftly scurried and took cover behind Zilbagias, trembling.

It was like...she was...really a dog?

"You still doubt me? I used magic to strip her of any sense of self she had left, making her believe she is nothing more than a dog."

"But...no..."

"You are pretty stubborn, huh? Fine, I'll give you absolute, undeniable proof. Not all princes have the patience to prove their word. You should be thankful for my generosity." With an unsettling smile, Zilbagias drew his obsidian knife from his belt. And then slowly, he dragged its blade across his arm, slicing it open. "Ah, it hurts, it hurts..." He made sure to exaggerate and to make a big

fuss about being in pain, prompting the saint to give another whine as she scurried closer.

“Are you worried about me, Liliana? What a good girl. Think you can lend me a hand?” The prince extended his wounded arm, causing Liliana to respond by immediately licking it. And with a faint, bubbly sound the wound started to glow before slowly closing all on its own.

“What?!” Sidar felt like an axe had just split his head in two. Veene, who was standing next to him, had all but dropped her weapons in shock.

“There you have it. Good girl, good girl!” Zilbagias said, ruffling Liliana’s hair and planting a kiss on her forehead. It took every ounce of Sidar’s willpower to keep his confusion and disgust at bay.

“To be honest, doing all that was all I could manage in such little time, so we haven’t really done anything yet. The atmosphere in this place makes it hard to relax, y’know? I figured it would be best to take her back to my room, and enjoy her at my own pace.”

What? What on earth was this prince saying?

“I’ve taken a liking to her,” he declared, his expression beaming with arrogance. “So I’ve taken it upon myself to make her my pet. I’ll return to my room with her in tow. I assume there are no objections, right?”

Of course there are!

“My sincerest apologies. Your prowess has taken me...aback,” Sidar desperately tried to reform his smile, giving a polite bow. “Forcing the saint into submission like this was something I did not think was possible.” The high elf once again scurried back to hide behind Zilbagias. Sitting on her backside behind his legs, she poked her head out around him to take peeks at Sidar. Without letting his smile falter, Sidar returned her gaze with a strong look of his own, causing her to flinch back into hiding. Any sign that she was the saint felt like a distant memory. Somehow he had actually managed to destroy her sense of self...a fact that infuriated Sidar to no end.

Altering her brain directly was a last resort because they feared destroying her personality would cause the saint to lose her abilities. But here was

Zilbagias, molding her personality like clay without even a hint about his actions beforehand. In the end, her miraculous power was still intact, but if it had been lost...

...well, no matter. The saint was subdued which meant her powers were ripe for the taking. And that was undoubtedly thanks to the prince's efforts. Even so, that didn't mean Sidar would be so easily willing to let such a blessing as her healing magic just walk out the door.

"Are you sure, Your Highness? If you wish, we can convert this royal suite into a room of your liking. It can become a place for you to lounge in your leisure to your heart's content. We will spare no expense to accommodate any of your needs, of course. That way you can indulge in the pleasures of the saint's body whenever it's convenient for you," Sidar began, approaching the situation almost like a merchant bartering.

"Oh, what a great suggestion, Sidar! You get to reap all the rewards of my efforts while I would be forced to come all the way here to get even a taste of my own accomplishments. In what world would such an arrangement be beneficial to me?" Zilbagias laughed, his tone more condescending than Sidar had imagined possible. "I have a better idea. She comes with me so I can enjoy her whenever I please. That solves everything, doesn't it? That seems a lot more efficient than having to come all the way to this dingy little prison all the time. Am I wrong?"

"As you say, Your Highness," Sidar replied, his smile challenged by the description of his workplace as a "dingy little prison," but ultimately it survived. "But I regret I must inform you the saint was a gift to the night elves from His Majesty the King himself. It was a reward for the many lives we lost in the battle against the Panhuman Alliance's assault seven years ago. Of course, you were yet to be born at the time, so I can hardly expect you to remember."

Brat. Your father gave the saint to the night elves. She belongs to us.

"So I've been told. Seems you lost quite the number of people in that fight against the heroes. My father said something about it being quite advantageous. They just had to follow the trail of night elf blood splattered all over the place to find out where the heroes were."

You think you're some hot shot, huh? All you got were the scraps us demons let you have. Though he never voiced those words, it wasn't hard for Sidar to read between the lines.

"As far as the body of the saint my father left in your care, I'm sure that has brought you plenty of enjoyment over these past seven years." Zilbagias's smile suddenly vanished, his expression turning frigid. "In all that time, what exactly did you accomplish?"

His eyes were lit by a depthless cruelty, a scorn coming from one so sure in his superiority, looking down at someone exceptionally far below him.

"You can call it research all you want to try and give it legitimacy, but do you have any results to show for it? Are you sure you weren't just playing with her like some childish toy? Exploring ways to use her blood? Sure. Attempting to **Dominate** her? Okay. The fact you failed to figure out a way to utilize her healing miracle can be forgiven. At least, that's what I'd like to say." Zilbagias pointed to Liliana, lying on all fours at his feet. "But then how do you explain this?"

The saint, perfectly and completely **Dominated**.

"Please tell me, Sidar, how long have I been here? Five minutes? Maybe ten? That was all I needed. If this isn't evidence of your abject incompetence, then what is?" Zilbagias's words were like a scourge on Sidar's back, the look on his face like a predator toying with its meat.

It was difficult to determine if it was more humiliating to be talked down to by a five-year-old or to admit he was absolutely right. Teeth and fists clenched, Sidar lacked any rebuttal.

"I think you guys have the wrong idea," the prince continued, taking on a haughty tone. "The saint wasn't given to you to be your plaything. My father placed her in your possession in hopes you could find some usefulness in her miraculous powers. After all, when it comes to forest elves, the night elves would be the ones with the most insight in the entire demonic kingdom. Unfortunately, it seems he overestimated your capabilities quite a bit." Shaking his head with a sigh, Zilbagias turned to stroke Liliana's head with a small smile, and she replied with a series of happy barks. Her eyes glittered so much it was

almost as if she was begging to have a tail she could wag.

“What a cutie you are. Evidently, too much for people like these. In merely a few minutes, I was able to **Dominate** her. Something you couldn’t achieve in seven years. That fact alone makes me a more suitable owner for her. In fact, considering all the time you’ve wasted with your ‘research,’” Zilbagias said with a sarcastic laugh, “you should be thanking me for saving you so much time. Feel free to thank me whenever it feels like a good *time* for you.”

“As you say, Your Highness, but...” Sidar all but growled, nearly reaching his limit.

“Go ahead, speak your mind. I don’t mind hearing arguments, even from those beneath me,” Zilbagias added, taking every chance available to take a stab at Sidar’s ego.

At Sidar’s side, Veene was struggling under a torrent of uneasiness. Was the boy before her really the same Zilbagias she had come to know? His assertiveness and arrogance felt at odds with the image of the prince she had grown accustomed to. But even so, she couldn’t bring herself to speak up. All she could do was silently wait for the argument to reach its conclusion, knowing that however it ended would certainly decide her fate.

“You have been met with undeniable success here, Your Highness.” Sidar’s fake smile was no longer able to conceal his irritation. “Even so, this was a very risky gamble!”

“Oh? Are you implying this was simply luck?” Zilbagias clasped his hands behind his back, eyebrows shooting up.

“My apologies, but such drastic modification to her personality ran the risk of stripping her of her powers as a saint altogether. That was why we were careful not to directly tamper with her brain and memories! It was to be the absolute last resort!”

“So what you’re saying is you could’ve achieved the same result if you’d actually tried, but you were too scared of failing. Sounds like you’ve learned a valuable lesson. I hope it serves you well in the future,” the prince said, his smile finishing the thought for him: *assuming you ever get that chance.*

“You! *You!* You have no idea how rare and valuable that saint is to us!” Sidar shouted, his voice barely under a scream. “Failure would’ve meant no second chances! You were only able to do as you pleased with such reckless abandon because she didn’t belong to you!”

“So in the face of a challenge, you cower due to lack of confidence at the potential of failure?” the prince retorted. “Somehow you managed to make yourself sound even more pathetic.”

“The last hope for our people is the saint’s healing magic, Lord Zilbagias. Just last week there was great movement on the front lines. Twenty more of our people began the journey into the eternal dark.” Sidar’s rage had leached the blood from his face, his tone growing more and more venomous. “The **Transposition** quota came far too late. Every desperate attempt to ensure our soldiers stayed alive was futile. In the end, all it did was prolong their inevitable deaths!”

Using **Transposition** to heal demons was the utmost priority before all else. Because of this, it was common for night elves to wait a week to be healed since there were only limited opportunities at a given time. This usually meant that if there was a substantial amount of night elves that required healing at the same time, their assigned quota would be stolen away and used elsewhere instead.

“Your Highness, the night elves have offered our blood and our hearts to the demonic kingdom. We are prepared to sacrifice our lives for your sake! But! Is it so wrong for us to wish for the safety and survival of as many of our people as possible?!” Sidar glared again at Liliana, his crimson eyes blazing, obsession and envy dripping from his gaze.

“With the power of the saint’s blood, we could have saved *all* of them! We could’ve stopped the wounds from getting infected! We could’ve prevented limbs from being amputated! And you are a member of the Rage family, Your Highness! Dozens of human slaves were sacrificed last week just for your training!”

The prince before him wasted **Transposition** on dozens of slaves while night elves died without receiving any support. Even if the demons were the ruling

class, that was still unreasonable!

“You already possess the **Transposition** curse! Why do you feel the need to snatch the saint’s healing power from us as well?!”

And Zilbagias, faced with the furious lamentations of the entire night elf race...burst into a fit of laughter.

Sidar could feel a vein in his forehead about to pop. If he hadn’t been dealing with a prince, fists would have been flying. Even Veene, face downcast through the whole exchange, was struggling to maintain a calm expression, clearly starting to succumb to her anger.

“My apologies. I shouldn’t laugh. It wasn’t my intention to belittle the sacrifice of your warriors. I know it looks that way, so let me apologize again. It’s just, I couldn’t help but laugh at how comically pitiful you are.”

“Whatever do you mean, Your Highness?” Sidar replied through gritted teeth, his tone making up the threat his words lacked. He had completely lost the composure to restrain his expression, giving the prince an unveiled glare. After all this, he was at his limit. The night elves served the demons due to promises and aspirations that the night elves would prosper, not to serve as their entertainment.

“You said something about the saint’s healing miracle being the last hope for your people, right?” Ignoring Sidar and Veene’s glares, Zilbagias turned to Liliana, stroking her hair again as he crouched down beside her. In response to her beaming smile, he poked a finger into her mouth. The high elf let out a confused hum, but nevertheless gave the finger a hearty lick.

“The bodily fluids of a saint are filled with light and healing magic.” Retrieving his now quite slobbery finger, Zilbagias grinned. “Why don’t you give it a try? See what that healing magic does to you. Show me your arm.” Stepping close, he held out his finger.

Sidar felt a little...no, extremely put off at the thought of letting a high elf’s spit touch any part of his body. Besides the physiological instinct of disgust, he had plenty of experiences built up to be well aware of the burning sensation of light magic. But in this situation, it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. So, he rolled back the sleeve of his jacket. Zilbagias then wiped his spit-laden finger

across Sidar's sickly pale skin.

A sound like grease sizzling in a pan filled the room.

The sudden, intense pain assaulting his arm sent Sidar into a frenzy. Instinctively, he jumped away from the saint to take a moment to investigate his wound. The spit had caused his arm to start boiling as it started to melt through his skin.

"So it still doesn't work." There was no more mockery in the prince's voice, only pity.

Struggling to bear the pain, Sidar was at a loss. Why? Wasn't the saint **Dominated**?

"I'll take full responsibility since it was my suggestion. *Me Ta Fesui*." Magic surged out from the prince, wrapping itself around Sidar's arm. The wound, and the pain accompanying it, were torn away from him. It was **Transposition**.

"This...actually hurts quite a bit. I get it now." The burn was entirely gone from Sidar's arm, instead appearing on Zilbagias's. Though his face twisted a little with the pain, he simply rubbed the rest of the saint's spit on the wound, and with the same bubbling sound as before, the wound mended.

"Why...?" Sidar mumbled. Why did the miracle help the prince, but not himself?

"It's simple." Returning to Liliana's side, Zilbagias crouched down and hugged her. The high elf responded by nuzzling up to his chest. "Let me start by explaining **Transposition**. It was a curse created by the Rage family, when my ancestors saw their children suffering and wanted to endure that suffering in their place." Combing his fingers through Liliana's golden hair, he continued. "It evolved into a powerful curse, capable of hurting others...but in the beginning, it was born from parental love."

"Love...?" Sidar and Veene shared a look. That was not a word they had expected to hear from the mouth of one of the proud, haughty demons.

"The light dwellers' miracles work in the same way, more or less."

Despite Zilbagias's gentle tone, the words sent a shudder down Sidar's spine.

He had a terrible feeling about what he was about to hear. It almost made him want to cover his ears. “Think about it. Would anyone want to save the life of someone they wanted dead? The healing miracle is based on love too. It’s a prayer for your loved ones, for those who love you...one that is answered by the heavens.”

Zilbagias turned to look at Sidar. “I love this woman. I took pity on her, and so offered her a helping hand. I made her forget the pain and fear of her life here. So she responded with love in kind.”

The miracle of light would only be bestowed on those she loved. Even someone creeping in the darkness could be that ray of light, that source of love. But, for someone she hated, that ray of light would turn into a scorching flame.

“Can you think of a funnier story, Sidar? What you needed all along was love, yet you tried to find it with torture and pain.”

Without realizing it, Sidar and Veene had started shuffling back. It was like Zilbagias’s words were a curse, a spider’s web reaching out to entangle them, and they were instinctively trying to escape it.

“I told you it was simple. If you want the healing power of the saint...” Zilbagias said, giving Liliana another kiss on the forehead, “try loving her, and getting her to love you. Though it’s probably a bit late for that,” he finished with a laugh.

Of course it was impossible. Assaulted by a wave of dizziness, it was all Sidar could do to stop from dropping to his knees. He knew the night elves would never accept that answer. For cultural reasons, for religious reasons, for political reasons, for any reason you could think of.

All of their efforts up until now had been entirely pointless. It was no wonder Zilbagias had laughed. Comical? Yes, he was right. They had spent seven long years researching something they could never hope to be able to meet the basic first condition for.

“Practically speaking, it doesn’t need to be such a deep love.” Seeing Sidar’s despair, Zilbagias called out to him with a compassionate smile. “Friendship. Even a passing goodwill is probably enough. That leaves you night elves in quite the predicament, seeing as all of you have rejected the forest elves from the

bottom of your hearts.”

No matter what they did to alter the will of the saint, if the other side of the equation didn't close that gap themselves, they would never see results. The miracles of light were open to all those who could open their hearts to it, but they would turn a stern eye on those who tried to fool the system, who tried to subvert their mysterious laws.

“What do you think, Sidar? I'm not foolish enough to suggest you try to love her, but do you think you can at least get along with a high elf? If you can, you'll probably be able to share in her blessings too.”

Sidar sank into thought. Considering the massive boon it could be to him and his people, he seriously considered it. Could he overcome his visceral, emotional reaction and approach this rationally? Was there some way he could trick his own feelings? With drugs, maybe.

In the end, he felt it might be possible. But when he opened his mouth to give that answer, his throat gave him no sound. The hatred that had run through his veins for so long rejected that response. The night elves' mission to deliver as much suffering to the forest elves as possible, to exterminate them entirely, had an iron grip on his soul.

“I suppose that is a no,” Zilbagias said. “What about you, Veene?”

“No.” Without taking even a moment to think, Veene shook her head.

“Looks like your hatred of the forest elves runs deep,” Zilbagias shook his head with a sigh, stroking Liliana's hair.

“Naturally,” Sidar replied with a bitter expression. “They...the forest elves stole our power and our long lives from us. If we had absolutely no other option, then maybe somehow we could cooperate with them under limited circumstances. As disgusting as that sounds. But goodwill? Friendship? That's outside the realm of possibility.” Before he had even been old enough to understand them, Sidar had been told all the stories of how the forest elves and night elves became divided, and the brutal history that followed it.

“Hm. But Sidar,” Zilbagias said, poking Liliana's cheek, “this woman had nothing to do with taking away your life spans or your powers. That's all ancient

history. Do you think it's logical to continue your path of revenge on the elves of today because of a grudge you hold against the ones that are long dead?"

"Of course, it is originally a story of the past. But no small amount of blood has been shed in the present day. There is no way we can stop that now. And besides, that's what revenge is, isn't it? Surely you don't intend to espouse the foolish idealism of the humans?"

"Ha. I feel exactly the same way." In response to Sidar's shocked reply, a brutal smile rose to Zilbagias's face. "I don't know why, but your words really resonated with me. Yeah, that's exactly what revenge is. It doesn't matter who brought about your suffering. You're exactly right." His red eyes, brighter than those of a night elf, were all but glowing.

Sidar suddenly felt like he was standing before a bloodthirsty predator. It was as if he had accidentally stepped on a tiger's tail.

Sensing the turbulence in her master's mood while in his embrace, Liliana gave a whine, her long, pointed ears drooping.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Anyway, that's how it is, Sidar. So I'll be taking her with me." Reining in the intensity of his mood, Zilbagias continued like nothing had ever happened.

"No, I cannot allow that." But Sidar stood blocking the door.

"Man, you're stubborn. What is it now?" Zilbagias made no attempt to hide his irritation.

"That woman's miraculous powers may not be capable of helping us. But that does not change the fact she was a gift to us, so she is our resource to use. As you have noticed, the skin we can harvest from her is of phenomenal quality."

At the word "skin," Liliana flinched back, cowering in the prince's arms. Even with her memories gone, it seemed the pain of her seven years had been thoroughly engraved into her soul.

"Get to the point," Zilbagias replied bluntly.

"Even if it is for a prince like you, we cannot hand her over for nothing. We need some compensation." That should have been obvious.

You think we'd let you just take her for free?!

Though he kept his expression firm and resolute, Sidar was panicking on the inside. Even if her blood wouldn't be useful to them, it didn't change the fact she was a valuable resource. The fact Sidar had been the one to invite in the prince who consequently took her away would be seen as a colossal failure on his part.

So I need to get something in exchange!

Otherwise, he would lose his position. As much as learning the truth of the saint's miracles was a source of despair, he couldn't afford to sit around and cry while things got worse.

"Ugh..." Zilbagias sighed, rolling his eyes, but it was clear from his demeanor that he had anticipated some pushback. "So? What do you want?" And so returned the ball to Sidar's court.

This was his last chance. Understanding that, Sidar licked his lips, rebuilding his smiling mask. "As I have explained earlier, the loss of our soldiers is a growing concern to the night elf people." Enough so that they had even turned to a saint in hopes of finding a cure-all, he thought before continuing. "I understand that using the saint's blood for its healing properties will be difficult for us. But the fact remains, by taking her, you are acquiring that healing power for yourself. Perhaps it is foolish of me to think like this, but I do believe that will allow you to save resources on providing sacrifices for your **Transposition** magic in the future."

With the saint's healing power, he wouldn't have much need for the Rage family curse anymore.

"So, this is what I propose. While I of course cannot ask that you provide us with all of it, perhaps a small portion of the quota you had prepared for yourself could be allocated to the night elves? If you could convince the Rage family to do that for us..."

They might lose the saint, but if in exchange they received increased access to **Transposition**, the deal would be a resounding success. Sidar would be able to save face, even if all he could manage was to get Zilbagias's word.

“Your greed rivals that of a hobgoblin. You know that, right?” But Zilbagias’s reply was anything but promising. “We’re talking about something useless to you being valuable to me here. Without me, she’d have no value at all, but you’re acting like I’ll always be around to give her that value. Even if you take into account the value of her skin, you’re asking too much.”

“But, Your Highness, she is capable of producing an unlimited amount of skin. Could you not consider the value of that to be infinite?”

“Of course not. If you made an infinite amount of it, it would lose all value. Each piece of skin would become less valuable. You might be able to produce an unlimited amount of it, but that doesn’t mean you can produce unlimited value.” Zilbagias gave a mischievous smile. “If it was all that valuable, you could have used that to purchase more access to **Transposition** without the need for my assistance, right?”

Sidar had no response to that.

“Actually, speaking of hobgoblins...the other day, I was able to watch my father at work in his office,” Zilbagias said, looking into space as if trying to recall something. “It sounded like there was some conflict between the night elf and hobgoblin officials.”

Sidar straightened at the sudden change in topic. “It appears so,” he answered. The night elves and hobgoblins were always butting heads, trying to secure their own interests and influence within the demonic kingdom. Being hobgoblins, they didn’t have much they could contribute but in their service as government workers, so they were desperate to maintain their positions. The night elves couldn’t stand them, considering the goblin-like incompetence they brought everywhere they went.

“My father, the king, must show a fair and impartial face. So when the appeals come, he has to take a neutral stance, not siding with either group.” As if looking forward to Sidar’s reply, Zilbagias stopped. Sidar’s smile widened, careful to hide the machinations going on under the surface. “I have been given permission to enter the king’s office,” the prince continued, “both to learn governmental affairs and possibly to serve as a consultant. Depending on the situation, I could even be asked to give a full report on my personal opinion.”

So? Zilbagias's eyes asked the question for him. It was all but an offer to put in a good word for the night elves. The demonic kingdom was a dictatorship under the Demon King. Having a direct connection that could influence the king would be appealing.

But...the conflict with the hobgoblins was small prey to be fighting over. "I am most grateful for your offer," Sidar replied with a deliberately strained smile, "but our superiority in those affairs is all but self-evident. The ineptitude of the hobgoblins and their lack of suitability to their current positions is an objective reality. While Your Highness may be able to accelerate things considerably, that is a boulder already well on its way down the hill."

I appreciate your offer, but we can manage that problem without your help.

"Hm. Then..." The wickedness in Zilbagias's smile grew. "What do you think will happen if I side with the hobgoblins?"

Sidar's face started to cramp. He was threatening to get in their way if Sidar wasn't going to cooperate?!

"W-Well, umm..." He had no answer. Zilbagias had too much influence.

The boulder was already rolling down the hill. There was no stopping it. But a push from the side at the wrong time could significantly impact where that boulder landed.

This piece of shit...!

Sidar was screaming internally. The vein in his forehead and the cramp in his face were just barely losing to his determination to maintain his smile.

Before Sidar could think of anything to say, Zilbagias burst out laughing, doubling over and holding his stomach. It was clear he had taken quite a liking to what he had seen in Sidar's expression.

"Okay, okay. I was just kidding around. As thanks for that face you just showed me, I won't bring it up," Zilbagias said, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes before taking another serious expression. "So, you said you want your healing quota increased."

"Yes." Sidar refocused, not having seen this level of seriousness from the

prince before.

“I can’t really negotiate with the Rage family for you. I may be one of them, but as a prince, I’m not in line for their inheritance. The management of the quotas is left to the family head, and there’s no telling what kind of friction would result from me trying to intervene with him.” As a prince, a member of the ruling family, he had to be even more careful with how he wielded that power.

“But,” he continued, stroking Liliana’s hair, “I am also a member of the Rage family, and can use **Transposition**.” He stopped for a moment. “I could give you healing, personally.”

As those words sank in, Sidar’s eyes lit up. “B-But that...!”

“That’s what you wanted, right? To save even one more of your people? I can’t use **Transposition** to hurt the saint. Now that I’ve gotten her to like me, hurting her could damage our relationship and potentially strip my access to her healing miracle.” Liliana looked up at Zilbagias with a questioning look in her eyes, rubbing her face against him. It seemed the prince inspired a sense of safety in her. Like she knew he would protect her from harm. Or...

“So it’ll generally be me taking your injuries myself, and then having Liliana heal them.”

Sidar swallowed. This prince, a prince of the demons, was offering his own body to save night elves...?!

“Of course I can’t give you unlimited use, nor let you use that service for free. If I don’t limit the healing I do for you in some way, it’ll cause problems with the Rage family. We can discuss the exact details regarding the healing at a later date. Veene could negotiate for you.”

“Wait, me?!” Veene blurted out, surprised by suddenly being included in the conversation.

“And you, Sidar, will be responsible for choosing who benefits from that healing. This is my deal with you. It doesn’t matter what position or standing you have at the time, you’re the only one I’ll listen to on this.”

Sidar’s eyes widened. An incredible authority had suddenly slipped its way

into his hands. There was no doubt a price he was paying here, but on the other side of that coin, those negotiations, that price, was getting him access to healing. Healing that could help them even when their desperate pleas for more access to **Transposition** went entirely ignored!

He couldn't even imagine what kind of influence that would bring him among the night elves. Even with the loss of the saint, even if he lost his job as head of the prison for that failure, what he gained would more than compensate for it.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Sidar dropped his head into a deep bow.

"I shall leave the saint Liliana in your care, then."

It was a deal.

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Looking like he owned the place, a young demon boy swaggered through the night elf quarter of the castle. Sinister, twisted horns, a perfectly symmetrical physique, an attractive face, and above all an arrogant, fearless smile: these marked the seventh demon prince, Zilbagias. Some would probably ignore the cold, but courteous, gazes the young prince received. Instead, he was relishing in the moment.

The woman in his arms with the severed arms and legs was the high elf saint, Liliana. When he initially escorted her out of the prison, she had bounced around on all fours while barking happily. But upon reaching the living quarters, her demeanor had completely changed. She was ensnared by the scornful, hateful glares of the night elves, completely overwhelmed by her fear. Zilbagias was left with only one choice: he must carry her out himself. This didn't diminish how terrified she was of the night elves, so she spent the entire trip with her face buried into his chest while trembling.

Trailing the pair from a short distance away was Sidar, with a faint smile painted on his face.

Though silent, the looks and mouths of the night elves they passed formed countless questions.

What the hell is going on?

You let the saint go? Are you crazy?

Why is a prince carrying a high elf out of here?

The only answer Sidar gave was his ambiguous smile.

Now is an opportune time to form some connections, but with whom? While they walked, he began to think. With this power that had slipped into his grasp, how would he go about using this new authority? There was no doubt the loss of the saint would be ascribed as a failure, and with that would come all sorts of nonsense like false accusations and the like. Even if he was stripped of the prison warden title, there was now a prize with greater importance waiting for him.

Night elves were a more tight-knit community than the demons. That is not to say they were without their internal factions and cliques. Amongst the gazes of the night elves were many cold looks focused on Sidar, blaming him for what had transpired. But with the authority Sidar now wielded, they would soon regret their contempt upon understanding the arrangement.

While countless plots and schemes ran through Sidar's head, Veene slowly followed behind him. It was like she was an empty husk, her face completely devoid of expression. Though she had offered to let the prince meet the high elf, it was almost on a whim. When the dust had settled, she'd found herself with the responsibility of chief negotiator in securing more healing quota for the night elves. Everything had happened so fast that she couldn't get a grasp on the current circumstances at all.

Why... Why me...?

While Veene excelled as both a maid and hunter, she was pretty naive for a night elf. Primarily because she lacked the characteristic cunning of her people. Plotting, acts of deception, and the like never came to her naturally. According to her uncle Sidar, she was "too honest, lacking in craftiness." And he was not wrong. In the eyes of the night elves, honesty was not virtuous. It made her a good pawn, but not a good player. Veene was fully aware of this, and embraced her role as a pawn, but now...

This will definitely be a pain...

Just thinking about what was to come put a toll on her. Even though Sidar was the one in charge of managing their healing quota, she anticipated many people would demand a multitude of tasks from her. And all of those demands would come from night elves who loved to plot and scheme. So much so, they treated it like an art form. If they were masters at the art, Veene was barely a novice.

I'm sick of this. I don't want to think anymore. I'm just a maid. Just a maid...

So, she had gone empty. Sidar just gave a silly grin to the people they passed, so they inevitably turned to Veene for an explanation, but all she could give them was that empty expression.

Not only had the high elf prisoner been freed for some inexplicable reason, but she was being carried by a demon prince. The news spread like wildfire, and in no time the halls were packed full of bewildered onlookers. And the night elves responded in the only way they knew how, conspicuous glares filled with contempt. All while their lips and eyes skillfully navigated silent conversations.

In that bizarre world, even though the halls were packed to the brim, not a single word was actually spoken. Any exceptions came from those who were not well-versed in the craft yet: the naive and innocent children.

“Mom! Why’s that lady naked?!” a young elf shouted, pointing at Liliana.

“Don’t look! That disgusting creature is a high elf!” The child’s mother panicked, grabbing her child by the hand and pulling them away, soon to be mimicked by the other mothers in the vicinity.

“Disgusting?”

“High elf?”

The children, completely ignorant to who the saint was, could only wander in their curiosity about this bizarre behavior. To them, they had no reason to hate or be repulsed by the trembling Liliana.

That one ray of goodness, of innocence, would surely be extinguished later that night with all sorts of bedtime stories. All to teach them how things worked in this cruel, dark world.

Sidar bid them farewell with a respectful bow as Zilbagias and his prize made it out of the night elf quarter. With the hateful looks now a thing of the recent past, Liliana went back to where she'd left off, being full of energy. She was like a puppy seeing the outside world for the first time. Her excitement was palpable as she looked at the night sky through the nearby windows, all while scampering around her master. The metal caps on her limbs acted as hooves, so each step she took was rather noisy.

Ignoring the double takes from the guards and servants they passed on the way, Zilbagias proudly led his prize back to his room.

"Welcome back, Lord Zil—huh?" Garunya's face froze before she could finish her greeting. Her reaction was to be expected, however. The master she had seen off in good faith had returned with this strange...pet?

"Lord Zilbagias? What is that?" Wiping her monocle with a handkerchief, Sophia regarded the high elf with a cold glare.

"I took a liking to her, so I decided to bring her back. Starting today, she's my pet." Zilbagias no longer had his usual unpleasant expression; it was instead replaced by a bold smile. Sophia frowned, clearly suspicious. "Direct any questions to Veene."

As everyone's gazes turned to the maid, she returned to being an empty shell.

"I'll be busy for a while," Zilbagias continued.

"Busy...?"

"Yes." He proceeded to pick up Liliana, who was lying on her back, and placed a kiss on her forehead before throwing her onto the bed. The high elf barked excitedly, enjoying the new soft sensation under her. "It's time to have some fun. I'd like some privacy, if you don't mind." He grinned, taking off his jacket.

"Uh...what?! What?!" As if defrosting from her frozen state, Garunya returned just in time to be struck by another cannonball.

"Lord Zilbagias?" Sophia shared in her confusion.

Veene had gone beyond emptiness, trying to will herself to disappear altogether.

“Oh right, Sophia. Before you go, may I have a soundproof barrier?”

“Uhh...yeah. Understood...”

“I know all of you are confused, but I’m sure Veene here can explain everything and answer all of your questions. Now go on, get out.”

All the servants left the room almost in unison. “Veene, what on earth is going —!” Garunya’s shrill voice was cut off by the closing door and the barrier erecting.

Liliana gave a curious whine as she looked over at Zilbagias, who was now lying down on the bed beside her.

“I suppose this is goodbye, for both you and I.” The prince gave a hollow laugh as he poked at the saint’s cheeks.

It’s like I was born in that prison. His identity as Alexander had been sealed away. In that place, at that moment, the demon prince Zilbagias had been born. *And now, my memories will return, and the current me will wither and die.*

By conversing with the devil god within him, he was able to fully grasp the situation he was in. He knew his place as a temporary being, born by the sealing of his memories. So he had made sure to enjoy himself.

I did the best I could, but will that satisfy the real me?

“I cannot imagine a better result than this. Panic? Maybe. But disappointment? He has no reason to feel such a way,” the Devil God Antendeixis replied, as if in a monologue.

Ha ha ha. You think I’ll scare the crap out of him? Wish I could see the look on his face. Kinda sucks I can’t.

“Watching you has been quite the experience. Different, in a way. I must say, it was entertaining. Losing you is a shame, but...well, there isn’t anything we can do about that.”

Now that I think about it...I can’t really be punished for anything I do now, right? You think I could have some fun before I go? Zilbagias wondered, running his hands over the high elf’s soft skin. Liliana apparently found it ticklish as she squirmed under his touch.

“Such an act would give you incredible power, but the real you would be unable to live with himself. He would probably bash his own head in.”

I guess that’s off the table. Whatever. Say hi to the future me, then. All the negotiating worked out, but then again, I’m not the one who will have to pay up.

“I’m quite looking forward to his response. Goodbye, Zilbagias.”

With that, the magic of **Taboo** was revoked. Zilbagias’s memories flooded back to him, like the insides of his head were hammered back into place.

“What the hell did I do?!”

Why?! For night elves?! Why the heck did I volunteer to be their healer?! I already have to suffer through my training, and now this?!

“My my, it seems you’re back. And quite energetic at that.”

It didn’t take a genius to tell Ante was laughing up a storm inside me. *Damn you, treating all this crap like it isn’t your problem at all!*

While my rage boiled, I felt Liliana shift in my arms.

Uh-oh. I guess her memories were also starting to return. Even though we had made it out of the prison, returning to her true self after acting like a puppy for so long probably felt terrible. It was better than waking up back in that prison, but it was still certainly unpleasant. Especially when you account for the fact that someone she knew had witnessed her in such a state.

“Uh, yeah, about that. I’m really sorry. For all of this. Are you okay?” I hesitantly looked at Liliana...

...who responded with a confused look followed by a whine.

“Uh, Miss Liliana? We are in a soundproof barrier. There’s no need to act like that anymore.”

“Bark!”

“Liliana...?”

“Bark bark!”

Hey, Ante! The curse is still on her!

*“My **Taboo** is not affecting her anymore...”*

Wait, even Ante is confused? I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...

“Hey, Liliana...” You’ve got to be joking. “Your personality...?!” It didn’t come back?

Liliana’s response was another confused look and another bark. Completely oblivious to the situation, Liliana happily sat up and licked my face.

Hearing that her son had brought a high elf woman back to his bedroom, the storm known as Archduchess Pratifya came raging into the room only a few moments later.



Epilogue

Hey there. It's me, the hero Alexander, also known as the demon prince Zilbagias. Here I am, sitting in this tiny, bony chair. Again.

I had been in the seat of reflection for quite a while, and it was still a pain in my butt. Because man, my butt was killing me.

"Explain what's going on, now, Zilbagias." Prati's fan snapped open as she glared at me.

Hell, I'd like to know the answer to that myself!

That said, this entire situation was pretty unfortunate for Prati. When she came into the room, I had still been in shock that Liliana wasn't back to her old self. So the first thing she'd seen was me leaning over Liliana and shaking her by the shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Man, she'd really *screamed*. The look on her face had been like a once-in-a-lifetime event. It didn't entirely register before, but that was the first time she had actually raised her voice at me.

By the way, the moment she put me in this chair as punishment, Liliana had immediately started barking angrily at Prati. All it took was one angry look from the archduchess to send her scurrying back behind the bed to hide. *Useless dog*. She was now peeking out from behind the bed, watching me while she stayed in cover.

"Needless to say, a lot happened," I said with a distant look. "For starters, this wasn't me just succumbing to my own lust."

It was true that I took a liking to the saint, I explained. I also mentioned my negotiations with the night elves, my **Domination** of Liliana to make her think she was a dog, my contract with Sidar to provide them limited healing, and the strong influence I would now have on one particular group of night elves.

Prati hummed thoughtfully, opening and closing her fan repeatedly as she listened to my story.

“Demanding further negotiations for the healing to take place was a good move.” She seemed satisfied to learn I wasn’t acting like a pervert as she finally allowed me to stand. “Just how much do you plan on asking of them?” she asked.

Good question. It was something “Zilbagias” hadn’t considered at all.

“I haven’t thought through the exact details yet, but I’m primarily interested in information,” I answered.

“What kind of information exactly?”

“My interest lies in the intelligence gathered by the night elves focused on the front lines, and the movements of the Alliance. I’m fascinated by the actual raw opinions of those who are witnessing everything while on active duty. Especially before those opinions get cleaned up and recorded into their reports. Besides that, I’d like to know what the other races working in the castle are chatting about. Even if it’s just idle chatter.”

The former was of tremendous value to me. I would have firsthand access to the information network the night elves had built around the Panhuman Alliance. One day, when I was able to get a bit more freedom to operate on my own, the opportunity may arise to leak information to the Alliance. The damage that would do to the demonic kingdom’s intelligence operations would be significant.

The latter was about keeping my finger on the pulse of the activities in the castle, on the off chance there was someone plotting against the demons. Supporting them overtly would be out of the question, but I might be able to indirectly breathe some oxygen on the smoldering embers lying dormant in the castle.

By the way, the night elf servants employed by the demons were placed under strict magic which bound them to secrecy. For example, ordering Sidar to gather intel from the servants about Aiogias or Rubifya would be mostly impossible. On the other hand, that guaranteed any servants working for me wouldn’t leak information about my plans. That magic made night elf servants

incredibly valuable assets.

“At face value, trading healing for information seems like quite the bad deal. If it’s information you want, fine, but do consider requesting the services of those you’ve healed as an addition to that deal. That could become an avenue to gather some hands and feet of your own.”

“I think I understand. And you don’t mean as servants, right?” Most of those who would need healing would be soldiers, and I had more than enough servants.

“Of course.” Prati’s fan snapped shut. “In fact, I’ve been considering sending you to a real battlefield sometime in the near future.” She then followed up with a bombshell.

It took every bit of energy I could muster to keep my anxiety from creeping onto my face. “My first battle, huh?”

“Calling it your ‘first battle’ may be a bit of an exaggeration. The purpose is to give you a chance at some real experience. Think of it as practice, if you like.”

According to Prati, the demonic army easing up to ensure they didn’t entirely wipe out the Alliance meant we were left with an excess of military power. Races weaker in magic, like beastfolk, goblins, and ogres, were finding fewer and fewer opportunities to make themselves useful. While the beastfolk were more than happy to have fewer opportunities to die in battle, the actual problem came with the goblins and ogres. During the inception of the demonic kingdom, the demons had been satisfied using their strength. But now the wheels were in motion to start phasing them out of service.

And without any use on the battlefield, having goblins and ogres around became quite the eyesore. Ogres ate a tremendous amount of food, while goblins were filthy and stupid. Between demon soldiers, night elf hunters, disciplined beastfolk battalions, undead, and even dragons, the demonic kingdom was hardly lacking in firepower. It made one wonder: did we *really* still need goblins around? It was that “argument against goblins and ogres” thing.

Their treatment was kinda cruel after all the blood they had shed for the sake of the kingdom, but you won’t catch me feeling sorry for a goblin. I could maybe

scrape up a tiny bit of compassion for the ogres, though.

Anyway, as this sentiment began to spread throughout the kingdom, there had been a steady increase in ogre and goblin deserters. They had been given plenty of opportunities to gorge themselves on the front lines (mostly on humans) in the past, but now that any chances for that had been taken from them, they were pretty bent out of shape.

“If they simply deserted and returned to living wild in the forests, it wouldn’t be much of an issue.” The issue was when they took up residence in abandoned or destroyed forts and started multiplying, becoming a threat to the surrounding countryside. This was particularly an issue with the goblins. When it came to those who usually populated those areas, typically it would be (relatively) weaker demons, night elves, and beastfolk. So it wasn’t like some ordinary goblins could beat them in a fight. However, if the goblins were allowed to multiply, the tides would completely change.

If you let your guard down for even a moment, the goblin population could explode in no time. Plus, when it came to resources in a region, it didn’t take much for goblins to act as destructive parasites and devour them all. There was a saying that went something like “if you see one goblin, assume there are ten.” Because of that, it became standard procedure to exterminate a group of goblins who deserted to prevent them from reproducing.

“So I have prepared a bit of an excursion for you to some forts and castles that have been infested with deserters. Of course, this won’t act as your first official deployment. It would be a poor reflection of you if your first battle on record was exterminating some goblins.”

“So to prepare me for my first deployment, you want me to get used to the atmosphere of a working army?”

“Precisely...however, when it comes to you, I feel it might be somewhat unnecessary.” Prati gave a bitter smile. “I feel like I could throw you onto the front lines and expect great things, but maybe I’m only saying that as your mother. Sometimes, mothers can have skewed expectations for their children.”

Well, to be honest, I was already way stronger than I’d ever been in my

previous life.

“If nothing else, it will be experience. I would be happy to participate.” It was certainly far better than going to the front lines. I could even let a few goblins flee just to try and make the situation worse.

“I’m glad you’re so reliable. To get back on topic, see to it that some of the soldiers you heal fight under you, even if for a short time. Make them see it as a manner of payment. Though their tactics are often somewhat pathetic, humans will use similar strategies, so they may still be useful to you.” Prati stopped to think for a moment. “I will try not to interfere with your negotiations. Of course, I’m always willing to offer my advice, if you wish. On a fundamental level, however, I will let you handle things.”

“Are you sure?”

“As you said, it will be experience. We have room to make amends for any potential failures, as long as they aren’t too grave. There’s an almost endless depth to the craftiness of the night elves, so you cannot let your guard down around them. They have a strong sense of duty—remember that. In due time, you will learn how to navigate their ways.”

“Understood.”

Looks like everything worked out pretty well. The biggest relief was the fact I wouldn’t have to fight humans, at least for a while.

“So, about the high elf.” Prati’s gaze turned violently as she shifted her attention to Liliana. *Oh. I guess I spoke too soon.* “You... You don’t really intend to do *that* with her, do you? Zilbagias?” she asked as if struggling to talk with something stuck in her throat.

Honestly, being asked straight up like this put me in a rough spot too.

“Is that not allowed?”

“Whether it’s allowed or not...do you really feel those urges already? Even Daiagias had no interest in such things until he was an adult.”

Seriously? Is that how demons worked? I had told Sidar that I was starting to

deal with those urges, but I actually wasn't feeling anything of the sort. Sometimes my eyes would be unconsciously drawn to a woman's breasts, but that was it. I wasn't feeling lustful at all. Maybe I'd just assumed demons were like humans, who usually started getting those urges around this stage of maturity. In retrospect, I always had thought it was kind of odd I hadn't really gotten them yet. *Demons matured fast in many ways except sexually, huh?*

"If you really...really feel that need, I'm sure we can find someone within the Rage family to satisfy you. No need to stoop so low as to use a high elf, right?"

Really? I'd have second thoughts about anyone willing to sleep with a five-year-old. Granted, I'm the weirdo in this situation.

"Actually, mother..." But I had an excuse prepared for this. A perfect reason to be obsessed with this high elf. "You may have noticed already, but my magic has grown quite a bit lately."

That was all it took for the intelligent Archduchess Pratifya to fill in the rest of the details on her own. "No way..." she murmured, her eyes darting between me and Liliana. "That's the reason? That devil? A stricture limiting you only to high elves?"

"Yes. It's been a source of a lot of power for me." That part wasn't a lie. Not a surprise that treating one of your old friends as a pet was quite taboo.

Prati covered her face with both hands.

"Mother, this is all for the sake of getting stronger," I pressed.

After quite a long pause, she finally sighed. "Very well. You can do as you please with that elf," she said, standing up.

"Did you hear that, Liliana?! You're allowed to stay!" Lifting Liliana up from her hiding spot, I kissed her exaggeratedly, prompting another heavy sigh from Prati as she dejectedly dragged herself from the room.

The moment she was gone, Ante erupted into a fit of laughter. "*That face! Did you see her face?!*" She couldn't contain herself.

Liliana also barked happily, content that the scary lady was gone.

"And now you're an official member of the family!"

Liliana howled happily. What a cutie.

I then gave a heavy sigh. *What's up with her memories? Why won't they come back?*

After discussing it with Ante, only one possibility came to mind.

"She likely does not wish for her memories to return."

The past seven years had been like a living hell for her. With her memories sealed away, she was now an entirely different person. Living as a dog allowed her to forget everything, to not relive her seven years of pain.

"Remembering her old self is no longer forbidden to her. But if she has no desire to recall who she once was, it would be difficult to force her."

If I wanted, it would be easy enough to force her to remember. By saying something like "you aren't a dog, you're the saint Liliana" with enough magical force, I could make her remember everything. But seeing her hop around without a care in the world, happily licking my face...it was hard to entirely rationalize returning her to her senses as being the best thing for her.

At any rate, until an opportunity arose where she may be set free, she would be staying in the castle as my pet. I figured her actually believing she was a dog would be significantly less humiliating and easier to manage than having her remember everything and still have to pretend to be one. So when it came to her memories, I'd just wait for a better opportunity or just let her recover them naturally.

I decided to put it off for now.

"I'm so sorry..."

I murmured, stroking her hair. Liliana (the dog) looked up at me with a quizzical expression, as if to ask what I was sorry for. Though she was unique for someone of a race with a long life span, she was still a proud high elf.

It wouldn't shock me if she somehow died of shame upon her memories returning. I was sure she'd have a million things to say to me. And when that

day came...I'd take all of it.

"Hopefully that day comes," I added. *That day when I can set you free.*

"Bark bark bark."

At least my first trip to the battlefield was going to be delayed a bit.

Lying on my bed, I reached my hand up to the ceiling, in the same way I had with my flabby little arms when I was first reborn into this life. I still had quite a bit of muscle to build, but I was without a doubt growing up. Even beyond just my body, my contract with Ante made me far stronger than my past self. I was a prince in the demonic kingdom, and had won quite a bit of influence with the night elves.

And I'd destroy them all.

I clenched my hand into a fist. The Demon King was strong. There was no way I could match him as I was now. But an outsider like me had wormed his way into the heart of the demonic kingdom. I didn't know how long it would take, but the moment the opportunity entered my grasp, I'd bring this kingdom to its knees.

Because no matter what anyone said, I was a hero.

Side Story: The Saint and Baked Sweets

Long ago, shortly after the hero Alexander and the saint Liliana first met.

It was a bright and sunny afternoon. Silence covered the defensive line built in the forest by the Panhuman Alliance. The brutal assault by the Demon King's forces had lasted through the previous night and well into the morning, leaving the defenders exhausted. They were all sleeping like logs. Of course, there were still soldiers on guard in case of any surprise attacks, but even quite a few of them were dozing off in the afternoon sun.

Among them, one man sat in the shade of a tree, aggressively stuffing food from a lunch box into his mouth as he glared at the front line. A firm build, well-tanned skin, and short-cropped brown hair. His armor was covered in scratches and dents, and his sword and shield lay propped up nearby, ready for use at any moment. He was a man by the name of Alexander, a hero with the nickname "the Indomitable Sacred Flame."

"Hey, Alex! You still alive?" The sound of light footsteps approaching from behind caught his attention. Turning to see his visitor, he saw the dark-skinned smile of a high elf with hair that all but glowed golden in the sun.

The saint Liliana El Del Milfrul. Saints were the strongest weapons in the forest elves' possession.

"Yes, thanks to you." Alex responded, blunt but still with a hint of respect.

"I'm glad. When that demon unit rushed us and I couldn't find you, I got super worried." Sitting down beside him, Liliana gave a relieved sigh.

"That was quite a pinch. I had a hunch that retreating would cause our entire line to collapse, so we pushed forward and started wreaking havoc in their back lines."

"Well, now I'm *really* glad you made it out alive." Liliana's face turned

surprisingly serious after hearing about Alex's reckless behavior.

"I would've died if it wasn't for your blessing. Thank you." He bowed his head, still shoving food into his mouth.

"I'm glad it helped." With a listless smile, she leaned back against the tree and pulled out an apple of her own to start eating. As her mask of bravado came down, a look of exhaustion played over her face.

She had spent the entire night sharing her blessings with the Alliance defenders, and up until just now, she had been running around trying to do as much healing as she could. Not even a high elf had an infinite supply of magic. She'd need a break eventually.

And so, she had come to sit beside Alex, a soldier that wouldn't stiffen up and resort to only polite formalities when around her. The closeness with which he treated her was refreshing, acting as if she was just another comrade, not putting her on a pedestal.

Neither of them really had the energy to talk, so they both stared quietly at the sky as they ate. Finishing his lunch, Alex put his lunch box away before searching around in his bag and eventually pulling out a small wooden box.

"What's that?" Liliana asked, her attention captured by the soft, sweet smell emanating from it.

"Nut cookies," came Alex's curt response. Opening the box, he took out a cookie and tossed it into his mouth, chewing slowly as if to draw out every bit of sweetness he could. And as he did, the usually stone-faced Alex looked to have the beginnings of a smile on his face.

"Oh?" Liliana looked with interest at the box of cookies.

Forest elves in general avoided the use of fire, so they had no concept of cooking or baking. They didn't even have fields of crops. Instead, their only source of food was the plants of the forest they used magic on to grow fruits and vegetables. Traveling together with the rest of the army, she would have inevitably experienced things like bread or soup by now. But considering she had left the forest behind not so long ago, it was likely she had never seen baked sweets before.

“That’s... It’s one of those things, right? The ones you make by baking wheat?”

“That makes it sound like normal bread. Have you never seen these before?”

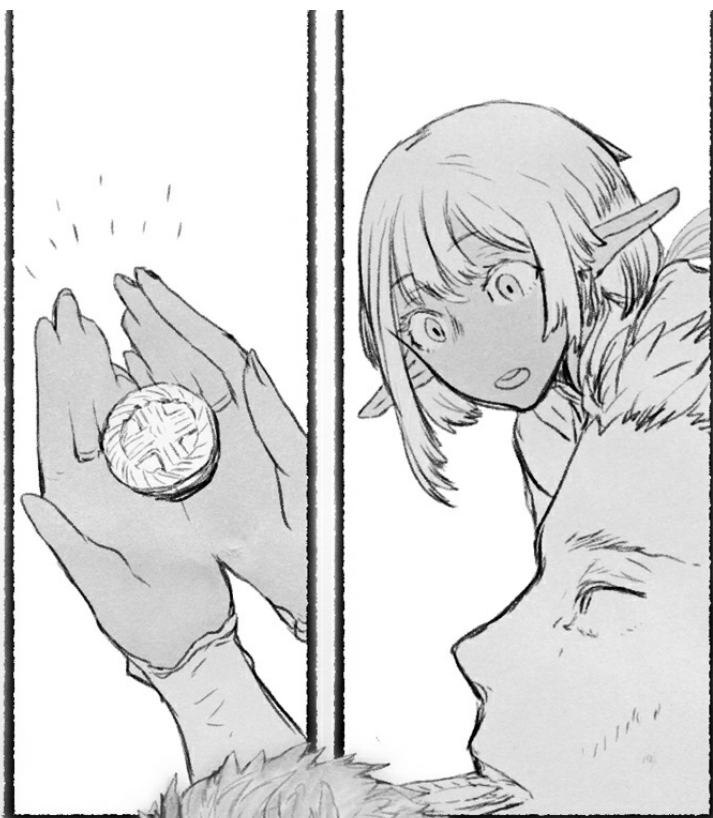
As he held the box out to her, Liliana found herself pulling a cookie out. She frowned at the small dessert, turning it over in her hands. Wheat came from fields, fields came from destroying forests, and baking came from burning wood, so from a moral standpoint, things like this were no good to forest elves.

But her curiosity was too much for her to bear. With a soft crunch, she took a bite.

“It’s so sweet! This is delicious!”

The saint, representative of all forest elves, brought her hands to her cheeks as her eyes started to shine.

“They were made with honey,” Alex explained with a satisfied nod, popping another one into his mouth.



Having finished her cookie in no time, her eyes were immediately drawn back to the box. The action was entirely unconscious, to the point she didn't even realize how shameless she was being.

"You can have more, if you like." Noticing her attention, he pushed the box into her hands.

"What? Oh, no, that's not what I meant." At that she finally realized she had been staring at them, her face flushing. But she couldn't quite bring herself to give them back.

These are...bad!

Looking down at the box of cookies—was this how humans felt when they stared at chests full of gold and jewels?—Liliana found herself gulping.

Maybe...just...one more?

Crunch, crunch.

"Mmmmmm!"

They were amazing! Giving Alex one of her apples in exchange, Liliana ended up enthusiastically polishing off most of the remaining cookies.

That day, the saint Liliana had fallen victim to the forbidden fruit of baked sweets.

+++

The next day, Liliana decided to bring Alex some baked goods as a thank-you gift.

"What? You can't get any?"

"It's quite a difficult request. You may be a saint, but in a camp like this..." The Alliance's quartermaster shrugged apologetically.

Those kinds of sweets were a rarity, and that gave them tremendous value. In a peaceful city was one thing, but in the middle of a battlefield, it wasn't something you could easily get your hands on. The apple she had given him in exchange wasn't nothing, but it hardly seemed like a fair exchange. Alex had actually brought them to the front lines as a special reward for himself, but had

given them to her as thanks for her tiring effort for the sake of the Alliance soldiers.

They were really important, weren't they?

Liliana couldn't help but feel guilty. She hadn't understood how rare and valuable they were, so she had eaten them all. Even though she had only known him for a brief time, she knew he was the kind of guy that loved food, and she'd eaten them all anyway.

Liliana took the bread, one with a bit more sweetness than usual, that the quartermaster had given her to make up for the lack of sweets. Taking a small piece for herself...it didn't taste bad or anything, but it was a far cry from the cookies Alex had given her.

"Oh. That's it!" The new idea sent Liliana running through the forest, turning her ears to the voices of the wind and the trees. And with their guidance—

"There's one." She had found a bee's nest. "Sorry, I'm just going to take a little of your honey, okay?" Liliana breathed a small amount of purifying magic on the bees angrily buzzing at her interference. The reinvigorated bees reluctantly seemed to relent, opening the way to their nest.

Liliana took a bit of the honey from the nest, letting it soak into the bread. That should make it a lot better. *Though, it still might not match those cookies.*

"Hey, Alex! You still alive?" Once again, like nothing had happened, she came to his side. "I brought you a present today."

"That's rare," he responded with a doubtful tone.

"Here! This is for you!"

"Bread? That's even more rare..." He blinked in surprise. As he took a bite of the bread, he did a double take at the unexpected sweetness.

Liliana watched him eat with a bright smile.

This was a story from the time shortly after Alex and Liliana met. Long, long before their fateful attack on the Demon King's castle.

Bonus Short Stories

The Imp Sophia and the Devil God Antendeixis

About three years had passed since my lessons with Sophia first started. I had mastered the demonic language of course, but also reading and writing in the human and elven alphabets. Studying became such an integral part of my routine that I started reading books in my free time. In my previous life I would've preferred death to studying. *Guess that goes to show how putting humans in a new environment can change them drastically.*

"Except you're a demon now."

Yeah, I guess. But demons are savages, so me getting the urge to study more was the last thing I expected.

As I became more accustomed to handling my studying independently, Sophia started to bring her own work while supervising me. With a rigid expression, she rapidly chewed through the stack of paperwork before her. Seeing her like this made it hard to believe she had a mischievous imp phase.

Hey, Ante. What was Sophia like as an imp?

"Hm. I suppose the most apt description would be that she was like a little speck."

Ante jumped out from inside me, her sudden appearance throwing Sophia into a bit of a panic. "In truth, about this big," Ante said, leaving barely any space between her fingers.

"Okay, that can't be true. She'd barely be an imp at that point, more like a little bean devil."

"From a physical perspective, you may have a point. But from my perspective, that was how she appeared."

"Oh...right. I guess you are technically kind of a god."

“Not ‘kind of.’ I *am* a proper devil god.”

For the record, Sophia was trembling in her chair without a clue about what was going on.

“Oh, I was just asking her what you were like when you were little,” I explained.

“Ah, I-I see,” she replied with a weak smile. *Ante really scares the crap out of her, huh?*

“What did you do to make her so scared of you?” I muttered.

Ante chuckled. “Oh, not much. I simply invited her in with the promise of showing her a few rituals of taboo. And then let her experience them for herself,” she said with a grin. “For example, there was once an ancient human tribe that executed their particularly wicked criminals by stripping them naked, smearing them head to toe with honey, and then throwing them into a pit filled with great-jaws. The process was known as ‘Insect Hell.’”

Sophia’s face grew steadily more pale, her trembling growing more intense as Ante’s explanation dredged up the old memories.

“At first the great-jaw bites merely itch, but over time, the irritation becomes intensely painful. It was splendidly terrible. I could almost make it into a fetish.”

“A fetish...?”

“Yes. I was fairly bored, so I joined her in experiencing that process. I also had her roasted while trapped inside a bronze statue, and nailed to a pillar to be devoured by birds...”

“W-Wait, you didn’t do those with her too, did you?”

“Of course I did. The gloomy melancholy of being eaten alive by birds...ah, it was so much fun...”

“Uh...”

Unlike Ante’s unfazed expression while explaining such awful things, Sophia’s breathing reached the point of becoming horribly ragged. Her trembling was descending into a full on seizure. It seemed pretty clear to me she was dealing with some pretty serious trauma.

“I’m surprised the two of you survived all that. Wait, does your palace have the tools to do all that kind of stuff?”

“It’s my palace, after all. It would be no exaggeration to call the interior my own world. My experiences, anything I’ve heard or seen, can be easily reproduced in that domain. Even death can be repelled indefinitely.”

Really? I was wondering how she found these “great-jaw” things, whatever they were, but I guess she could manipulate and transform the environment however she pleased. That really puts into perspective why they were called devil gods.

So the little imp Sophia had to endure a hellish amount of executions with this pervert. And even after all of that suffering, she wasn’t even allowed to die.

Reminiscing on her torture finally completely overwhelmed Sophia as her eyes rolled back in her head as she passed out. Being a knowledge devil in this case probably did her no favors as she would never forget any of her experiences. Also, I’d never seen a devil faint before. *You learn something new every day, I suppose.*

“I didn’t realize your palace was such a convenient place. But considering you can do pretty much anything there, it looked rather...boring?”

“Yes, I once had pools and gardens that stretched on for eternity, lavish mansions, even great cathedrals. I experimented with various environments. But with so few visitors, I grew tired of them. It all felt hopelessly empty. In the end, I settled on the simplistic decor you witnessed.” Ante’s grin widened. “With so few visitors, I tend to get a bit carried away when I finally do have one. Our parties last for months...”

Months, huh? Having such an extended period of suffering with a perfect memory must’ve been terrible.

“And you were one of those rare visitors. I expect the entertainment you will provide me to last much, much longer,” she chuckled, slipping back into my body.

Yeah, sure. I guess with the situation I’d found myself in, there was a good chance I’d be meeting those expectations.

“Uh, Sophia?” Anyway, for now I had this devil to worry about. I tried lightly smacking her face, but she was completely out of it. “All right then.”

Deciding peace and quiet every now and then could be quite the luxury, I returned to my books.

Shedding and Baby Garunya

One day, while petting Garunya during one of my study breaks, I noticed clumps of fur were starting to come off on my fingers.

“Ah...sorry...” Garunya’s satisfied purring was interrupted by her realization, the maid suddenly becoming self-conscious.

“Ah, I guess it’s shedding season,” I commented. The seasons *were* changing. I ruffled the fur around her neck lightly, watching with amusement as puffs of fur filled the air. Garunya shrank back, clearly embarrassed.

“I think it would be more efficient if you used this,” Sophia said from her spot nearby, pulling out a brush. *Efficiency wasn’t really the goal here...but sure, why not?*

“Relax, Garunya.”

“U-Understood...”

Man, this really takes me back. Well, to memories of my past life. If you brushed the village chief’s cat like this...

Garunya began purring again.

And if you put some muscle into it here...

That got a pleased meow out of her.

As my mind wandered while brushing Garunya, I soon became the owner of a considerable amount of white fur.

“You’ve got quite the collection there,” Ante said, clearly amused. Having returned to her senses, Garunya’s face was drenched in embarrassment.

“You could probably make a doll with that amount,” Veene said as she popped in to clean up the mess, gathering it all into a ball.

“Oh? You mean like a felt doll? I’ve read about them.” Sophia’s eyes began to sparkle, Veene’s offhand comment catching her interest. “Now that I think about it, I’ve never seen one with my own eyes. This is the perfect opportunity to try making one. The experience should be quite enlightening!” She was out the door almost before the words left her lips, and in no time returned with a number of bottles filled with fluid.

“If I remember correctly, you start by making a pattern with paper, then pack the hair around it. Then you take some soapy water...” Sophia’s hands moved quickly and precisely as she drew the memories out of her head. “Huh, this is tougher than I thought. Veene, could I have some fire magic?”

“Ah, of course.”

“Make sure not to burn anything. Just enough to warm it up.”

“Understood.”

Garunya wore a conflicted expression as she watched the two work on the doll. Humans of old had hunted down white tiger beastfolk for their fur, so this likely made her think of that. As a former human myself, I couldn’t say it was a pleasant reminder for me either.

After a little bit of trial and error, “Done! Say hello to Baby Garunya!”

A small felt doll now sat on Sophia’s open hand. With button eyes, a button nose, and a small ribbon, it was sure enough a somewhat clumsy recreation of Garunya. Honestly, it was pretty cute.

“She seems quite skilled,” Ante commented. “I have doubts I could replicate such talents.”

Right? Though really, when it came to Ante, skill wasn’t the real issue. The real issue was her lack of patience for that kind of precise work. That said, she could probably use magic to whip up something like this fairly easily.

This kind of thing would’ve made all the kids of my village ecstatic...not that I can remember them all that well anymore.

“I’m glad I learned of a practical application for this knowledge,” Sophia nodded in satisfaction, looking over the doll in her hands. “So uh...now what?”

Does anyone want it?”

We all shared a look. Sophia just wanted to test out her knowledge, so she had no use for the doll. Veene seemed entirely uninterested, and Garunya clearly had mixed feelings about taking a doll made from her own fur. So, inevitably...

“I guess I’ll take it,” I said.

“To decorate your room? If other demons were to see this, I imagine you’d face no small amount of scorn.”

I grimaced at Sophia’s warning. As much as I personally liked Baby Garunya, I knew the gossip about the demon prince having a stuffed animal would get out of hand to unimaginable degrees.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to keep it somewhere safe, then.”

Too bad. It’s really cute. I guess it’s a bit too cultured for demons.

And so, Baby Garunya was put to bed in the corner of my closet.

The Assault on the Demon King’s Castle

An icy wind howled past my ears.

My name is Alexander. I am a human hero. So...why am I flying in the frigid cold, with nothing but a single rope to tie me to this dragon?!

Okay, okay, I know. I’m well aware that we’re in the middle of launching a surprise attack on the Demon King’s castle. “The Assault on the Demon King’s Castle.” Simple and straightforward, like all good names. We were the last desperate effort of the Panhuman Alliance to put an end to the war against the demons. With the help of the white dragons who deserted from the Demon King’s army, we would launch our surprise attack during midday, when all the demons would be asleep. We would strike with a force of highly trained elites. After infiltrating, we would kill the Demon King and bring an end to this stupid war. The plan was perfect, if you could ignore the fact that our assault unit’s trek to the castle was a one-way trip. But everyone in the unit, including myself,

was well aware of what they signed up for. Our lives were a small price to pay to put an end to the Demon King.

The concealing magic we used on our unit made it hard to see them, but there were dozens of white dragons flying alongside me. Each had about eight people on their backs. Heroes like me, Swordmasters, Fistmasters, and dwarven forgeknights made up the vanguard. The middle guard consisted of priests from the Holy Church, and the rear guard of forest elf monks and archers. Our party had a pretty good composition.

“Alex! You still alive?!” I turned around to see where the shouting was coming from and saw the Swordmaster seated behind me. He was clinging desperately to the rope, just like me, as we were both thrown side to side by the dragon’s jostling.

“Yeah! Somehow!” I shouted back over the wind.

I completely lost track of how long we had been up here. It was cold enough to freeze to death, the air was thin enough I felt I might pass out at any moment, and the constant turbulence meant there was no chance to rest. In order to keep the concealing magic intact, we couldn’t use any other magic, so we had no way to keep ourselves warm. The conditions were terrible. Much crueler than any wintry battlefield.

“Looks like it’s almost time to say goodbye to this awful sky!” But the Swordmaster just grinned, pointing to the surface far below us. Turning to look where he pointed, the open wilderness we were once soaring over had turned into fields and cities.

We are getting close to our destination! I could feel myself getting pumped.

“I see it! It’s the castle!” the metallic shout of our white dragon reached us over the wind. Far in the distance, barely a speck on the horizon, was a tiny white structure. Under the brilliant sunlight, it gleamed like a mountain of chalk.

“What kind of castle is that for denizens of the dark?!”

I had heard that their castle was made by carving into a mountain of marble, but the bright colors were not something I expected. It was infuriating. Though

of course, this was not originally a castle for the demons. It was once a den for dragons.

“The palace at the peak is the Demon King’s dwelling!” the dragon rasped. “We will initiate our attack from the sky!”

The white dragon roared, a cry taken up by those around us shortly after as our concealing veil was stripped away. Suddenly, I could see dozens of dragons in the sky around me. I could feel my insides rushing upwards as they all dived toward the castle as one. As we raced to the castle’s peak, the once tiny structure quickly grew enormous.

The dragons’ roars grew heavier, dozens of beams of white light shooting toward the castle as they unleashed their breath attacks. The brilliant barrage pounded the castle—or at least attempted to, before unnaturally twisting and curving away at the last second, as if deflecting off an invisible wall and sparking out.

“As we thought. Not good enough,” the dragon we were riding growled in frustration. We had expected the Demon King’s own home to have some form of exceptional magical defenses, and that turned out to be true. The dragons that reached the palace slammed hard into the barrier, unable to penetrate it. It was so strong! The sudden impact sent the warriors on the dragons’ backs flying, left to fall to the ground. Even if they miraculously survived the fall, they surely would be left with serious crippling injuries.

At the same time, a beam of black light, that’s probably the best description, cut through the air beside us. Looking to the source, I could see hordes of dragons with glittering black scales ascending into the sky from the castle.

“Dark dragons!” our dragon roared, metallic voice dripping with a vicious hatred. But it wasn’t just dark dragons. Streaks of flame, blades of wind, and bolts of lightning rushed up at us from the castle. Dragons of all colors were rising to fight.

“We’re setting down outside the palace!” Deftly dodging around the incoming breath attacks, our dragon made landfall just outside the palace at the top of the castle. *Finally, we’re on the ground!* Even if this was the Demon King’s castle, I almost felt like kissing the dirt.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Humans, forest elves...the Alliance?!”

“How did they get to the castle?!”

Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to be goofing off. Our flashy entrance was witnessed by a group of catlike beastfolk servants and sickly pale night elves.

“Death to the dark!” we roared, drawing our weapons. Arrows of magic from the forest elf monks took the night elves in the forehead as our wolf beastfolk Fistmasters sank their teeth and claws into the enemy beastfolk.

The sounds of the breath attacks clashing was deafening, filling the air with a deep bass. A rainbow of dragons was attacking us from above, but the white dragon we arrived on was trying desperately to fend them off. Similar scenes were playing out all across the castle.

“Leave me! Go!” As we moved instinctively to support them, the white dragon urged us onward, desperation in its eyes. It then unleashed another breath attack to offset one targeting us, wrapping itself in empowering light magic. “I will hold them here! Go! Take down the Demon King!”

For either side, the dragons could only fight out in the open. With their attack from the sky being blocked, the only option was for us to go inside and kill him ourselves!

“Go! Get that Demon King's head even if it kills you!”

“Got it! Let's go!” Accepting the dragon's determination, I charged forward. Honestly speaking, if we were ranking the members of our party by our strength, the only way I'd be first is if it was sorted from weakest to strongest. There was an abundance of formidable allies with us from heroes and other legendary figures to the forest elves and their incredible magic.

So I didn't really have a right to take up the lead like this. But when push came to shove, you needed to go with the flow, and right now I was the man for the job!

“Charge!” Clad from head to toe in magic armor, the dwarven warriors were

the first to follow. The other heroes naturally fell into formation beside me, lining our shields up to form cover for the Swordmasters and Fistmasters, ready to dash out at any targets of opportunity. The priests and monks began chanting, layering powerful magical blessings overtop of us. And so we stepped into the entirely unknown territory that was the Demon King's castle. The stronghold of the demons!

Damn, why is it so complex?! Of course, we had no idea where we were going. So should we turn right or left?!

"What do we do, Alex?!"

"Start with the palace! Just head in that general direction! Which means, up!"

"Of course!"

Keeping a careful eye on our surroundings, we ran through the castle.

"Intruders?!"

In no time at all, we came across a burly devil. It had venomous looking gold and black skin, and wasplike compound eyes. I had no clue what kind of devil it was, but I got the feeling it was pretty strong.

"Die!" It didn't matter what kind of devil it was as the result would be the same, a sword to the head! But before our weapons could reach it, its insect-like wings buzzed, carrying it out of our reach. Or so we thought, as magic from the forest elf monks sprouted vines from the floor to restrain the devil.

The devil grunted as the vines threw it off-balance, distracting it long enough for my sword to take its head. I then gave it a swift kick, sending it flying through a nearby door. The headless body crashed into the next room before erupting in an explosion of chaotic energy. Devils exploded upon dying, so when it came to higher level ones like that, you needed to ensure you were a safe distance away. I heard screams from within the room...but they were denizens of the dark, so I ignored them.

Rounding a corner in the corridor, we were met with a group of night elves in their sleeping clothes, wielding bows and knives. *Oh, sorry, did we interrupt your beauty sleep?* Our shields warded off the first barrage of poisoned arrows, creating an opening for the Swordmasters and Fistmasters to rush in and tear

them apart. They wasted no time as the night elves were dead in mere moments.

However, the group of high level undead that emerged from a staircase leading down into the castle were going to be a greater challenge. At first glance they could be mistaken for humans, that was until they quickly began hurling dark curses at us. These liches, seduced by dark, forbidden magic, were still no match for the light magic of our priests and monks, who unleashed a blast of purifying light to sweep them away.

“Humans in the castle!”

“Kill them!”

And at long last, the demons came out to play. With their pale, bluish skin, and sinister horns while wielding spears.

“Death to the dark!” we shouted, tightening our formation. With the strength they gained from their devilish pacts, each individual demon was unbelievably strong. But we were the elite of the elite, and our weapons and blessings were of the highest grade. Half-hearted magic and curses were no match for us! Our coordinated assault left ample room for us to exercise our unique skills, slowly but surely pushing our way deeper into the castle.

But we didn’t make it that far without sacrifices. Even with priests and forest elf monks alongside us, serious wounds required some time to heal. And that was assuming the wounds weren’t grave enough to mean immediate death. In particular, us heroes leading the vanguard were taking heavy losses. One had his throat ripped out by a vampire lord. Another was hit by a poisoned arrow from a night elf, expiring before healing magic could be brought to bear. The Swordmaster that had been seated behind me on the dragon fell to a demon’s curse.

“Dammit!” I couldn’t help but curse. *Where’s the palace?! Where are the other parties?!* Even in the maelstrom of battle, I throttled my brain for every bit of useful thought I could squeeze from it, relying on my instincts to carve a path forward for us.

“Hey, you!”

I shouted at a cat beastfolk maid cowering in the corner.

“P-Please! Please don’t kill me!” She was young, a teenager at most. Grabbing her by the collar, I forcefully shook her.

“Where is the Demon King?! Tell me how to get to the palace! If you do, I’ll spare your life!” I roared at her with no composure to keep my voice under control.

“One lie, and you’re dead!”

The beastfolk squealed. “Th-Th-This way!” Half-sobbing, she pointed us down a hallway. The other heroes looked at me dubiously, which I answered with a resolute nod. While I had no concrete evidence to support the assumption, I surmised the girl lacked the wherewithal to lie to us. If she was a night elf that would be a different story, but this girl felt more like a country bumpkin.

In the end, my instincts were right on the money. We found the stairs leading up to the palace, and so as promised, I let the maid go free.

“Charge!” we roared, locking shields and racing up the stairs. *Damn, where are all these demon guards coming from?!*

We were already in shambles. The forest elf monks could heal our physical wounds, but not only were their healing powers limited, there was nothing they could do for our mental exhaustion. Even so, every single one of us fought like hell was one step behind us, pushing through anyone that stood in our way. Even though one of our priests died taking a demon’s spear, in exchange we were able to make the final push to the top of the stairs and into the palace itself. The wealth and art of all the kingdoms they ravaged were on vulgar display, crammed into this disgusting building.

“I’ll hold them here! Everyone else, go!”

As a new surge of devils arrived to contend with us, our dwarven forgeknight, being the slowest, took up the rear guard. With the time he bought us, we pushed farther and farther into the palace.

“Right here! I can feel a sinister magic!”

As we went, the forest elf monk directed us onward. Unlike us humans and

beastfolk, his magic sensitivity was quite high, allowing him to detect the Demon King's powerful magic.

And then...

"I must say, I'm quite surprised." After breaking through a rather impressive door, we saw him. "I never thought anyone would make it all the way here."

The haughty Demon King was waiting for us. The muscular demon sat on his obsidian throne. Blond hair and beard like that of a lion's mane, bloodred eyes, pale blue skin, and two ominous, twisted horns. Wearing clothes that were at the same time both primitive and gaudy, he held an imposing jet-black lance.

"What...the..." The monk was speechless. And not just him. The rest of us, humans and beastfolk included, felt crushed by his incredible aura. *For the usually calm and composed forest elf to go so pale, to start sweating waterfalls like that...is this Demon King that strong?!*

But we had no time to be afraid. "So you're the Demon King?!" I shouted, bringing my holy sword to bear.

"Indeed I am," he replied, slowly rising to his feet.

"I am the Demon King, Gordogias Orgi!" It was like a whirlwind had whipped up in the room, the Demon King's presence growing many times stronger.

"Welcome. As pathetic and weak as you are, you shall provide me some brief entertainment. See if you can keep my attention."

And now he's insulting us?! Damn you!

"Hii Yeri Lampsui Suto Hieri Mo!"

May your holy light shine in my hands!

I drew every ounce of strength from my body, enveloping myself in a silver light. As if a manifestation of my rage and hatred, mystical flames roared around me.

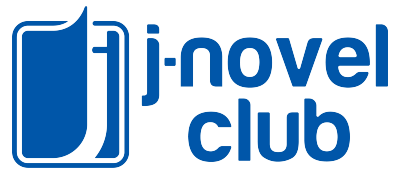
If nothing else, if no one else, I will kill you! I'll win a future, I'll win peace for humanity!

“Death to the dark!” I shouted, rushing forward.

“Death to the dark!” My surviving companions were barely a step behind me.

“Ha.” And as we rushed forward, “Laughable.” The Demon King swung his lance effortlessly, plunging it into the shield of the hero beside me. Despite the shield being made with the finest dwarven craftsmanship and being layered with countless blessings, it crumpled like wet paper.

And so the true nightmare began.



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Zilbagias the Demon Prince: How the Seventh Prince Brought Down the Kingdom Volume 1

by Tomoaki Amagi

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